Supporting a Grieving Workforce

First Edition.

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Introduction

What Grief Looks Like

Have you ever seen a *carrier shell* on a Florida beach? Carrier shells house sea snails. As the shells grow, they cement objects to their outside rim—pebbles, smaller seashells—whatever the snail finds. Marine biologists aren't certain whether these objects serve as some kind of camouflage or as ballast that keeps the snail shell from sinking into the sand. Either way, the carrier shell doesn't just house the snail; it permanently lugs around other objects as the snail travels. This particular type of shell doesn't integrate the objects *into* its own shell; instead, it *carries* them wherever the snail goes.

Think of this carrier shell as toting along the unintegrated grief of life. Over the years, it continues to take on the weight of new objects, new grief. In time, the shell becomes old and stops growing, yet it remains encrusted with the grief objects forever. The carrier shell as a metaphor for grief is a sad one because the objects—the grief—are continually hauled about and never fully integrated; there's always heaviness to carry around.
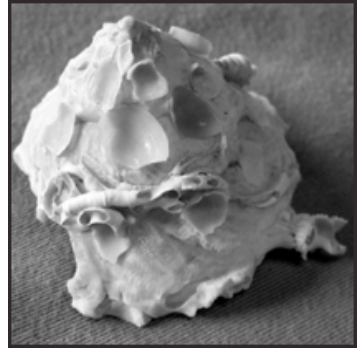
The Florida beach also contains small rock-like objects, pocked with apparent air holes, some filled with tiny seashells. These tiny shells grow both *onto* and *into* the rock over years of tumbling in the sea. Through an oddly beautiful cementing process, these rocks both contain and are made of the shells. Let's call them "shell stones" here.

These shell stones are like another sea creation indigenous to Florida waters: *coquina* (Spanish for "small shells"). Coquina is a sort of stone made of tiny

seashells that have bonded together over many years. They're literally formed from *layer upon layer of shells* that masons can cut and dry for building. The Castillo de San Marcos, a fort at St. Augustine, Florida, was built from coquina because it was readily available as a sort of stone. Coquina's advantage is that while its tiny shells are terribly fragile in their individual state, they are amazingly strong and resilient in their bonded state. Although still shells, they're also stone. The Castillo de San Marcos was able to withstand several bombardments from attacking ships because the coquina absorbs the impact of a cannonball while different kinds of stones used in fortresses would have shattered.
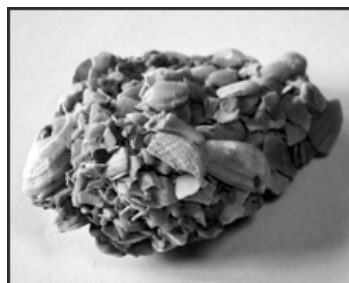
Imagine the coquina and the shell stones—both of which take shells into themselves—as a life that integrates grief. Rather than carrying it around forever as grief cemented to their bodies (and hearts), these rocks absorb the grief and make it a part of their very nature. Indeed, as coquina shows, they become strong because of the grief shells. If, like these shells, people change themselves by having embraced and integrated grief into their lives, then they can open their hearts to loving and embracing others, which ultimately changes them.

Use these carrier shell, shell stone, and coquina images as you read this book about grief and mourning in the workplace. Think of grief as a seashell—natural to life, yet fragile to carry without breaking your heart further. The temptation is to cast off this grief shell, as it's not wanted. Yet, no one can cast it off because it's been cemented mysteriously to the bereaved and it's become part of them. If people can't cast it off, they can pretend that it's not there. But the grief is stuck to them, as with the carrier shell, and it's visible to others even when people try to hide it.

Therefore, the work of grief and mourning isn't to throw it away, wear it on the outside, or "get over" it. The work is to integrate it into life. If people can accept the grief shell as part of them and allow it to grow into their broken hearts, then they can absorb the good it can provide. Like the shell stone and coquina, integrating grief provides the core strength needed to withstand life's bombardments.

Grief in Workplace Settings

According to a January 3, 2019 article in the *Chicago Tribune*:

> Grief last year cost employers an estimated $113.27 billion in reduced productivity and on-the-job errors, a calculation that takes into account not only the deaths of loved ones but also other traumatic losses such as divorce or home foreclosures, according to the Grief Recovery Institute, an organization based in Bend, Ore., that trains therapists and counselors in grief recovery. (Elejalde-Ruiz, 2019)

That cost estimate had increased "from $75 billion" in 2002, which accounted for inflation and an aging workplace population. These human and financial costs of grief don't begin to account for the losses experienced in workplaces since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. During the year and a half since the start of the pandemic, workplace grief has increased as people have seen sometimes multiple family members, friends, and coworkers succumb to the virus as well as to other health-based (e.g., heart attacks, cancer, stroke), accidental (e.g., transportation-related, falls, drowning), natural (e.g., hurricane, tornado, fire), and violent (e.g., murder, gunshot, knifing) deaths.

Moreover, despite safety protocols, people can die in the workplace from industrial accidents, violence, and chronic (sometimes unseen) health conditions as well as common

illnesses. And the COVID-19 virus has changed how people live and work. Such life changes include working from home and/or homeschooling or assisting with online schooling. Some workers, in addition, are the designated caregiver for elder or disabled family members—often at a distance during the pandemic—which can cause deep stress and anticipatory grief.

People have been experiencing decreasing employment security as workplaces attempt to remain agile during uncertain times, creating more job uncertainty for workers and, often, basic food and shelter insecurity. Physical distancing rules resulting in limited opportunities for funerals and memorial services have prevented people from experiencing sufficient social support. Distributed communications through team video software have changed how people work and talk, likely in some permanent ways, but it has proven inadequate for expressing the kinds of sympathy and group mourning that are needed.

In sum, people—*we*—are grieving all these kinds of losses, which amount to, as author and workplace consultant Jennifer Moss states, mourning "the death of our previous lives" (Aspen, 2020).

These kinds of workplaces challenges—and so many more from sexual abuse and harassment to historical and current racism to cultural factors to how significant others react to one's grief—can be traumatizing. *Trauma*, according to Jamie Marich (2014) is a "wounding" that needs "care and time to heal"; life itself, she indicates, is traumatic, but it affects some people more than others (p. 5). More specifically, Francis Weller (2015) calls trauma as "a *soul-shaking* experience that ruptures the continuity of our lives and tosses us into an alternate existence" (p. 38). Trauma typically has a component of grief, which is one reason we attend to it in this book. We want to acknowledge here that employers may not be prepared to address their employees' various traumatic experiences, but employee assistance programs (EAPs) and other entities such as the

Workplace Trauma Center and the Green Cross Academy of Traumatology (GCAT) can provide or find assistance.

In short, grief is a major workplace challenge—even without pandemic conditions. Bereavement experts (see Bento, 1994, for example) have seen workplace grief as "disenfranchised" insofar as the loss may be ignored or unacknowledged, not socially sanctioned or publicly shared (see Doka, 1989, pp. 4-7), and "stifled" insofar as "recognized grief [is] denied its full course" (Eyetsemitan, 1998, p. 471). It might at first seem that we can take care of our grief at home, away from work; of course, we can compartmentalize our bereavement and act as if it isn't there when at work or in certain social settings. Yet grief unacknowledged and unaddressed—even at work—is grief carried, like the carrier shell we described earlier in this introduction.

Certainly, all the normal problems of dealing with any loss, as we describe in Chapter 1, can occur in a workplace setting. For example, people may not ask the bereaved about the loss in fear of triggering crying and other expressions of pain. They may not know what to say or how to be supportive, and they may say unexpectedly hurtful things. In the workplace, where many spend one third or more of their day, unawareness of these problems may be perceived as slights and as uncaring attitudes toward the bereaved. That the bereaved will have long-term needs is well-understood by bereavement specialists (Macdonald et al., 2015). Workplace grief needs a place for discussion because not talking about it hurts the team, productivity, and—more importantly—the bereaved individual(s).

There are remedies, however, to be found in the process of developing a culture of support. A workplace that offers a culture of support is one where grief is not minimized but rather acknowledged (Thompson & Lund, 2009, p. 44). In such settings, workers receive more than a three-day emergency or compassionate leave to address their losses; there is a formal,

written policy making clear their opportunities to speak up about their needs, whether that is to work at their previous task levels or to have temporary reduction or refocus of their tasks. In a culture of support, coworkers also have received education and support of their own bereavement, stress, and/or trauma needs so they can be present for the people primarily affected by the grief-inducing event.

Elements of a supportive workplace culture include, but are not limited to:

- Connecting the human resources department with an EAP
- Having critical incident management resources and support at hand for rapid deployment
- Establishing reasonable and effective bereavement policies and informing all employees about them both prior to and after a loss
- Educating administrators and employees about grief and mourning, as well as engaging in and guiding strong communication behaviors, including how to express sympathy
- Accommodating the bereaved as their needs shift over time by providing empathy and thoughtful guidance on a long-term basis
- Finding collaboratively developed solutions to how to work when grieving, which can affect productivity positively
- Supporting the team that supports the bereaved to address their own grief about the loss and its ensuing changes to the immediate work setting and team needs[1]

People don't check their grief at the workplace door. Some go to work eager to leave their sadness at home while others reluctantly drag themselves to work. Either way, employers must keep the productivity up while the bereaved worry about

1 Adapted from Marshall (2015, p. 17) and Tyler (2003, p. 2).

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lowered productivity and possible absenteeism. Everyone in such situations deserves to be supported.

The Goals of this Book

This little book's format offers space not only to talk about providing support for people who are grieving in the workplace but also to develop and build an understanding of grief and some of its soulful aspects. Learning about these aspects can help with understanding how employees and coworkers express and withhold their grief in the workplace, where they spend a third or more of their days (or nights).

To aid in sharing about grief, mourning, and how workplace grief can be addressed, we speak about the bereaved primarily in the first-person plural (i.e., *we*, *us*, and *our*) although we also use third person nouns and pronouns as it seems helpful (i.e., *humans*, *people*, and *they*). Doing so allows us as authors to be inclusive of anyone who might be grieving. When we need to speak about ourselves as authors, we also use *we*, *us*, and *our*, but we contextualize that as much as possible with "as authors" or some other phrasing.

> **Chapter 1** shares insight into the processes of grieving, which is useful for understanding the broad range of human reactions to grief—both in the workplace and at home. If people are to be effective in offering support to themselves and others, they need to be aware of how people respond and cope with grief.

> **Chapter 2** discusses what mourning looks like in terms of how we can take care of ourselves and each other when grieving a loss. This chapter sets the stage for Chapter 3's specific mourning activities that can be helpful in the workplace and home settings for actively mourning grief.

Chapter 3 discusses various types of workplace deaths and how individuals, managers, and corporate leaders can be significantly helpful to the people grieving those losses. This chapter provides specific tips for understanding the results of a workplace death and how to take the inevitable grief and mourn it individually and collectively. Nurturing the workplace family in such mourning helps in building a culture of safety, support, and healing.

Chapter 4 provides some signposts that indicate the workplace grief is healing, knowing that there's no timeline and that all grief is unique to the individual and the situation.

Grief is part of everyone's history. Like scars on the skin, people can try to erase experiences with loss in a vain attempt to "get over" it or to "move on" from it. No. Grief doesn't need to be erased. It's a natural, normal, and necessary part of life. Grief can enrich humans emotionally and spiritually because it's as much a part of the relationship they have shared with the deceased as the passion with which they have loved. Grief deepens knowledge, wisdom, and strength. Thus, it's helpful to confront grief and work with it through mourning activities.

This positive and hopeful perspective is that grief, fully mourned, can heal. And, although people experience grief in their workplace, they can find support and care in that same place of employment. Those are the major messages of this book.

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