

Making sense of grief and loss

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

A guide for people managing teams

We are living in very challenging times – both at work and in our home lives. Thoughts about our health, safety, security and that of loved ones, colleagues and service users are also met with news that the pandemic is the direct and indirect cause of many deaths. We all deal with grief and loss in different ways and not everyone wants or needs the same support. You may feel like you and your team are coping well and don't need any additional support or guidance, or you might be starting to question just how you are all going to get through this.

Many of us may already be grieving what we knew as our 'normal' life, but we will gradually find ways to name and give a voice to the loss we all share, as we create a new 'normal' for ourselves. Whatever your situation might be, it can still be useful to have some guidance and support.

If you and your team are also coping with the death of someone you have supported or someone close, stepping back and thinking about how you and your team can work through this difficult experience can be invaluable.

Understanding grief

Grief takes time to process. Allow some time for you and your colleagues to adjust.

Grief is a natural and appropriate response to loss. Feeling a sense of grief, loss, guilt, panic and a host of other emotions right now, are all valid reactions and to be expected. Normal processing and distress should not be interrupted or 'diverted' when this is a perfectly natural way to feel.

Grief is not the same for everyone. There are a range of reactions and responses that you may experience, either on their own or all at the same time. It's entirely possible to feel and hold all sorts of emotions including, anger, fear, denial, depression and eventual acceptance.

Grief is as unique as your fingerprint. You and your colleagues may be grieving for the same person but experiencing this in different ways, all of which are completely fine.

It's important to remember not to invalidate what someone else is feeling, but also not to minimise how you are feeling.

Grief is not exclusive. The times we are living in right now highlight a whole host of 'realities' that are occurring for everyone. Try to think of grief, not as something that you have to get over, but as a process. The emotional experience of loss is transient and will pass. The intensity of it will change, as we integrate both our personal and our shared loss into a new world view.

Talking to your team about death and loss

Talking to your team can be emotional and difficult. Make sure you take time to prepare what you are going to say.

- **Give permission** to allow for whatever you and your team are feeling right now.
- **Take care** to recognise the difference between allowing space for feelings and forcing feelings. If people don't want to talk, don't make them.
- **Be guided** by your team. Invite them to help you understand when they are ready to stop talking about the loss and agree to change the subject to something else.
- **Be prepared** for people to be in very different places with their experience of loss.
- **Stay connected** with your team and help them to connect with one another. Social networks can reduce distress and help people adapt better.
- **Remember** people may be cut off from their usual support network. Grief can be a lonely experience made more difficult by the isolation due to Covid-19.

You don't have to be a therapist

This isn't your role, and no one will expect it. Offering your team compassion and space to grieve and adapt to loss might be all anyone needs at first.

Stick to the facts but strike a balance between providing the facts and allowing space for feelings.

Tell it like it is

If you have information, share it. People much prefer it if the truth is on the table. Be sensitive when you introduce the subject that someone has died. If you don't feel comfortable speaking about death, this is completely understandable and important to recognise as part of your own self-care. It is also absolutely fine. You can always ask someone else from within the team to lead this for you or seek support from a more senior colleague.

Mindfulness or Mindlessness

Mindfulness techniques can be useful but they're not a cure all and can run the risk of being 'one size fits all' psychosocial plasters. These are strange times and there's nothing wrong with switching off and practicing a bit of 'MindLESSness' too!

Holding Hope

You and/or your team may temporarily lose hope. If you think this is happening, look for the people who can hold hope for you. When you feel OK again, you can be the person to hold hope for others.

Our minds have a way of having us see the absolute worst scenarios. The best scenarios are also possible.

Knowing when to seek help

Many people may already be living with loss and grief. New losses can also trigger old ones. If your team are already working through the shock and distress of a previous death as a direct or indirect consequence of COVID-19, it may mean they move from a normal grief response, to one that is complex or persistent.

If you sense this might be happening, try to guide them towards finding additional support.

Remember that it's OK for you to seek support for yourself too.

Signs to look out for

Signs that you or someone on your team might not be coping with grief may include the following:

- Not sleeping
- Not feeling motivated to do simple daily activities

- Fixating on or finding it difficult to stop thinking about the death and being unable to think about anything else
 - Feeling guilt, anger and/or blame
 - Experiencing intense sadness
 - Finding it difficult to connect with other people
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Where to find help

You may have local contacts already. These services can also be of help to you and your team:

[Cruse bereavement care](#)

[Mind: mental health and isolation](#)

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We are a small group of HCPC registered Clinical and Counselling Psychologists working alongside accredited Counsellors and other talking therapists.