

Xan Goodman, Susan Wainscott, and Samantha Godbey

Grief in the library

Coping with the loss of a colleague

Nearly three years ago, the three authors and another colleague started working at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas (UNLV) Libraries within several months of one another and quickly bonded as we found our footing as tenure-track faculty librarians. When Frederic, our instructional design librarian and friend, died unexpectedly the following year, our grief was sudden and deep. Frederic, Fredo, Fred (we called him many names) was a man of profound intellect and biting humor, who in his short time at the UNLV Libraries greatly impacted our work and the way we think about student learning.

As we have coped with this loss, we have been struck by the length and variety of grieving responses that we and others have experienced. As librarians will do, one of the ways we approached the situation was by exploring the literature on grief in general and grief in the workplace. We were surprised by the lack of materials specific to libraries and wanted to share our experience as well as some resources with others who find themselves in a similar situation.

The general management literature provides the latest research and best practices to assist co-workers in their bereavement processes, whether due to loss of a co-worker, friend, or family member. Resources can also be found in the higher education literature.

Grieving at work

In a public or semipublic setting such as the workplace, the different belief systems and personalities of our co-workers can become much more apparent when the group is experiencing an emotional event such as the

death of a co-worker. It is safe to assume that each individual has a different set of beliefs and emotional responses, and that some will be less aware or less accommodating of these differences. The private bereavement process of one person may be interpreted by a more expressive person as unfeeling and cold. People may also be unprepared if a workplace loss triggers other unresolved grief and loss in themselves and others.

Mary Tehan and Neil Thompson describe workplace grief responses as open (i.e., visible and clearly tied to the loss) or hidden (i.e., less obvious and not obviously related to the loss), such as a having short temper or the inability to focus.¹ They warn that some workplace cultures are less accepting of those who are different, and a grieving person may face negative consequences if they feel or behave differently than others expect. Organizing a collective grieving experience, such as a memorial service that focuses on the lost person, may allow the group to mourn in a supportive manner. Practicing compassion by allowing each person the time and space to grieve in his or her own fashion can also be helpful.²

Grief in the workplace can be complicated by a variety of factors. For instance, the authors' grief was complicated by our desire to complete a writing project that we had begun with Frederic. We wanted to complete the project on

Xan Goodman is health and life sciences librarian, email: xan.goodman@unlv.edu, Susan Wainscott is STEM librarian, email: sue.wainscott@unlv.edu, and Samantha Godbey is education librarian, email: samantha.godbey@unlv.edu, at University of Nevada-Las Vegas

© 2016 Xan Goodman, Susan Wainscott, and Samantha Godbey

its own merits and as a tribute to Frederic, but we found it difficult to do so without the contribution of his unique skills and knowledge.

In the workplace, while a colleague's position may be refilled, the specific contribution of the lost colleague may not be replaceable. Letting go of unfinished projects may trigger additional bereavement of the colleague and the potential the project held.³ Alternatively, co-workers may feel guilt or distress in successfully filling the shoes of the lost colleague, which is a form of survivor's guilt.

Honoring a colleague

There is no roadmap or guide to the perfect grief support program for your workplace, because each workplace is unique. However, organizations or workgroups may develop traditions that support the bereavement process, such as a moment of silent reflection at a group meeting, signing sympathy cards for the family of the deceased, collecting donations for a scholarship, or establishing a tangible memorial such as a plaque in the library. Another option is to hold a small memorial service in the library to which library and campus colleagues are invited. Combining these traditions with support services available in your organization, and compassionate listening for as long as it takes, will help your workplace support those who remain with compassion, while also maintaining an appropriate focus on work.

After Frederic died, we held a small memorial service at the library that allowed us to speak about what he meant to us. This service was held several months after his death in conjunction with dedicating a named table in the library in his honor. We also felt it was important to support his family during this time. We collected donations to assist the family with funeral costs. A co-worker close to his family cleaned his office and shipped personal items to them, in order to spare them travel time and costs. Additionally, our book conservator helped create a memory book to share stories of Frederic with his family.

Conclusion

We are fortunate to have one another with

whom to reminisce and to process this grief, which remains today, a little more than two years after Frederic's death. In addition to those resources mentioned below, we include here some reading that may be helpful to others who are impacted by a loss. We also encourage readers to explore resources available through their organization's wellness program, which may provide literature about grief or access to a grief counselor.

Notes

1. Mary Tehan and Neil Thompson, "Loss and Grief in the Workplace: The Challenge of Leadership," *Omega* 66, no. 3 (2013): 265-280.
2. Suzanne Crowe, "Finding a Place for Grief in the Workplace," *Anesthesiology* 122, no. 2 (2015): 465-467.
3. David Charles-Edwards, *Handling Death and Bereavement at Work*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 13. *zz*

Additional reading

- George Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).
- Kari Dyregrov and Atle Dyregrov, "What kind of support can the school and workplace provide?" in *Effective Grief and Bereavement Support: The Role of Family, Friends, Colleagues, Schools and Support Professionals* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008).
- Andrew Levy, *The Orphaned Adult: Understanding and Coping with Grief and Change After the Death of Our Parents* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2000).
- See Modern Loss, a website providing a space for a "candid conversation about grief," at <http://modernloss.com/>.
- Anna Ranieri, "How to Handle Shared Grief at Work," *Harvard Business Review*, May 26, 2015, <http://hbr.org/2015/05/how-to-handle-shared-grief-at-work>.
- Sheryl Sandberg, author and Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, post about the loss of her husband, www.facebook.com/sheryl/posts/10155617891025177:0.