

## **WORKING WITH GRIEF: When Colleagues Are at a Loss for Words**

For months, Stuart Shippereit had difficulty answering the phones in his office. The sound of the dull bell triggered an indescribably anxiety. There was no mystery about the origin of his phobia: A year ago, Shippereit routinely answered the office at 9 am the morning it was the police informing him that his 18-year-daughter, Caroline, a freshman at the University of Notre Dame, had been killed in an early morning car crash outside of Washington.

Now, Shippereit and his wife, Marianne, who live in Springfield, adjust to the emptiness of survival and the pain of bereavement both in their private lives and in their jobs. Like many couples who share a loss, they responded differently. Marianne preferred to get right back to her government office where she could “keep busy” and surround herself with friends. She took no time off and at home she put her energy into numerous projects from painting the entrance hall to writing personal letters to Caroline’s many “compassionate friends who need to keep in touch.”

A Navy man, 43-year-old Stuart Shippereit had been assigned to Operation Desert Storm, but after his daughter’s death his orders immediately were canceled and he was given a new desk assignment. Relieved and grateful that he did not have to leave the family, Shippereit says that it still was difficult to enter a new job with new faces and new responsibilities. Initially, he chose to take two weeks off, and he later took individual days of leave. Admittedly, he “vegetated” wanting to do nothing.

“Those first few months I was in shell shock,” explains Shippereit. It was fortunate, he says, that his supervisor was someone who “understands grief, somebody who understands that I was in a fog...that helped us both.”

But after the death “There is a storm surge of concern, people to hug, all the food...” says Shippereit while proudly showing a large album of photos and touching commemoratives from relatives, friends and Caroline’s classmates. “Then after a while it subsides. After you go back to work, you don’t have the amount of people and support. You don’t know if you are going insane.”

During the precarious period of grieving, the feeling that one is going crazy is

not uncommon. It may come in the middle of the night, at lunch with colleagues, or at the start of a staff meeting. Grieving is not an emotion that easily can be turned off when one dons business attire or steps onto the subway. The same is true for the symptoms of grief—despair, anxiety, anger and confusion. The bereaved soon learns that these feelings may flare up at the most unexpected and inappropriate moments, so he does everything he can to suppress them.

“We get very good at avoiding the grief, so good that we don’t realize we are doing it,” points out Ron Culberson, counseling manager with the Hospice of Northern Virginia. “If it hasn’t been dealt with, it comes out in other ways, such as physically or emotionally—a short temper, exhaustion, burnout.”

Culberson says he believes that our society is uncomfortable with grieving because there is “no quick fix.” He often hears of cases where the bereaved return to work and nobody even asks how they are feeling. Or co-workers will say, “Haven’t you gotten over it yet? It’s been six weeks!” Or, “Well how old was your father?”, implying that his age should make the death easier to accept.

“We have an unconscious scale of grief carried in the minds of a large segment of society,” says Sharon Lerner, director of education and training at the St. Francis Center, a nonprofit organization in Washington that offers grief, illness and bereavement counseling and training to the community.

“But grief,” says Lerner, “is unique to the life of the individual experiencing it. It is not tied to whether the [deceased] was a child or a parent or a spouse. Where we see the most evidence of the mythological scale is in terms of allotted time off in the workplace to different kinds of losses. If it was a friend, in some jobs there may be a day off even if that friend was more important than the parent. For the death of a child or a spouse, one may be given two weeks; for apparent only one week. I frequently hear that from employees over and over again, though it is not true for all workplaces.”

According to Lerner, people were better equipped to handle death in the pre-industrial era when communities were much closer and people died in their homes. Mourning periods were

marked by rituals and tradition in dress and ceremony so that the grief was recognized by all who came in contact with the bereaved. "Death and illness was more a part of our visible lives," says Lerner. However, "As a result of technology, more people died in hospitals and funeral agencies handled the death."

Another significant societal change that affects bereavement is that the family is more transient: Patsieann Misti, 32, grew up in West Virginia and now lives and works in Alexandria. Three years ago her 57-year-old mother died of an inoperable brain tumor. Misti vividly recalls the frustration and guilt she felt working full-time as a commercial interior designer and wanting to be with her ailing mother "as much as possible." Limited in the number of days she could take off, Misti traveled home on long weekends for more than eight months, often returning to work physically and emotionally exhausted. When her mother died and Misti returned to work, the silence was deadly and her exhaustion continued as she constantly tried to "appear happy."

"I wanted to wear a sign around my neck that said, 'Don't you know my mother has died? Please don't brush this under the rug,'" exclaims Misti. "It would have been all right to talk about it, even for me to cry a little bit."

When Misti met two other women who had similar experiences, they formed the Parent Loss Support Group, an organization for young adults in the metropolitan area. "We've learned that the best thing that anyone can say is, 'I don't know what to say, but I'm here.'"

Few people know what to say to the bereaved or how to act, particularly in the workplace, where people are expected to perform at their optimum, and where the office politics and hierarchy keep people from reaching out. "In the past few years, there has been a growing awareness of a need to address grief in the workplace," says Lerner, "but there is still a tremendous amount of work to do."

"In any other situation you would look at a person who is grieving and tend to think they need some psychiatric treatment. They may lose their appetite, forget [things], not be able to perform, or feel like they are going crazy. What people don't realize is that this is normal. If employers can know that, they can reduce their

fear and anxiety of this being a very long-term situation. The more support that they can provide...and understanding, that will facilitate that grief process more than anything else."

A number of private and public industries are employing organization like the Hospice of Northern Virginia and St. Francis Center to instruct them on how to support and communicate with their employees in times of loss. Depending on the size and make-up of the industry, the grief counselor may meet with a large number of employees, a handful of managers or one senior manager. Some businesses call for "crisis assistance" when an employee dies and there is concern as to how her colleagues will cope with the emotional loss.

Since 1987, the St. Francis Center has provided workshops on grief to the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA). Flight attendants selected as peer counselors from all the airlines learn how to recognize signs of problems among their ranks, for example, when a colleague has a miscarriage, loses a parent, a spouse, or a friend.

"We learn what to say, what not to say, now to stick with the bereaved, and how to recognize the grief processes," says Barbara Feuer, director of the Employee Assistance Program for AFA in Washington. Whether the loss is caused by AIDS, cancer or old age, Feuer notes that the most important thing they have learned is that the length and stages of the grief can vary and be unpredictable. The grieving may take as little as two months or more than two years, and the feelings of shock and acceptance may "bounce back and forth." The best adage for the peer counselors is to be prepared.

Ellen Nielsen, an accountant for a national travel agency, returned to work six months after a car crash in which her 12-year-old stepson was killed and she was critically injured. Her boss understood when she told him that she could "no longer handle" her staff and to appoint another in her place. "He was very kind and took that load off me," recalls Nielsen. "He gave me assigned projects, very easy ones. At first I thought 'I am working not as an accountant, but as a clerk.' But I had to realize my limitations."

Initially, others in Nielsen's Virginia office also reached out. She was moved by the fact that one of her superiors hugged her and

told her she could not comprehend losing a child. "My former staff came to my [work] station and talked, giving me kind words like, 'You look good; you've gained weight.' That was compassionate of them," says Nielsen, whose injuries had reduced her weight to less than 100 pounds. "None of them said any of the platitudes like 'It is God's will, you have to accept it' or 'You have other children.'"

Gradually the words and the arm around the shoulders stopped and Nielsen was left with her relentless grief. With the aid of her siblings and family she realized that she had to go outside the workplace to find a "safe place" for grieving. In time she joined and became the leader of the Alexandria chapter of Compassionate Friends, an international support group for parental loss. Like the Shippereits, who also are members, Nielsen found she could talk more easily to others who had been through the same type of loss. And, as Stuart Shippereit says appreciatively, "Through Compassionate Friends I learned that this is a hard, long process."

This May, two months after his 49-year-old wife, Jackie, died of breast cancer, Bernard Smith, the administrator of an Army agency with eight offices in the United States and overseas attended a meeting with his regional directors. "They all knew about Jackie and had expressed their condolences after the death," says Smith. "But that week no one—men or women—mentioned it, nor did I.

"During the meeting I sat where there was a view of Virginia Beach; there was a storm raging outside. I would catch myself getting lost in thought. As the head I had to get myself moving. You have to get back to business. "Despite the concentrated effort, which includes a healthy diet and daily exercise as recommended by his doctor, Smith allows, "When you go back to work, you wear a tie, the same suite, but the pain..." he shakes his head as if in amazement. "I don't think I can cut any slack for myself. People say things the first time they see you, then after that nobody says

anything except for the people who are close to me in work."

Because of his senior, global position, Smith frequently is in touch with people who are unaware of his wife's death. "I handle it like nothing has happened," Smith explains sadly. Opening up to his colleagues somehow seems inappropriate. "I may say nothing but I think about it."

Fortunately, Smith has found considerable relief through the support of his three grown children and being in contact with a social worker at the Hospice of Northern Virginia. (When his two daughters had to return to their jobs in Chicago and Richmond, the hospice put them in touch with hospice condolence counselors in their area.)

In the past few weeks Smith's social worker has reassured him that his need to visit his wife's grave, to read her letters, and to plant a tree in her memory is perfectly normal and a way of "leaning into grief." He also has been counseled that going on trips and then returning to an empty house and a rush of memories can be very hard.

Just last week Smith finally went on a business trip to New Jersey that he had postponed several times because he dreaded reliving the memory of how he and Jackie had last taken the trip together and she had won his colleagues over with her warmth and enthusiasm. Once there, however, Smith soon realized that no one felt at ease to mention his wife or her death. "I mentioned her one time and there was total silence, so I changed the subject. Eventually everyone started talking again. My subordinates are especially reluctant to talk."

Smith emphasizes that with cancer and death there is no feeling of control so it is important to him that he now has control, especially at his job. That's really what motivated him to go to New Jersey last week, Smith says. He wanted to master the fear of the memories. "You have to figure out how to bring up (his wife's death) naturally to make people comfortable. And you've got to keep moving ahead."