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EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

supporting EAP professionals

What Grieving Employees Want EAPs to Know

By Deb Kosmer

People say that grief is hard work, and it's true. Trying to deal with the death of loved ones – day after day, week after week, month after month – is exhausting. The tears, anger, confusion, disbelief, guilt, and emptiness "drain" us, meaning that the littlest things can wear us out.

Counselors, including EAP practitioners, need to be very careful about what they say and tread softly with grieving employees. The grieving are not looking to a counselor for advice, but rather for *validation* of their feelings and their *right to* those feelings.

Grieving individuals are looking for someone to *listen* as they release some of their pain. They are looking for someone who will *give them the time that they need* to sort through their feelings, and who will not expect them to "be over" the death in weeks – or even months – someone who *understands* that we do not "get over" the death of someone we love. Rather, in time, we learn to **adapt** and assimilate the loss into our lives.

Why? How?

Grief is often accompanied by a loss of a person's sense of fairness. *Why did it have to be their husband who died? Their wife? Their child? Their*….whomever. "How" is another key question as in, *"How could this happen?"*

Most bereaved people struggle with feelings of guilt such as "if only" as in, *"If only I had insisted they go to the doctor sooner…seen a different doctor…kept them home that day,"* and on and on.

❖ **Putting into practice**: EAP counselors, who want to be supportive need to listen without judgment, be comfortable with the expression of strong feelings, and they need to be compassionate and encouraging as a bereaved person struggles to survive the loss.

The 'Old You'

Many people will tell a grieving individual, *"I can't wait for the old you to return."* This puts additional pressure on the bereaved person, and it's an impossible expectation to begin with. It's true

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Featured Inside

that in time the bereaved will be better, but they won't be the *same*. Life-changing events change us.

❖ **Putting into practice**: Consequently, it's important for EAP counselors to recognize that the goal is not for the individual to "get back" to who they were, but to get to know and like the person they become over time. This is **not** the same thing as liking the fact or saying, *"It's OK that their loved one died."*

Belongings & Names

Personal belongings are important for many grieving workers. These items are a bridge between themselves and their loved one. There is no "right" timeline for keeping – or not keeping – personal items. It is also not wrong if a person decides to give items away soon after the death. That's because some people gain comfort from knowing that someone else is benefiting from the items.

❖ **Putting into practice**: In other words, it's important for EAP counselors to be aware that there are few absolutes when it comes to the "right and wrong way to grieve."

In addition to personal items, most bereaved individuals want to say and hear their loved one's *name*, even if it brings tears. Hearing others say their loved one's name or share a story or memory helps them know that their loved one has not been forgotten. Since they cannot make new memories, the ones they have with their loved one become even more precious.

❖ **Putting into practice**: EAP counselors can help a bereaved client by encouraging them to talk about their loved one and share stories and memories. It is as important to gain insight and information about the *person who died*, as it is the person who is doing the grieving.

Pain Varies from Person to Person

An individual coming in for grief counseling may be grieving very differently than other family members, which can create added turmoil as they struggle to understand one another. This is because the impact of a death affects each person differently, and to greater and lesser degrees.

For example, a person who appears to be, or who perhaps really is "OK with or relieved about the death of a loved one," can be perceived as cold and uncaring. This individual may struggle more with *other people's expectations* of them, than actual grief. They may hesitate to express their feelings with anyone other than a counselor.

❖ **Putting into practice**: One of the worst things I heard a counselor say was, *"Pain is pain; there is no difference from one person's pain to another."* This is simply not true. In retrospect, I realize that what she was trying to say was that we can't judge one another's pain and should not try. When someone is in pain, it doesn't really matter that others may be experiencing more pain. Rather, this individual's pain is what matters most to him or her, and it hurts!

However, initially all I heard was, *"Pain is pain,"* as if there's no difference whether you just broke up with your girlfriend, your goldfish died…or your husband of 55 years…or your 92-year-old uncle. "Pain is pain" is like telling someone to be glad that he/she doesn't have to deal with as significant a loss as this person's, with the insinuation that the other individual's is worse.

'Closure'

"Closure" is another word and concept that angers the bereaved. This signifies that there should be an end-point in time for their grief. While the outward expression of grief, and the intensity of the loss and dissipate over time, this is **not** the same thing as closure. As noted earlier in this article, closure means we learn to *adapt* to or *accommodate* the grief, but **not** to "get over" the grief.

❖ **Putting into practice**: It's important for EAP counselors to acknowledge that death ends a life – but not a *relationship*. The attachment and continuing bonds that grieving people feel to their loved ones is something that cannot, and should not, be taken from them.

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Wearing pieces of a loved one's clothing, taking up hobbies or activities this person enjoyed, and even "talking" to them are common and often helpful activities.

Grief Stages not Helpful

Many counselors like to refer to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief. However, grief is messy and doesn't follow any particular pattern or rules. Trying to put a structure around it is impossible and not helpful. Everyone's journey through grief is unique.

❖ **Putting into practice**: While the individual may experience some parallels to the Kubler-Ross model, trying to assign or determine nonexistent stages only serves to frustrate the grieving and impedes the process.

It is also important for EAP counselors to recognize that, for some grievers the *second* year after the death is actually harder than the first, because by then the reality that the loved one is never coming home is finally becoming clearer.

It is also not uncommon for people to tear up even after 40 years when they share a story about their loved one or unexpectedly hear their favorite song. This does not indicate a lack of or unhealthy grief. It also does not mean that reminders are unpleasant. There can still be a need for tears long after a death.

Finally, it is also not unusual or pathological for someone to sense a loved one's presence or to attribute things and happenings as a sign or message from them. Many people find comfort in these experiences. ■

Deb Kosmer, MSW, CSW, CT, is a bereavement support coordinator. For more information, email her at debrakosmer@gmail.com. ***Editor's note****: For more information on this topic, see this month's Brown Bagger insert.*

Editor's Notebook

This month marks the second cover story in *EAR* by Deb Kosmer, whom long-time contributor RaeAnn Thomas suggested to me several years ago as an expert on the topic of grief.

Grief is a tricky subject. Everyone experiences grief differently. Some people wear it on their sleeves, others do a good job hiding it inside. Some find work therapeutic, while still others find it difficult to work at all.

In addition, grief response service tends to get the short end of the stick, compared to crisis response services, which isn't exactly the same thing. What should the grief process consist of? Should there be a few moments of silence at work for the deceased?

The point is, when you as an EA professional aren't exactly sure how to assist HR and others struggling with workplace grief, we hope this month's cover article and *Brown Bagger* will give you some good ideas.

Thanks, Deb for the excellent submission. Until next month.

Mike Jacquart

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Points to Remember

- Grieving people are broken-hearted, not broke.
- They need to be comforted, not fixed.
- They need to be heard, not talked to.
- They need understanding, not unrealistic expectations.
- They need to be allowed the time they need, not hurried along.
- They need validation, not judgment.
- They need to be able to tell their story as many times as it takes.
- They need to know it's OK to cry – and not to cry.

➢ Many people question why they are still here. This kind of questioning is usually a search for meaning and is usually **not** indicative of suicidal thoughts.

➢ Even years after a death, it is not uncommon for something to trigger grief.

➢ Avoid asking someone if they have "accepted" the death. Acceptance to the grieving is equated to saying they are OK with the fact that their loved one has died. They can be "OK" without believing that dying was OK.

➢ Grieving people look to their counselors to sit with them in the darkness as their counselor shines some light along the way. ■

– Deb Kosmer

Social Media Conduct – Part II

By Richard Weinblatt

The rise of social networking has its supporters and detractors. Some lament the workplace distractions, while others point to the teamwork and productivity that can result.

The key for supervisors and executives is to recognize uses and abuses, and what steps should be taken to control adverse actions.

The following are two recommendations that can be implemented in any workplace. Two additional suggestions were presented last month.

❖ *Take technological precautions*. Be sure to keep one step ahead of the nefarious forces of the Internet. Continuously updated anti-virus protection, mandatory and periodic changing of passwords, and strong firewall protections are imperative in the new social networking world.

Web filtering systems are also available to enable the employer to restrict access based on a number of different options including time frame (such as breaks or lunchtime) or a time limit (such as one hour per day).

❖ *Monitor usage*. Employers must be able to monitor Internet usage and, in particular, social networking within the workplace. Be

sure that employees understand that their computer interaction is being recorded. This oversight is vital as the company may bear civil or criminal responsibility for some actions of their employees.

Summary

Take steps to assure employees that such online networking etiquette expectations are in place to protect them, as well as the company. ■

Dr. Richard Weinblatt, The Cop Doc, is a former police chief, ex-criminal justice professor, and past police academy director who is an expert on police, crime, and safety topics. To find out more, visit www.thecopdoc.com.

Resources

The ***Workplace Bullying Institute*** at www.workplacebullying.org raises awareness of, and creates a public dialogue about workplace bullying. It also strives to apply solutions for individuals, unions, employers, and policy makers.

The ***Wellness Junction*** at www.wellnessjunction.com contains strategies for building a successful workplace wellness program, plus surveys, reports, a blog, and more.

Grant Winners to Expand EA Research

The Employee Assistance Research Foundation (EARF) has announced the winners of its first grants. Two organizations, from two different countries, will each receive $40,000 grants for studies to be completed in the spring of 2012.

The Institute for Stress and Work, and the University of Leuven, in Belgium, was recognized for its proposal, "EAP in Continental Europe: State of the Art and Future Challenges."

The National Behavioral Consortium, located in the U.S., was lauded for its proposal, "Creating a National Benchmarking Resource of Metrics for the EAP Field."

The two studies are expected to provide valuable empirical data, according to Carl Tisone, the foundation's founder and board chairman.

The foundation's second grant cycle will be announced sometime this fall. Details will be posted on the foundation's website – www.eapfoundation.org. ■

Source: EARF.

In the News

Understanding Disability as a Diversity Issue

Approximately one-third of the allegations of workplace discrimination filed by people with disabilities involve dismissal or poor working conditions leading to resignation, suggests a study by Texas A&M University professor Fredrick Nafukho.

The findings, which appear in a special issue of *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, have important implications for human resource and employee assistance professionals. They suggest the need for more knowledge of the different forms of disability and diversity management skills, which help avoid conflict and mistrust.

"Those of us who work in human resource development know the most valuable asset organizations have is people," Nafukho says. "But people are not the same. They are very different. If we can tap into these differences in a constructive way, we'll get the best out of people for the improved performance of their organizations."

Nafukho notes that diversity can encompass any characteristic that can be used to differentiate between individuals. In terms of disability, those differences could be:

- Physical (mobility issues or chronic illness);
- Sensory (visual or hearing impairment);
- Cognitive (mental or learning disability) or
- Emotional (depression or psychological conditions).

The research utilizes data from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). According to the data, the most common disabilities in discharge allegations included back injuries, non-paralytic orthopedic conditions, depression and diabetes.

"People, regardless of their differences, need to feel valued, respected, supported and appreciated in the workplace because they all offer positive contributions to the work environment," Nafukho says. ■

Source: Texas A&M University News.

Quick Ideas

Workplace Behaviors:

Do's and Don'ts

- DO respond constructively when someone offers an idea.
- DON'T let negativity become your "go-to" response.
- DO push for solutions.
- DON'T give in to the temptation to whine.
- DO conduct tough talks in person.
- DON'T leave critical or harsh messages on voicemail or send them to an email inbox.
- DO set goals and hold yourself and your employees accountable for results.
- DON'T confuse activity with progress. ■

Source: Jon Gordon, author of Soup: A Recipe to Nourish Your Team and Culture (Wiley, 2010, ISBN: 978-0-4704878-4-6, www.Soup11.com).

Don't Let Possessions Define Your Worth

By Gary Foreman

Recently, two events came together in an interesting way. On our way into work, I suggested to my wife that we stop at Starbucks for a cup of coffee. We needed some uninterrupted time to go over some family and business matters, and a local coffeehouse seemed like a good place.

I ordered a cup of black coffee. She ordered something that was related to coffee, but had more in common with milk, whipped cream, and other ingredients!

Normally when we go out I pay our restaurant bill, but my wife has a Starbucks card so it made sense for her to pay. She teasingly told me that her "gold" card makes her a special customer. I replied (only half in jest) that the card makes her a special sucker.

Let me point out that my wife is frugal, so I'm not trying to paint her as a spendthrift. Rather, most of us have a few areas where we like to treat ourselves – my wife's just happens to be coffee.

However, it also occurred to me that it's the things that provide us with status that are often the same items that ruin our budgets... the *designer clothes, sunglasses, prestige cars, watches*, etc. These are the things that seem irresistible, but wreak havoc with our credit card bills later.

Fortunately for us, my wife and I can tease each other about the Starbucks card as it's not a significant expense. Rather, it's a little luxury that she deserves.

Relating Financial Advice

Several days later, I was interviewed by Marty Nemko, host of a public radio station in San Francisco. We discussed what we can pass along to younger generations about money. I remarked that the concept of a "starter home" had disappeared. Most 20-somethings expect that their first house will be much like their parents' existing home. They assume that they can start their financial journey in the same place that took their parents 20 or 30 years to reach!

Their parents have been building equity for decades to make their mortgage payment affordable. But their kids don't have that same down-payment, so their mortgage payments are often too expensive for them. They need to begin their financial journey at the *start*, not the middle!

As we continued the discussion, Marty asked me what was the most important thing that we could teach young adults. It seems to me there are two areas that will make a big difference in their financial future.

❖ **First, learning to live without status symbols is freeing.** It's a hard life when you let others define your worth based on the things you own. If my self-worth is tied up in a new car, I'll be forced to buy one every few years, and that gets expensive.

I'll be much happier if I decide that my self-worth has nothing to do with my possessions. That buying (or not buying) an expensive new watch will make no difference in who I am and what I'm really worth. That's very liberating.

❖ **Second, all young adults would be wise to learn about the value of compound interest.** It's a double-edged sword that can make – or break – your finances. The idea is simple: If you save a few dollars every month and put them in a bank, IRA or other investment, they will grow over time. Once you've saved the money the hard work is done. Time and a little monitoring will do the rest. These savings can become significant.

On the other hand, if you *spend* a few dollars more than you make each month, the same compound interest will become a burden. That's because the money that you owe will accumulate interest, and the debt will grow. You'll continue to pay more for something that you bought years ago.

Summary

These concepts are simple, no MBA is needed to understand them. Look at prestige goods for what they are – *a way to separate you from your money*. Learning to live without them is actually very freeing emotionally.

In addition, compound interest can make – or break you – financially depending on whether you save a little, or spend too much.

I'll ask a final question: *What gold cards do you have in your wallet?* ■

Gary Foreman is the editor of the Dollar Stretcher website (www.stretcher.com) and various e-newsletters. The Dollar Stretcher is dedicated to helping people live better on the money they already have.

Workplace Violence & Bullying – Managing Risks

By Christopher Boman & Dennis Moschella

Each day, thousands of American workers are harassed, intimidated, threatened and verbally or physically attacked. And bullying is three times more prevalent than sexual harassment. While only the sensational cases seem to make the headlines, threats and harassment in the workplace are a serious concern for employers.

However, employers can manage their risk by implementing preventative measures. (An EA professional should be able to assist.)

❖ **Conduct thorough background checks** — Employers could be liable if someone carries out a violent act and has a criminal record such as charges for carrying a concealed weapon, stalking, battery, etc. Ensure thorough background checks and drug tests are conducted for every hire and that risky behavior indicators are reported to HR.

❖ **Expand company policies** — Studies show that fewer than 30% of businesses have a workplace violence prevention policy. Adopt and publicize a zero-tolerance policy regarding threats, harassment (including bullying and cyber-stalking) and violence in the workplace. Company policies can help prevent potential problems before they escalate into something more destructive. In addition, regularly train all managers and employees on company policies, violation reporting guidelines, and investigation procedures.

❖ **Understand the psychology of bullying** — Studies show that 71% of bullies outrank their targets and 40% of bullying targets don't tell anyone. This is an important step in helping staff report bullying, as it shows that most people don't report it because it's their boss bullying them. Understanding both the bully's and the victim's psychology can help employers address issues in a manner that yields positive results.

❖ **Learn the warning signs** — Warning signs can indicate a potential problem, including verbal threats, paranoid behavior, extreme depression, disregard for worker safety, or a romantic obsession with someone in the workplace. Ensure that both management and staff report potential warning signs.

❖ **Don't discount third party harassment** — Remember that many employees deal with vendors and other third parties throughout the workday, and that employer liability can extend to interaction with these individuals. If bullying or other harassment by third parties is conveyed to employers, the company must address the problem as soon as it's reported.

❖ **Don't forget the financial impact** — The financial costs to businesses each year as the result of bullying and workplace violence threats and incidents are estimated to range from $36 billion to $120 billion. These numbers reflect absenteeism, decreased productivity, high turnover, theft and sabotage at work, medical care and increased accidents on the job and litigation. Experts advise that the return on investment for a business to implement a workplace violence prevention and education program is real and quantifiable.

❖ **The impact of bullying** — One study indicated that 75% of people bullied in the workplace will leave their jobs. You may lose some of your best workers if they're being targeted.

❖ **Call on the experts** — Consultants and legal experts are a smart investment to identify potential risks, mitigate actual threats, and offer solutions for companies to protect themselves and their employees. ■

Christopher J. Boman is a partner at the Irvine, Calif. office of the employment law firm Fisher & Phillips LLP. Dennis B. Moschella is managing director and workforce violence specialist for the Los Angeles office of i-fact@nalysis, inc., a private investigations firm.

Parity Law Won’t ‘Break the Bank,’ Study Suggests

Parity in insurance coverage of substance abuse treatment has not led to increased use of this service or an increase in costs. It has done what it was designed to do – lower out-of-pocket expenses for covered individuals, research suggests.

Employers who provide health insurance plans for mental and substance use disorders are now required by the federal *Mental Health Parity Act of 2008* to provide benefits that are equal to those given for general medical care.

“There is always a fear that for substance abuse and for mental health, every time a plan is more generous, the utilization will skyrocket ... and the insurance companies will start complaining that they won’t be able to afford these services. But this is not true,” said lead study author Vanessa Azzone, researcher and biostatistician at Harvard Medical School in Boston.

“Providing parity for substance abuse services didn’t increase the overall costs. And that is the big fear that everyone has opened the floodgates and all these people will want these very expensive services,” said Anita Everett, director of community psychiatric services with Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. (Dr. Everett was not involved in this study.)

“Also, the number of individuals who actually sought the services didn’t go up that much,” Dr. Everett stressed. “I think that is important, although not shocking, and consistent with what we already know: a lot of people with substance abuse disorder don’t recognize their need for treatment or are unwilling to seek treatment. Offering parity is not all of a sudden going to break down their resistance.

“The clinical significance of parity is that it enables a clinician to be able to help patients and to ‘strike while the iron is hot,’ so to speak,” Dr. Everett added. “If they’re at a point where they’re ready, then hopefully we’ll be able to immediately meet that readiness,” she said. ■

Source: Medscape Medical News © 2011 WebMD. A version of this article appeared on the website of the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (www.eapassn.org).

Quick Ideas

Do You Manage Your Day?

1. **Manage your goals**. What are you working *toward*?
2. **Manage your priorities**. You’ll never get it all done, so choose what is most important.
3. **Manage your focus**. Block things that steal your time and attention. If you’re interrupted, manage your focus by spending *less* time on trivial matters.
4. **Manage technology**. People may expect replies to emails and texts, but you needn’t always make a detailed response right away.

Source: Michael Guld, an author, speaker, and president of The Guld Resource Group