

## **Workplace Responses to Employee Grief Following the Dissolution of a Romantic Relationship**

Samantha Little  
Management and Accountancy  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville  
One University Heights  
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Mary Lynn Manns

### **Abstract**

Loss often leaves individuals unable to function well in the workplace. This study examines workplace response to employee grief following the loss of a marriage and other romantic relationship. Findings indicate that the loss of a romantic relationship causes a lack of focus, interest and energy that manifests in decreased work performance; yet, employees receive little understanding and assistance from co-workers, managers and general organizational policies. The goal of this study is to increase understanding of this type of grief, its effects on the workplace, and the actions organizations can take to compassionately respond to and support grieving employees.

**Keywords: Grief in workplace, dissolution, employee grief**

### **1. Grief in the Workplace:**

Loss is a part of life but the resulting grief often affects an individual's ability to function well in the workplace. Productivity can be lowered when the emotional turmoil following a loss causes an employee to experience difficulties in concentration and judgment, stress, depression, lack of motivation and substance abuse. This creates financial implications for the organization such as increased health costs, absenteeism, injuries, errors and missed opportunities<sup>20, 13, 10</sup>. With the cost of "hidden grief" to U.S. companies estimated at approximately \$75 billion annually<sup>12</sup>, organizations will undoubtedly benefit from understanding how to help these troubled employees.

This is a particularly challenging problem because the demands in the workplace conflict with the needs of someone who has experienced a psychologically traumatic event. Bento refers to this as an interplay between "grief work" and "work life."<sup>3</sup> While workplace goals are concrete, production-oriented and intellectual, loss is an affair of the heart that causes the individual to be drawn into emotional, psychological and spiritual labor<sup>20,3</sup>. The resulting emotions, ranging from sadness through anger and exhaustion, can be misunderstood or even chastised by supervisors who see this as a barrier to getting the job done. Therefore, they may expect their employees to deal with these feelings only on personal time but, at the same time, may not view this troublesome state of mind as a valid reason to grant sufficient personal time for recovery. Unlike Japan where workers who feel too devastated to come to the office can take paid compassionate leave to mend a broken heart, studies of U.S. organizations have found that many managers do not understand the needs of grieving employees<sup>3,11, 20</sup>. As a Wall Street Journal article titled *The Workplace Can Seem Cold and Indifferent to a Grieving Employee* states, "Bereavement is a blind spot for many bosses...workplace attitudes are stuck in the Industrial Age"<sup>18</sup>. Strong reader response recounted how grief over the loss of a loved one hits with such a force that one's ability to work is altered for months or years; yet many organizations treat bereavement like jury duty, warranting a few days off and little else<sup>19</sup>. Members of workplaces are expected to leave their emotions at the door, even if they are grieving.<sup>21</sup>

Many researchers label this lack of support for grief in the workplace by referring to the term “disenfranchised,” defined as “grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publically mourned and/or socially supported.”<sup>7</sup> Hazen<sup>11</sup> and Bento<sup>4</sup> are among those who argue that grief is disenfranchised in the workplace while Stein and Winokuer<sup>20</sup> explain that this is because “in the norms of the world of work, all losses become disenfranchised because emotions and feelings are discounted, discouraged, and disallowed.” Eytsemitan<sup>8</sup> coined a related term, “stifled,” to refer to recognized grief that is denied its full course due to workplace practices.

Whether disenfranchised or stifled, discounted grief is unsettling because human support is a necessary component for healing. Without the acknowledgement of others, the healing process is likely to be delayed and eventually become more severe and lengthy with effects on that worker’s mental health and productivity<sup>3,8</sup>. Therefore, lack of concern in the present can cause the problem to be even more troublesome for both the employee and the organization in the future.

To be fair, the professional atmosphere in formal organizations can make it easy for managers to believe that they do not need to be concerned about their employees’ private thoughts and feelings (Charles-Edwards, 2001; Bento, 1994). Yet, there are a range of noteworthy incentives for organizations to learn more about grief in the workplace and have a role in helping employees mend. In addition to the productivity and financial implications, many argue that there are humanistic reasons for supervisors to respond to bereaved employees with compassion<sup>13</sup>. Individuals returning to work after a loss bring their grief to work with them; therefore, the responses of others in the organization will make a difference in their ability to reenter and become productive again<sup>3,20</sup>. Anderson and Foley suggest that people “often need encouragement to grieve while at the same time receiving the assurance that their grieving will end”.<sup>1</sup>

The response of managers is particularly significant because a demonstration of interest and understanding in the grieving employee’s situation sends the message that the employee is important to the company and, on a wider scale, creates an atmosphere of trust, helpfulness and loyalty<sup>20</sup>. A study of more than 12,000 employees over a three-year period revealed that management’s ability to be in tune with employees’ perceptions, emotions and motivation and to “manage with a human touch” has a dramatic effect on work performance<sup>2</sup>. Researchers have found that compassion at work generates feeling and prompts meaning that seeps into attitudes and behaviors at work.<sup>15</sup> As Kahn<sup>14</sup> points out, compassion is “part of, rather than separate from, work interactions” while Fineman<sup>9</sup> responds that “Pain and compassion are not separate from ‘being a professional’ and the ‘doing of work’ in organizations. They are a natural and living representation of people’s humanity in the workplace.”

Yet, there is little evidence that a significant number of organizations are creating environments in which compassion for a grieving member is part of the workplace structure, policy and daily interactions. Even though it is well known that grief is often a lengthy, arduous process<sup>6,10</sup>, studies that examined personnel policies from a wide range of organizations revealed that after the death of a loved one, employer response focuses only on the early days of bereavement<sup>12,20</sup>. Similarly, another study showed that 84% of respondents resumed full responsibilities upon return to work after attending a funeral even though these employees indicated a desire for more formal organizational support and understanding of their bereavement process<sup>8</sup>. An investigation of parental loss revealed that this type of grief, as with other types, is disenfranchised; three of the 14 female subjects were so devastated that they quit their jobs and only three others received regular acknowledgement and support from work colleagues<sup>11</sup>. This agrees with a recent case study exploring the attempt to empower grieving employees at work—it concluded that in the face of bereavement, individuals still experience insensitivity and indifference from co-workers, managers and human resource personnel alike. This can be classified as incivility, defined as “the exchange of seemingly inconsequential inconsiderate words and deeds that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct<sup>17</sup>.” While the offender or even third parties may claim the behavior was unintentional, it may not seem that way in the eyes of the griever.

Findings such as these have led to a call for further exploration of the organizational actions and interpersonal behaviors that complicate or facilitate the healthy resolution of grief in organizations in order to add to the understanding of disenfranchised grief in the workplace.<sup>5</sup>

## **2. Grief From the Dissolution of a Romantic Relationship:**

This paper contributes to an understanding of grief in the workplace by examining an area that has not been given as much attention throughout the literature—loss that occurs from the divorce or break-up of a romantic relationship. The majority of studies focus on subjects whose loss has been the result of the death of a significant person in their lives. While much can be learned from these studies, there is still an important gap. At least one author identified

the dissolution of a romantic relationship as one of the two most common types of loss, along with death, that employees found difficult to handle, affecting their ability to focus adequately at work<sup>5</sup> while another pointed out that grief for people who are still alive is particularly misunderstood<sup>3</sup>. Stein and Winokuer<sup>20</sup> observed that employees are likely to find that the death of a non-marital or a non-blood loved one is often not recognized in the workplace<sup>12</sup>; therefore, one can conclude that the break-up of such a relationship would not be either.

Yet, with divorce rates in America at 41% for first marriages and 60% for second marriages and an 88% increase in the number of cohabiting unmarried partners, individuals who experience loss through a divorce or break-up is an important group to consider. The experience can be as devastating as the death of a loved one<sup>16</sup> but, in addition to the challenges already mentioned, there are some unique issues for the person experiencing a loss in this way. There is rarely a ritual or any formal recognition, such as a funeral, to aid with the healing. Individuals who did not choose the separation can become overwhelmed with anger coupled with feelings of rejection and even betrayal. Others will often minimize the experience by pointing out faults in the ex love, expecting that this should cause the griever to stop talking about the loss and “get over it” much too soon. These types of reactions are likely to cause the griever to believe that no one understands, leading to further isolation at a time when relationships are essential for the coping process.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. The Study:

An exploratory study examined how co-workers, managers and organizational policies can assist employees who have experienced the dissolution of a marriage or other romantic relationship. It investigated how the workplace can be different when people notice, feel, and respond to employees who are in this type of pain. It challenged supervisors to care about how they manage with compassion and how their decisions can create a better organization for all.

The study had three objectives:

- To investigate the ability of employees to do their jobs following the dissolution of a romantic relationship
- To investigate the support employees receive from co-workers, supervisors and organizational policies following the dissolution of a romantic relationship
- To gather recommendations for organizations to improve the way they respond to these employees.

This study is grounded in Bento<sup>3</sup>, 1994 who proposes a model illustrating the interplay of “grief work” and “work life” and in Hazen, 2009<sup>13</sup> who proposes how managers can apply theories about grief in the workplace to support employees who have had a major loss. Personal interviews were conducted with individuals, from a variety of organizations, who experienced grief following the dissolution of a romantic relationship. Open-ended questions inquired about the response of co-workers and managers as well as any support employees may, or may not, have received from these individuals and from organizational policies. Twelve subjects who had recently experienced the dissolution of a romantic relationship were also asked about the kinds of workplace resources that could have helped them minimize the impact of their grief on their job. Following is a list of the survey questions:

Interview Questions:

1) Background:

Your Gender

Gender of your romantic partner

Your age

Job you had when the breakup occurred

Describe the organization (size, etc.)

Approximate salary you earned when the breakup occurred (optional)

How long were you in a relationship with this romantic partner?

How long ago did the breakup occur?

Was it a divorce or breakup?

Who initiated the breakup?

- 2) Tell your story of the loss of your romantic partner and the effect this had on your job.
- 3) After the breakup, how did you feel when you were going to work? Could you do your job as well as you usually did?
- 4) Did you inform your **co-workers** about your loss?
  - If no, why not?
  - If yes...
  - 4a) How did they react?
  - 4b) What did your co-workers do to help you?
- 5) Did you inform your **supervisor(s)** about your loss?
  - If no, why not?
  - If yes...
  - 5a) Did your supervisor(s) acknowledge the loss? How?
  - 5b) Did your supervisor(s) account for the grief when assigning projects and evaluating your work?
  - 5c) Did your supervisor(s) work with you to minimize the possible damaging effects of your grief on the workplace?
  - 5d) Did your supervisor(s) offer support? How?
  - 5e) Did your supervisor(s) educate other employees about how they could respond to and help you?
- 6) Was there any **organizational support**, such as policies and procedures, in place to support you?
- 7) To help you cope with your grief and minimize its effects on your job, what do **you** feel you need/needed from your supervisor(s)?... from your co-workers?... from your organizational policies?
- 8) Is there anything else you want to say that was not included in my questions?  
Do you know anyone else you can refer to us as a subject for this study?

The findings indicate that the loss of a romantic relationship causes a lack of focus, interest and energy that manifests in decreased work performance; yet, employees receive little to no understanding and assistance from co-workers, managers and general organizational policies\*.

The goal of this study was to increase understanding of grief following the dissolution of a romantic relationship, its effects on the workplace, and the actions organizations can take to respond to and support grieving employees. It comes with the appreciation of the many influential realities that make the promotion of compassion in the workplace a challenging undertaking. Grief is an emotional issue that requires an emotional solution. However, the professionalism that drives the workplace does not normally encourage individuals to be emotionally invested in their co-workers. This is further complicated by the fact that emotional disorders are usually not as visible, and therefore not as easily recognized and appreciated as a physical ailment would be. In the daily life of a busy worker, it is unlikely that the grief of another employee, which is often hidden and therefore quite subtle, will be given as much priority as other competing demands. Managers may feel they have to choose between getting the job done and their desire to support their workers. Yet, the results of this research suggest that integrating compassion and support for grieving employees will contribute to getting the job done. A call to action with this in mind is likely to allow everyone to recognize that this is not only good for the individuals but it is good for the organization too.

\* Detailed results were reported at the 2010 Academy of Management Conference and, for copyright reasons are not reported here. The reader can refer to this conference for more details.

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