

# SUPPORTING PROFESSIONAL CAREGIVERS THROUGH GRIEF



**Bright Horizons.**

Early Education & Preschool

**Staff who feel emotionally supported are at the heart of strong, effective programs and schools. We can't expect caregivers and others to create a warm, nurturing environment for children when they are struggling with powerful emotions. They simply can't give something they don't have.**

This article offers some perspective and information on how to support staff through grief.

## **THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF PROFESSIONAL CAREGIVERS**

Much has been written about supporting staff through grief in the workplace, but the needs of caregivers vary widely from those in other professions for several reasons:

- ▶ Staff develop deeply personal relationships with their clients.
- ▶ Caregivers and others must maintain an emotionally stable environment.
- ▶ Change is constant in child care centers, shelters, hospitals, and similar settings.

## **PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Staff become very personally connected to their clients — children and families. When clients experience loss, caregivers are often directly impacted. Children and families rely on caregivers to provide a safe, comforting, dependable environment after a loss, even when the caregiver might be processing his or her own feelings about a situation.

Additionally, the range and scope of experiences a caregiver encounters are vastly larger than those encountered by employees in other industries. In a given day, a caregiver might comfort a child whose pet died, encourage a parent who is grieving over the diagnosis of a disability, or support parents who are facing divorce.

## **LACK OF PRIVACY**

In many industries, an employee struggling with a loss can close the office door and “muscle” through his or her work while quietly and privately dealing with grief. Caregivers don't have the option of retreating to a private office during difficult times. They're in the classroom, clinic, shelter, etc., where children and adults need them to be present, engaged, and involved. This reality can tax a caregiver's emotional reserves,

potentially leading to burnout and other negative outcomes.

## CONSTANT CHANGE

Perhaps more than any other industry, caregivers work in an environment of constant change. Children and families enroll and depart. Children move to new classrooms or new schools. Staff turnover tends to be higher than in other industries. All these realities can cause stress and grief for staff, but are rarely acknowledged.

\*The term *professional caregiver* refers to anyone who cares for children professionally, including teachers, therapists, clinicians, medical personnel, social workers, and others, rather than parents, grandparents, families, and guardians.

## CREATING A SAFE PLACE FOR PROFESSIONAL CAREGIVERS

Acknowledging and talking about these challenges goes a long way in diffusing some of the stress caregivers feel. In the following segments, you'll find more specific ideas on building a staff community that fosters healthy emotional expression for caregivers.

## WHAT TO DO

### Build Community

Child care centers, clinics, and schools are inherently different than many workplaces. We are in the business of dealing with human relationships and emotions, day in and day out. Caregivers need and deserve a warm, comfortable environment just as much as the children do. By building a strong sense of community in the setting **before** a crisis or loss occurs, we ensure that caregivers find the support they need during difficult personal situations.

**The culture and environment can either nurture staff's emotional growth or hinder it.** Every member of the staff plays a part in how the community feels. Think about how well your organization fosters emotional well-being for staff. Below are a few ideas to consider:

- ▶ **Create a warm, welcoming space for staff.** This might take some creativity, depending on your floorplan, but try to consider it a necessity rather than a luxury.
- ▶ **Work on establishing a healthy community culture in your center.** Say no to gossip and encourage staff to communicate, work together, and build friendships.
- ▶ **Spend time on building relationships.** Be transparent in your expectations and think about how to divide responsibilities in a way that fosters growth while reducing competition.
- ▶ **Plan occasional social activities and use staff meetings effectively to build community.**

## Be Prepared

- ▶ Learn about the grief process, as well as the general tips for supporting adults.
- ▶ Stay up to date on company policies so you know (and can answer) questions about insurance, benefits, and medical leave.

## IDEAS FOR SPECIFIC SITUATIONS

### When an Employee Suffers a Loss

- ▶ **Respond immediately.** Reach out to an employee as soon as you learn of a loss. Express sympathy and ask what you can do to help. Listen to the employee and respect his or her wishes, particularly around disclosing the loss to others. Send condolences, such as flowers or a note. Continue to check in with the employee, e.g., “It’s been a few weeks since David died. How are you doing?”
- ▶ **Avoid making assumptions.** Grieving doesn’t unfold in a neat, orderly timeline. Don’t assume that an employee should be “over” his or her grief. For most people, the pain of grief lessens with time but the loss never leaves. Keep the door to communication open. Understand that the employee might not perform at his or her usual level initially. Be patient and sensitive. Talk about possible solutions. For example, perhaps another teacher could lead group times or perform other tasks that require high energy or lots of interaction with others.
- ▶ **Navigate workplace changes.** Immediately after a loss, an employee might need time off. Going forward, continue to check in with the employee. Watch for signs that he or she needs additional support, such as frequent absences or tardiness, loss of interest in work, or reduced performance. Step in sooner rather than later. Encourage the employee to use the resources available through human resources.

- ▶ **Recognize the impact on staff members.** When an employee experiences the death of a family member or other loved one, your immediate concern will be for that employee. Don't forget, though, that depending on the closeness of their relationship, other employees might be affected, too. You, too, might find yourself grieving with the employee. All these reactions, while difficult, are present because you've developed close, intimate relationships and because your staff cares about one another. Focus on nurturing those relationships and providing comfort.

## When an Employee Is Ill

When an employee becomes seriously ill, the entire community will probably be impacted. You and your staff might feel intense grief, wonder how to help, or worry about how these changes will affect your team. It's important to allow yourself — and your staff — to grieve and nurture each other while continuing to take care of the children and other daily responsibilities. Below are a few ideas:

- ▶ **Expect a variety of reactions and emotions.** Depending on the intimacy of your relationships, you and your employees may feel intense sadness or concern.
- ▶ **Respect the sick person's privacy.** Your employee must decide how much information he or she wants to share with others regarding the illness. Communicate clearly so you understand the employee's wishes. Always ask for permission before you share information.
- ▶ **Consider workload changes.** Your employee might need to take time off from work or be unable to fulfill all his or her usual responsibilities. Talk with staff about how to realign these responsibilities so the children's care isn't compromised yet staff feel supported and capable of dealing with the changes. Let staff know that you appreciate their efforts, but watch for signs that people are doing too much. Consider bringing in additional help.
- ▶ **Ask how to help.** Talk with the employee about how the team can best support him or her. For example, after a surgery or treatment, an employee might feel overwhelmed by lots of visitors or emails, but appreciate a few cards, a dinner, or a gift card for food. Continue to invite the employee to social events, such as a holiday party. Keep him or her updated on happenings at work. Encourage team members to keep in touch through emails, phone calls, or short visits as appropriate, perhaps assigning one person as a single contact point.

## When an Employee Dies

Because of the nature of our work, we often develop very close relationships with coworkers and employees. When a staff member dies, the team may grieve deeply. Below are a few ideas for supporting your staff:

- ▶ **Allow time to memorialize and remember the staff member.** Participating in an event or ritual to celebrate the staff member's life can offer comfort. Staff members might attend memorial services or plan an activity at work, such as a fundraiser, in honor of the deceased. Acknowledge the staff member's contributions occasionally on an ongoing basis. Remember enjoyable experiences, e.g., "This reminds me of the song Alice sang at the end of the day."
- ▶ **Expect and be comfortable with intense reactions of grief.** Allow yourself to grieve and keep an open door for others to talk to you. Talk about the deceased employee, remembering special times together. Plan a memorial activity or ongoing project; for example, create a library in honor of a team member who loved books.
- ▶ **Be aware of challenges.** Watch for signs that a staff member needs additional support, such as excessive absenteeism or a loss of interest in work. Encourage staff members to use human resources benefits or join a support group.
- ▶ **Take care of yourself.** You can't help your staff if you're overwhelmed yourself. Be aware of your own reactions to grief. Talk with others, meditate, journal, go for walks, or do other activities that offer comfort.