



## APPROACHING GRIEF AND MOURNING — A GUIDE FOR LEADERS

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**Grief, mourning, death and loss can be difficult subjects to tackle at work.** But leaders everywhere will inevitably face their own personal experience with death or loss. At a minimum, they will be leading others as they move through grief and mourning as a fact of life. There is no way to escape death or loss and it is important to move through grief and mourning in a healthy and compassionate way.

For those of us who have experienced death and loss, it can manifest differently for everyone. Someone else's grief can trigger our own responses to grief.

**Incomplete mourning** can activate memories of grief and sadness from previous losses. We may find ourselves at work lacking concentration, unable to focus, and being unproductive as we grapple with the awareness of grief. We may not have fully grieved previous losses and find ourselves here again.

### What Does Grief Look Like?

Grief can look different for everyone. There is no one way to grieve; no one size fits all.

#### Grief:

- May or may not be expressed externally.
- Ebbs and flows. There is no single way to get through it.
- Is a process. It doesn't ever necessarily end, but shifts over time.
- Often brings up other losses. We may have thought that we were complete with mourning someone, then find we are back there in ways we were unprepared for.
- Is something that happens inside of us. Mourning is the outward expression of that grief.
- Can be more than the death of a person. It's the death of routine; the death of familiarity. It may be the death

of a job, or of a relationship.

- May last for days, weeks, months or years.
- Can appear in a form of collective grief.
- Can foster compassion for ourselves and others.
- Can create resilience. Transformation can happen.

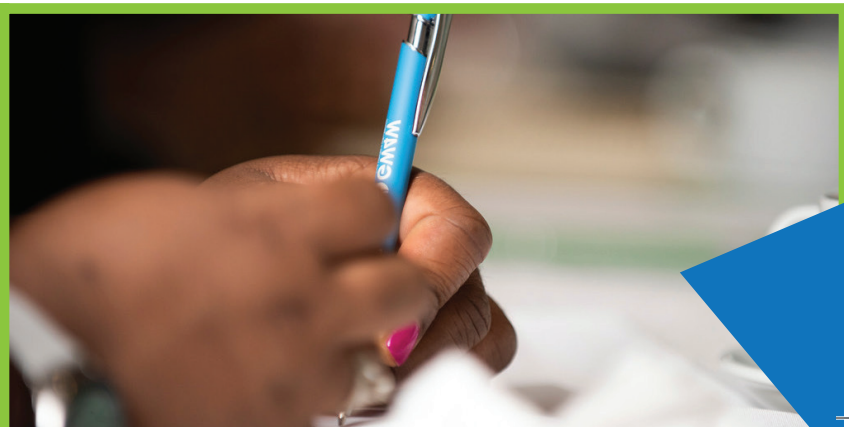
### What is Collective Grief?


Grief felt by a collective group such as a community, society, village, or nation as a result of an event such as a war, natural disaster, terrorist attack, death of a public figure, or any other event leading to mass casualties or national tragedy.

- All of our losses can help us feel more connected to another person's grief.
- No one can fully know someone else's experience of grief, but they can know what it's like to have that experience within themselves. That can happen on a group level.
- Repeated grief can have a profound impact. For example, when we see another brown or black body being killed over and over again or losing several people close to you in a short period of time.
- Customary mourning rituals are not available to many people now. We must find other ways to express loss and grief without the social support we may have had in the past.
- There is a universal connection to humanity with collective grief and acknowledging this can provide comfort and a deeper connection to others.

### How can we address grief and mourning in helpful ways?

- By being self-aware. First, to have compassion for yourself and to listen to what you are feeling.





Recognize your pain, offer yourself compassion, recognize you are not alone, and ask yourself, “What do I need right now?” If you are looking to support someone you know, you may need to do this first, before trying to be helpful to someone else.

- Checking in with people on a regular basis, by asking some simple questions, such as, “How are you doing right now? How are you feeling? Something seems a little bit off.” And then listen. The key is identifying that you or someone you know may be grieving.
- The simplest but the most profound act we can do for someone is just being present and “holding space” for them. To listen without words or offering solutions, is powerful. It is ok to not attempt to take away their pain, because we can’t. Genuine listening is a gift.
  - Understand the importance of coming to the conversation without answers, to sit without judgment, to sit without thinking in advance, ‘what am I going to say?’ because “I think I know what could help them.”
  - Sit silently with that person while they weep, while they manifest whatever is coming up for them. It could be anger; it could be sadness. Grief expresses itself in many ways. Being a witness to another person in their grief can be a beautiful gift. Holding this compassionate space can do wonders.
- Having the right support. If you are mourning, try not to go to a “dry well,” which is someone who is just not emotionally able to support you at this time. Being with the right people at the right time, if you have that choice, can be very helpful.

- Being proactive about your mental health and proactive about your life. This can help during times of great stress.
  - Write down all your wellness tools that you’re going to use. Write down your triggers so that you can recognize them when they show up again.
  - What does daily maintenance look like? What are the tools that you would want to utilize or the people you would contact during a crisis?”

#### To Organizational Leaders

- Those in the business of setting policies should gather information from their employees, such as:
  - What do you need in a bereavement policy?
  - What do you think would be helpful given your experience with this organization and also with your own experience of grief?”
- Leaders need to understand that grief is a process. Few of us stop grieving in a matter of days. Having a meaningful dialogue on this subject with employees is important because the typical three-day bereavement leave isn’t sufficient. It is also important to discuss this with anyone who manages a team, to better prepare them.
- Not everyone wants time off. Some people, when mourning, want the routine of work. They want to be able to get back to work soon. Others may need more time away.
- It’s important to recognize and not assume that we understand the depth of a connection between the mourner and who died. Someone who lost their best friend may still need time off.
- As a leader, being more compassionate and non-judgmental can build social capital in your organization and build a foundation of trust.

**If you have experienced a loss or are looking for support, know that you’re not alone. Please reach out to us. GW4W has a global network and we can connect you to credible resources.**



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**If your organization could benefit from leadership or team training on this topic, please contact GW4W at [info@gw4w.org](mailto:info@gw4w.org).**

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