



JUST THREE DAYS: *Returning to Work After Loss*

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Ann cried for days after her husband and child were killed in a tragic crash. She didn't know how she could ever return to work and talk with her co-workers. The conversation always led to personal conversation about trips, family gatherings, and future plans. She didn't think she fit in any more.

Jenna, a young, single woman felt that co-workers wouldn't understand her deep grief and how close her ties were to her parents. Since their deaths, she felt like an orphan. She had no other family to share her grief. Nan and Gary were devastated when the suicide of their twenty-one-year-old son shocked family and friends and fueled the rumor-mill. They felt like they were pointed-out and pitied in their social circles and at work.

Each of these individuals had different return-to-work fears; and each of them will respond to their grief very differently. The only common denominators they shared were the deaths of someone precious to them and the requirement of returning to work in just three days. This article is based on the experiences of Nan & Gary.

In our grief education series, grief in the workplace often surfaces as a difficult challenge in the grieving process. Many people spend more time in the workplace than they do at their own homes. Our co-workers become the sounding board for family issues. We share our intimate dreams and plans with them. When challenges occur, we confide, hoping to get a shred of "good advice" that will help us conquer the latest turn in life events. Some co-workers become the welcome extended family we rely on from day to day. Our relationships often last for decades, and possibly a lifetime. When death and loss interrupt our lives, these friends are often some of the first people to know.

Three days of paid, time-off work or compassion leave could have been three months and Gary and I still wouldn't have been prepared to return to work—at least not productively. My thoughts about that over the years, haven't changed much. When I couldn't stop crying or feeling sorry for myself, it was impossible to focus and function. In three days, I had to make arrangements for a funeral celebration, deal with my stunned reaction to sudden death, notify family and friends, bury my son and convince myself that the world had not just ended.

In three days, we tried to recall beautiful memories to make Chad's funeral service "special." We wanted people to remember him as the wonderful son who filled our lives with joy. This required thinking rationally and logically about what Chad's "wishes" might have been. (We had never discussed them.) We tried to remember his life achievements (so short a life), find photos, select music that he would have preferred, pick flowers that would have suited his out-of-doors personality, and meet clergy to plan a eulogy befitting how he lived—not how he died. We needed to meet with funeral directors, visit with friends who stopped by the house, try to get some sleep, console his fiancé and friends, and tell the incomplete, unrehearsed, unknown story over and over again.

Our challenges for returning to work were similar to those we hear in our groups:

We were expected to focus on our work and be productive even though we were tired because we couldn't sleep. We experienced emotional overload and couldn't distinguish between sadness and depression or agony and pain. We dreaded the social interactions we had to make with everyone who had ever known us. We feared that we might lose our jobs because of this distraction and obsession in our lives. We prayed for compassion and time to help us restore some normalcy and felt pressured to conform in such a short period of time.

Only when we are fortunate, do we have a "boss" and a company who understands the process of grief and is willing to provide the necessary flexibility as we adjust. Here are some suggestions:

BEFORE RETURNING TO WORK

It's a good idea to enlist the support and help of your manager. Ask your manager to communicate a message to your co-workers about the death and any arrangements that may be agreed upon to help you readjust so it doesn't appear as preferential treatment. Talk to your boss about flexible hours to help you deal with emotional swings and post-funeral responsibilities. Check with your human resources department regarding the policy and programs for the bereaved in your workplace. Find out how to contact EAP (Employee Assistance Programs) to help you cope.

THE BENEFITS OF RETURNING TO WORK

Even though it seems like an impossible task, once we've made the effort and worked through the initial uncomfortable reactions, we can make a positive comeback. Establishing a familiar routine gives purpose and structure to fill the hours that otherwise might seem endless and lonely. Such routine provides a diversion from obsessive thoughts and sadness. Keeping busy is necessary for some grievers, but not for all. We may be blessed with a family of friends and co-workers who are anxious to help and want to absorb some of our pain. We may be surrounded by love, concern and true friends.

I was fortunate enough to have a compassionate boss who was more than willing to give me the time I needed to adjust. He was an excellent listener and provided me the flexibility in hours and assignments for a period of time. He prepared my co-workers for my return to work by outlining his expectations of me and asking them to be understanding, too. He initiated a healthy environment and a "safe place" to return, with a very open-door policy. With this period of grace and the attention of friends who cared, I soon began to acclimate myself to a comfortable environment among friends.

WHEN RETURNING TO WORK IS LESS THAN EXPECTED

Not every one is as fortunate as I was. There are some "bosses" who just don't get it and maybe never will. This can lead to months of frustration and aggravated secondary losses. Some companies have very strict policies regarding bereavement and return-to-work issues, and little flexibility is offered. Sometimes this may silently force the bereaved individual to ask for a leave of absence and, ultimately, a job change. If you feel this is the only acceptable option, it could be a good choice, since work is a huge part of our everyday lives. It's not uncommon for individuals to change jobs as the result of loss. As our priorities and interests change, so does our purpose and meaning in the work we do.

Expect to hear hurtful remarks such as, "Now you have a child in heaven." Prepare yourself for answering questions about your loved one's death. People will ask almost anything, and it may be uncomfortable for you. It doesn't mean that they are "nosey." They may really care about you, but your perception at this time is guarded.

You may find some co-workers will avoid you because they don't know what to say to you. They may be afraid of hurting your feelings or causing an emotional leak. Let them know that even though you may cry, you welcome their support. Encourage them to visit another day.

Work may have accumulated while you were gone—some bearing deadlines, productivity and little room for error. Talk to your boss about your workload and see what arrangements can be made and what flexibility is available. Explain you aren't asking for preferential treatment, but temporary assistance.

Include your loved one's name in your conversations. This gives others permission to talk about him or her. Your loved one will always be a part of your life and your memories. Saying their name and telling their stories is healing.

Remember the workplace is a business. Some rules are made to keep it operating smoothly under tragic circumstances. However, inappropriate consideration or actions should be reported. During a time of grief, you are returning to a place that can either become your friend or your enemy. Sometimes, this is dependent upon your reaction and desire to heal your pain. Gary and I understand "uncomfortable." Our jobs changed as a result, but we changed too. Grieving is a process that will take considerable time. It requires "grief work" that can't be completed in just three days.

Without realizing it, our workplaces became a source for allowing co-workers and friends to step into our world. We taught people about grief by stumbling blindly through our own pain. We replaced humility with a determination that we would not allow this to destroy us. We understood fear that comes from witnessing reality. That made us more compassionate of others' relationships and other losses (divorce, health, financial). We told our story, which was always evolving, and discovered the sanctity of memories. We shifted our priorities as we searched for meaning, and we found a world full of purpose.

Just three days is a company rule initiated to provide fairness in their investment of their employees. For the bereaved, healing grief could take three months, three years, or three decades, but a company's investment in honoring an employee's loss can reap a benefit of loyalty for many years to come.