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# SURVIVOR'S GUILT IN THE WORKPLACE

Coping with tough  
business decisions starts  
with putting the oxygen  
mask on yourself first.





## You may already be familiar with grief on a personal level.

What you might not realize is that there's a whole other layer of grief on a professional level. Since every organization has been impacted in some way, that means every one of its employees has been, too. Company leaders like you are making tough decisions every day to protect their people and keep things afloat. Inevitably, there's been fallout.

So now, while juggling the stressors of keeping things balanced for your family within the walls of your own homes, you're also having to make critical decisions that affect the livelihoods of your extended "work families" — many of those decisions include large furloughs and layoffs. It also includes helping your employees cope with added anxiety and fears and walking with them through sickness and death.

In case you haven't been able to put your finger on what to call the weighty feeling that follows, it is its own form of **survivor's guilt in the workplace we'll call career grief.**

Leaders like you are human, and you need ways to manage and cope, as well. Career grief is real. It's powerful. But so are the ways you can process it.





## Career Grief: What Is It?

Grief is a beast. It is a difficult emotion to experience, and while there can be a general pattern that you can expect, ultimately it is different for everyone.

Often grief is described as a box with a ball in it. Every day you move the box around as you go about your life, but sometimes, the ball hits a hidden button inside the box, and once that button is hit? BAM. Grief. It hits like a ton of bricks dropping from a seemingly innocent window, and that's it for the day. We're off-kilter and struggle to re-right the ship.

As we all begin to creep back out into the world, how do we navigate a "new normal" and forge ahead in the workplace while still making room for those who are grieving, processing the loss of teammates who've been let go, and honoring those who have passed? There is no easy answer, but all trains of thought lead back to the same place: we can grow stronger if we learn how to navigate the "uncomfortable" in healthy ways.

In order to cope with grief, you are going to have to prepare yourself to sit with some less than comfortable feelings—your own and those of the people you're continuing to serve.

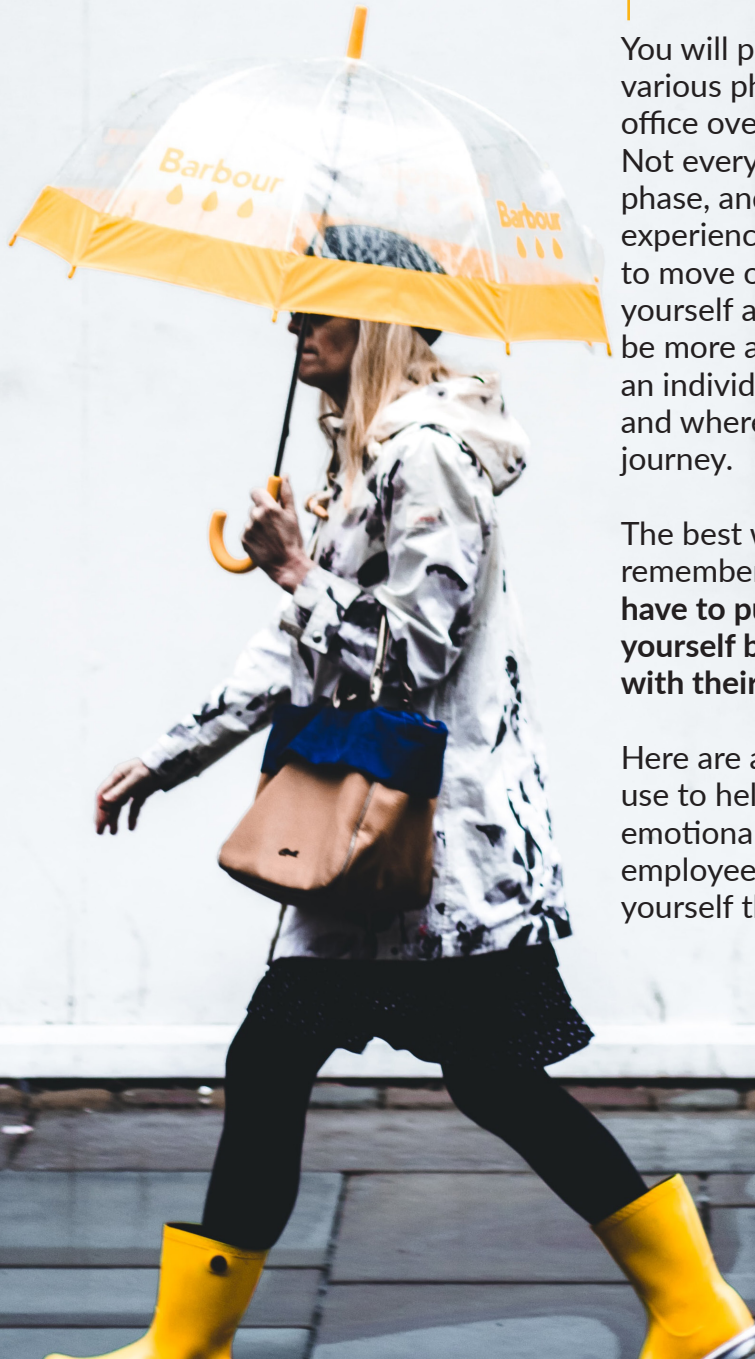




# The Cycle of Grief

The grieving process tends to differ from person to person, but in general you can expect to see six phases:

- 1 Denial or shock ("This isn't happening.")
- 2 Bargaining ("But maybe if I just...")
- 3 Depression ("I'm too sad to function.")
- 4 Anger ("Why did this happen? It's so unfair.")
- 5 Acceptance ("This is hard, and I don't love it, but it is what it is, and life needs to continue on.")
- 6 Finding meaning ("I'm healing, not because my grief is smaller, but because my life is bigger")



You will probably see people in various phases of this cycle in the office over the coming months. Not everyone goes through each phase, and it isn't necessary to experience each phase in order to move on. As long as you make yourself aware of the stages, you'll be more able to identify where an individual is in their process, and where you are in your own journey.

The best way to do that is to remember one critical thing: **you have to put the oxygen mask on yourself before you assist others with theirs.**

Here are a few tools that you can use to help you prepare to be emotionally present for grieving employees while still giving yourself the space to grieve.

## Adjust your own oxygen mask first

First thing's first: you can't pour from an empty cup. In other words, it isn't possible to give from your own emotional well if it's already empty. If you are grieving from either loss of life or loss of the old way of life, give yourself permission to do what you need to in order to work through your own grieving process.

- **Acknowledge your feelings.** When we ignore feeling things we don't want to feel, the emotion we're running from has a way of exploding all over us and anyone who might be caught in the crossfire. The only way to the other side of grief is to *journey through grief*.
  - **Find a tangible way to express your feelings.** Some people turn to dance, some create scrapbooks, and still others create a physical space in their home where they can go to sit with their feelings surrounding their loss. Having a tangible way to encounter and express your feelings can make a tremendous difference.
  - **Maintain your hobbies.** If you have a hobby that was a consistent part of your life before, try and maintain that. It can give you not only an outlet, but also a sense of stability as you navigate some very unstable feelings.
- **Don't let anyone else dictate your feelings.** Others may question why you are responding to your loss the way you are. The way a person encounters his or her grief is unique to that person. There is no "one size fits all" manual for feelings. Feel what you feel and consider healthy and safe ways to process those feelings.

- **Don't try and dictate anyone else's feelings.** Don't be the person who attempts to tell someone else how they should be grieving.
- **Look ahead for potential triggers.** Be proactive about identifying things that will push your proverbial "grief button." **Look over the calendar and identify dates that may be difficult to get through.** Think about places in town that are best to avoid for a while, if possible. Clear your Netflix queue of anything that you might not want to see for a time.
- **Stay active.** Your mental health is inextricably tied to your physical health. You may not feel up to running a marathon in the next few weeks, but keeping your body active while you mourn will go a long way towards helping you establish a new normal in the face of your loss. It will also help to give you a sense of routine during a time when such things seem difficult.



## Then What?

It is highly unlikely that your workplace has been completely unaffected by the recent global situation. You are going to encounter grief at work, whether your employees are grieving a loss of life, or the loss of a way of living; grief will most likely be present. How do you, as an employer, acknowledge your employees' grief while continuing to return to a "new normal" work environment?

- **Acknowledge the situation.** One of the most common things that grieving people talk about is how much they wished someone would acknowledge their pain. Don't let a fear of saying the wrong thing keep you from saying anything.
- **Express your concern.** This can be as simple as an "I'm so sorry." You don't have to dive deep. But giving them a sign that you care is so important.
- **Let the grieving party talk about what happened.** Letting your employee have the opportunity to talk about what happened will go a long way towards
  - A. letting them know that they can trust you, and
  - B. helping them continue to move through their grief journey.
- **Ask how they feel.** This isn't just a "Hey, how's it going," this is you being ready for them to tell you anything, from, "I've been crying for three days straight" to, "I'm so angry, I punched a wall last night." Having a safe space to express feelings is valuable.

- **Accept their feelings.** Your employee may cry in front of you, or otherwise have an emotional reaction that they normally wouldn't. Try not to make them feel awkward for this. It's human to have extreme reactions to grief, and you being accepting of their reaction will make a tremendous difference.
- **Be genuine.** When you ask how they're doing, mean it. When you tell them to take an extra day or two off, be sincere. Don't say what you think you "should." Genuine communication is far more important than saying the exact right thing.
- **Support them however you can.** A few examples: find out if there is a meal train helping their family with food, offer to let them take a few days off, or make sure their workload isn't too heavy when they first come back to the office.





One powerful metaphor for grief is this: the waves of the ocean. During a storm, they are intense and constant! It feels like they are going to overwhelm and crush you, because that's just what massive waves do. But when the weather is calm, and the storm has passed? Those waves are still there, they're just less intense. Grief is the same.

There is no one way to approach grief, and there is no magic button that will make everything better again. All you can do is continue through your journey, and support others in theirs until the storm has passed.

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## One Day at a Time

Right now, your job is to focus on one choice at a time, one hour at a time, one day at a time. If even that feels impossible, reaching out for help is one of your most powerful tools in times like these.

**We're here for you.**

Contact us at [learnmore@naturallyslim.com](mailto:learnmore@naturallyslim.com) and visit [www.naturallyslim.com](http://www.naturallyslim.com) for more resources on navigating this turbulent season.

And remember: If you feel you or a loved one needs the help of a mental health professional, please call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) 24-hour hotline at (800) 662-4357. You matter. Always.