

A Grief Out of Season

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We are not prepared to lose a friend or colleague in the span of a day or weekend. We are not prepared to have death come to us so suddenly and unexpectedly. Work is the known world—the place for demonstrating our strength, our competence, our viability to exact predictable results. We are broadsided by the news of sudden, violent, and senseless death. And it is as if, for a moment, time stands still, as we take in the information that a person of youth and promise, our friend or colleague, has died. This truly is a time of grief out of season.

In the workplace, this may leave a desk marked by personal touches, work in progress, voicemail and email still active. It leaves conversations unfinished and relationships suspended. It requires us to take care of our colleague's workload, even before we have fully processed our own reactions.

And what is this thing call “grief?” Grief is the natural, healthy, spontaneous, unlearned, normal, emotional healing process that occurs after a significant loss. It includes aspects that are both so very unique to each of us, and aspects that are universal to our species as biological and emotional beings. Cutting edge research shows that the human brain registers emotional wounds in the exact location as physical injury, a fact known subjectively by all of us who have experienced heartbreak, the aftermath of divorcing families, the disorganization of relocation, the unrealized hopes of lost dreams, and the myriad of the challenges of life's endings and beginnings.

In the case of sudden loss, though, people describe a reaction that includes feeling helpless, vulnerable, or even fearful. This loss out of season rocks our reality. The world no longer seems as controllable, predictable, or as fair as we thought it to be. This can be unbalancing in ways that affect our feeling, thinking, and behaving.

We may feel waves of sadness. And we may experience irritability or anger at the circumstance of this particular loss, at the upset to our belief in the fairness of life and our belief in the expected order of life events. We may feel guilty that we don't feel what others are feeling. Or we may find that this loss triggers the memory of past losses, perhaps even ones that we thought were long past and resolved.

And having these feelings, coming and going, as is expected in grief, we can feel fatigued, preoccupied, or distracted. Sometimes people may notice sleep disturbances, restlessness, and anxiety, or feel more susceptible to physical illness. And so for a time, work productivity may be off, and relationships may feel the strain of this more intense internal process.

All of these reactions may be normal in the days and weeks ahead, in this time of grief out of season. At the very least, the disruption in the normal flow of the workplace brings with it significant stress. And so, it is a time to stop the action. Talk. Think. Contemplate. Some may be challenged with questions regarding their religious faith, or the meaning of life. Talk some more. To your friends and colleagues. To family and other supports.

