

# Working Through It

Reimagining Grief and Bereavement  
in the Workplace Post COVID-19

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# Abstract

Grief and bereavement in the workplace is a complex endeavour for employees and management to navigate at the best of times. We live in a death-denying society which keeps us from knowing what to say or do in the face of loss, which is complicated by the work-home divide that discourages employees from bringing personal issues into the professional realm. However, the events of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected both these elements because it has put death, loss, and grief at the forefront of consciousness, and blurred the lines between personal and professional as employees moved from the office to working from home.

This shift presents an opportunity to rethink how organizations approach grief and bereavement in the workplace. There has not been a great deal of research devoted to this topic, even though most people in the workplace will be affected by a significant loss at some point in their career, and the impacts of grief and loss can have negative consequences on work ability and the workplace. The losses and grief brought on by the pandemic are complicated and likely to have long-standing impacts on the mental health of employees. In order to adequately support employees, build resilience, and continue to operate effectively, organizations need to reconsider and invest in grief and bereavement support strategies. This project utilizes user interviews, systems analysis tools, and a design thinking process to explore possible interventions that can be used in the workplace to enable more effective grief and bereavement support.



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*“Always remember there was nothing worth sharing like the love that let us share our name.”*

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## Part 1 — Introduction



# Personal Reflection

My life has been shaped by death, but my career, in particular, has been bedmates with grief from the beginning.

In the first week of my last year of high school, my father died very suddenly and unexpectedly. He'd been feeling unwell for quite some time — in hindsight it seemed obvious for just how long — but it took a sleepless night of inconsolable pain for my mother to finally convince him to go to the hospital and refuse to leave until they figured out what was going on. After a few days in the ICU, an oncologist took my family into the unit's quiet room and broke the news: pancreatic cancer. Impossible to treat. A month at most. A week later, he was gone and the world upended.

Only three years later my mother would be diagnosed with ovarian cancer and, once again, the world turned upside down. This time, we went through the whole cancer process: surgery, chemo, radiation and, as promised, the cancer was eradicated. Three years later — by which point I had graduated university and nabbed my first full time job as a receptionist in a boutique Bay Street law firm in Toronto — we got the news that the cancer had returned. I was only a few weeks into my tenure and was unsure of what the appropriate response was in a professional setting. I sought out one of the lawyer assistants who, while kind, looked at me somewhat perplexed; what did I expect her to do? Truthfully, I don't know. I just knew it felt like something I needed people to know.

On my mom's 8-hour chemo days I would hop on the subway during my lunch break to the hospital and hang out for a bit before heading back to the office. It was only a few stops away and it felt like the least I could do given that I was unable to drive her down or spend more of the day at her appointments like my siblings could. The chemo seemed to be taking more energy out of our mom this time around but, we reasoned, that made sense from a cumulative perspective. It would be harder to bounce back from an already depleted energy supply.

When the cancer finally took a turn for the worse, my siblings and I found ourselves sitting by our mother's bedside in the ER waiting for someone to finally tell us

what the hell was going on and why she had declined so rapidly. (Spoiler alert: it was pneumonia!) Once we'd decided my sister would spend the night at the hospital with mom, my brother and I went home to get some rest and I sent a panicked, late night/early morning email to the office manager apologizing that I would not be able to come into the office the next day to help with the big office move that was, of course, happening that day because, you see, my mother was in the ER. Hope that's an ok excuse!

My mother's decline and eventual death ended up taking 3 weeks of hospital time, spread between the ICU and then the palliative care unit. In the end, I was away from work for about 6 weeks. I was extremely fortunate to have been working for a very generous and understanding employer that let me take 6 weeks off work and still had a job lined up for me upon my return. They also sent me a Godiva chocolate gift basket in lieu of flowers because they knew a 22-year-old would appreciate sugar more than florals. I was startled when, on my return to the office, they told me I basically had no more vacation days for the year. Of course this made sense, as they'd essentially given me six weeks of paid leave – 5 times the standard 3 days most offices give! But I worried and wondered, what if I just really couldn't come in one day because of the overwhelming grief?

But my experience is the exception, not the rule.

My grief ebbed and flowed in the years following my mother's death. In the fall of 2009, one year after I'd started at the firm, five months after my mom's death, I left my job and spent the next year floating. My siblings and I all lived at home and were able to stay in the house and support ourselves together. But it was an unsustainable situation. We were all in our 20s, none of us had found stability in a career path yet, all of us had stayed at home, living together, far longer than we'd hoped or anticipated. While there was comfort in the familiar, the house was a cage, stifling our growth – we couldn't live there forever. And so, three years after our mom died, we left our home behind, sold to a young family looking for a place to raise their kids into adults. I sobbed in the front hallway as I wrote a note to the new owners ("Welcome home!"), apologizing for the trash bags left at the side of the house but promising we would come back and retrieve them the next day. Having spent the final hours in our home removing the final pieces of our presence, my siblings and I finally convened on the driveway in a daze. "Is that it? Is that everything? Is it over? Did we do it?" It was 4am, our cars were filled to the brim and we needed to sleep.

The next day by some miracle I dragged myself out of bed and to work, feeling the rawest and most emotional that I had ever been in my life. My parents were gone, my home was gone, but the phones weren't going to answer themselves. At the time, I was only a few months into a new, demanding job and was being asked to cover a 3-week vacation for my colleague. Unlike with my mother, there was no acceptable bereavement period for this odd situation. There was no room for understanding that my grief would envelop me like a cloud – it was not a quantifiable loss the way the law or policy defined, and thus, it wasn't worthy of reprieve. It's no wonder that nearly a year later I threw in the towel to travel. An attempt to try and outrun my grief and everything the last decade had thrown at me.

After a year abroad I returned home and sought out work once again. Coming down to earth after a year of freedom and adventure, I frequently questioned if I had made the right decision to travel. If I'd made the right decision to listen to give myself space, listen

to my grief, and give myself time to heal. Job hunting felt exceptionally hard, and when I finally landed some work, I felt so far behind my peers who had been building their careers and moving on up. It felt embarrassing. During imaginary conversations in my head I'd try to explain myself to outside observers. "It wasn't supposed to go this way! They died and I lost my home and I fell off track! It's not my fault I'm ahead and behind!" I knew that my losses, on account of happening so early in my life, had impacted my career trajectory, which in turn had affected my earning potential, which in turn had affected my housing prospects and on and on, the impacts compound and it's that much harder to get back in gear. But how do you explain this all in a job interview? Easy – you don't.

Years passed and I finally started feeling like my life was on track. I thought it was safe to assume there were no more tragedies in store for me as I prepared for an exciting fresh start of a new job in a new industry with new challenges and opportunities. And then it happened again. My uncle, the last remaining family member on my father's side and a lifelong bachelor who had doted on my siblings and me throughout our lives, was found dead in his home. A sudden stroke taking him from us completely unexpectedly. Another loss, another spiral.

When the Covid pandemic hit, suddenly death was being talked about openly and honestly. There was fear, which can make people do strange things, but people were more open to sharing their concerns about getting sick, about loved ones potentially getting sick, and frank conversations about death were coming up more and more. I began to wonder if this might be an opportunity to meet the moment. Given the collective losses and grief people have been going through the world over – even if it's not a death, there is still big loss and grief – might we find a way to shift our thinking for the better? Can we use the changing nature of work and offices as a way to better ourselves?

My hope is yes.

# Research Question & Objectives

The Covid-19 pandemic has influenced the very nature of work and our relationship to it. It has caused powerful shifts in employment trends, launching “The Great Resignation” as thousands of people worldwide quit their jobs, deciding their status quo was no longer acceptable. The cascading impacts of the pandemic have created a collective trauma that has us questioning how we are meant to “go back to normal” amidst the ongoing chaos of a mutating virus, widening social and economic divides, climate crisis, and unresolved grief, just to name a few forces. With that lens, this merits a closer examination of whether current responses and supports for bereaved employees in an office workplace are sufficient.

To this end this research project poses the question:

How might we use the Covid-19 pandemic as a catalyst to reimagine how grief and bereavement is handled in office workplaces?

**To sufficiently answer this question, this project also explores a number of secondary questions such as:**

- What kind of resources and support would better equip managers to support employees?
- How might the changing nature of the office workplace in light of the pandemic impact grief and bereavement and the measures taken to support those experiencing it?
- How might the experience of the pandemic change how organizations approach mental health and traumatic events?
- What effect does grief and bereavement have on individuals' careers? What can be done to mitigate negative effects?
- What will be the long-term effects of this trauma without sufficient employee supports?



# Problem Framing

## Why This?

Death and grief are subjects that people commonly avoid but were forced to confront when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged. With soaring infections leading to death counts equivalent or surpassing WWII, The Vietnam War and the Korean War<sup>1</sup>, this collective experience of trauma has brought the reality of death, loss, and grief to the forefront of our consciousness. The pandemic compounded multiple types of losses including loss of loved ones, jobs and income, bereavement rituals, routines, lifestyles, and even hopes and dreams, among other things. Experts speculate that the pandemic will cause a significant increase in the number of bereaved people experiencing Complicated Grief—a chronic form of grief that significantly impairs the mourner—and the psychological impact of these losses will be felt for a long time (Gesi et al., 2020).

One of the biggest impacts of the pandemic has been on the nature of the workplace as remote work became common to help prevent the spread of the virus. While technology had already started to encroach on personal time pre-pandemic, the physical separation between work and personal life remained, exemplifying the boundary metaphor which “refers to when the public and private are treated as separate bounded spaces where actions and feelings that are appropriate in one space are not appropriate in the other.” (Kirby et al., 2003 as cited in Bauer & Murray, 2018). When those lines of personal and professional become blurred, there are implications for employee expressions of grief, especially when considering the need to oscillate between loss-oriented tasks and restoration-oriented tasks as outlined in Stroebe and Schut’s 1999 Dual Process Model. For employees who have experienced a loss, going to the office can be a form of relief, as being at home can bring constant reminders of the deceased, but when the option for that environmental change is removed it can become psychologically difficult to engage in that oscillation (Walter, 2009).

Beyond the current pandemic, we are facing events such as future epidemiological threats, climate change related disasters, and a large aging population – all of which will lead to more deaths – and the

strong possibility of future tumult that will impact people practically, mentally, and emotionally. The World Health Organization (2014) estimates that by 2030 North America will see between 4,986 to 8,609 heat-related deaths attributable to climate change should there be no change to current human activity. It would be wise for employers to think beyond the present moment and build resilience within their organizations today to face the challenges of tomorrow. Employers may consider potentially expanding the understanding of what kind of experiences merit the support or accommodations typically reserved for bereavement to enable workers to manage grief in the future.

## Why Now?

Covid brought death to the forefront of our minds. Especially in the early days, when much less was known about the virus and death rates were high, we had to contend with our own mortality. What was the likelihood that we, or someone close to us, would suddenly pass? Would we be able to say goodbye to our loved ones? Would it be a good death? Had it been a good life? With time to reflect, were we happy with the choices we’d made?

On average we spend approximately one third of our lives in the workplace (Naber 2007), adhering to rigid structures, policies, and procedures that that have not significantly changed since the 40-hour work week was standardized in 1940 (Ward and Lebowitz, 2020) and which keep workers occupied for the majority of their waking hours. Given the outsized influence that work has on our lives and the massive disruption office workplaces face from Covid-19, the need to reevaluate current structures is clear.

As populations age, more and more people will experience losing a loved one while in their working years. But it’s not only the aging population that will give way to this rise in deaths and subsequent grief—existential threats to our lives abound. The Covid-19 pandemic has, at the time of writing, claimed over 6 million lives worldwide and nearly 40,000 in Canada (“Canada – COVID-19 Overview – John Hopkins, 2022”). As long as denial of the virus, resistance of

vaccination efforts, and inequitable distribution of vaccines worldwide persist, Covid will likely continue to mutate and evolve, making it unlikely that we will ever be rid of it completely. Climate change brings with it the promise of increased disasters that result in everything from deadly heat waves<sup>2</sup> to extreme flooding<sup>3</sup> that leads to loss of lives, homes, jobs, possessions, and a way of life, just to name a few consequences. As if environmental destruction isn't enough, scientists are warning that warming temperatures, destruction of wildlands, and loss of biodiversity will lead to an increased emergence of infectious diseases and greater spread, which will set off new pandemics (Lustgarten, 2020).

Some of these threats can be reduced with bold climate action, but no matter how much you try and delay it, one way or another, death will happen. We cannot beat it, but we can do our best to be ready to meet it, and learn how to support those left behind.

## The Opportunity

Crisis has a way of calling attention to who and what really matters. As such, the Covid pandemic has been a time of re-evaluation. In reflecting on the "Before Times" so many aspects of life that seemed unchangeable and non-negotiable, so many of the things that had been normalized in our society were revealed to not actually be serving us. Paying money to put yourself through a rush hour commute in order to get to the office by 9 am, and sit at your desk in an open concept office, where people can scrutinize your every move and insist on you dressing "professionally" in order to attend meeting after meeting that could have been an email — at a certain point, it seemed absurd. Once the pandemic revealed that it was possible to work from home in sweatpants, it became clear that not only is change possible, but there is room for so much more and, in fact, an urgency to create systematic change (Walsh, 2020).

*Herein lies the opportunity.*

First, the pandemic has shown employees that they do not have to accept the status quo of their workplaces, and record numbers of them have quit their jobs and embraced the search for better. Second, organizations have seen firsthand that they can embrace change and still operate effectively — what's to stop them from making more purposeful changes rather than those thrust upon them from the pandemic? Third, as the world grapples with multiple forces of change, foresight driven analyses infer that people will be facing bigger disruptions to their lives, both personal and professional.

These three elements create an opportunity for employers to demonstrate to employees that they understand and acknowledge that personal matters and home life do have an impact on working life and performance. By doing this, organizations can capitalize on employment shifts to capture great talent, and by thinking ahead about how to support employees, they can create resilience within the organization.

How will organizations ensure they are resilient in the face of these challenges? How will they support their employees and will they build in contingency plans to ensure that if someone has to take leave, that person can take their time to mourn their loss but the organization will continue to function? Read on ...

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<sup>2</sup> In July 2022 the village of Lytton, British Columbia was consumed and destroyed by wildfires after experiencing record breaking temperatures that would be virtually impossible without climate change (Isai, 2021)

<sup>3</sup> 2021 floods in British Columbia were linked to human induced climate change (Gillett and Flato, 2022)

# Scope & Methodologies

## Office Environment

This study focuses on how grief and bereavement is experienced in formal office environments among employees, leadership, and from an organizational standpoint. During the pandemic office workers represented a large percentage of the workforce that was able to transition to working from home. Thanks to internet connections and an increasingly accessible suite of tools and technologies, employees were able to work remotely despite the pandemic. The shift from the physical office to the home and the expectation of maintaining professional boundaries in a domestic setting provided new and novel challenges that previously would never have been an issue in the typical office environment.

## Geography

My initial intention was to confine participants in this research to the province of Ontario based on my own proximity as a researcher residing in the province, and because pandemic protocols were largely guided by provincial mandates. However, I received a great deal of interest in the subject matter from people outside the province who also wished to participate. Grief is a universal emotion; greater breadth of participation provides greater insights and contributes to a more well-rounded study. Thus, this study is looking at office culture as it exists in North American western society, and at grief rituals as they are understood within this culture.

## Demographics

I strived to achieve balanced gender representation among my participants, but the breadth of participants could have been expanded. Out of 25 completed recruitment surveys, 19 participants identified as female, and the remaining 6 identified as male. Out of 11 completed interviews, 5 participants identified as female and the remaining 6 identified as male. I did not ask my participants to identify their sexual orientation or race, but I do acknowledge that these factors can have additional impacts on an individual's experience in the workplace.

Death and grief can be a polarizing subject, and those participants that agreed to share their insights may have come to the topic with a greater willingness than most to discuss it in depth. I attribute part of this to

the fact that many of the participants shared about their own experiences with loss, which I infer made them more empathetic to the issue.

Bereavement grief in the workplace is an underreported and under-researched area, especially considering the pandemic, thus it was necessary for me to conduct primary research in order to gain more insights into how the pandemic might influence changes in this area. My primary research consisted of individual interviews with participants identifying with one or more of the following three groups:

- Human resources professionals
- Those in management and leadership positions
- Those who have been bereaved while employed in an office workplace

The rationale behind these selections was to collect insights from a variety of perspectives. Within an organization, human resources professionals direct administrative and operational functions, and are the department to approach when it comes to sorting out personal matters of employees. Those in management and leadership positions have a dual responsibility of managing direct reports and influencing a larger company culture with how they react to a bereaved employee. Their behaviour can have rippling repercussions throughout an organization, and can set the tone for how employees are expected to act in the future. Finally, those who have been bereaved while employed in an office workplace can offer direct insight into the current systems at play by sharing their experiences of the kind of support they were offered through their employer, and what kind of impact their loss had on their career, both in the short and long term.

## Type of Loss

Grief does not only manifest from death, but can arise from all manner of losses. In scoping this project, I considered the importance of exploring how office workplaces might deal with disenfranchised grief, especially around career grief, relationship grief, and so on. However, given the increased number of deaths that have been experienced, both directly and indirectly because of Covid, for scoping purposes I opted to make bereavement grief the focus of this study.



Part 2 — The Established Past



# Historical Societal Relationship with Death & Grief

To understand why grief and bereavement inspire such discomfort, particularly in the context of an office workplace setting, it is necessary to examine the broader modern societal attitudes of estrangement around death and how it has evolved and changed over the twentieth century.

The field of interdisciplinary death studies that emerged in the 1970s, as Eric Seeman (2019) points out in his work *Death in Early America*, largely focused on the white, middle-class experience of Euro-Americans and typically did not include Black or Indigenous perspectives. The history I reference here should not be taken as comprehensive or representative of intersectional cultural and religious approaches to death and bereavement. There is much to be gained from investigating these approaches more thoroughly, however that is beyond the scope of this project.

Additionally, while much of the history that I reference in this section comes from American sources, one can extrapolate that the geographical proximity of America provided a societal influence on the Canadian relationship with death.

In her incendiary work *The American Way of Death*<sup>4</sup>, Jessica Mitford (1963) describes the nature of the American funeral spanning from colonial times to the nineteenth century as a “family affair”, meaning that end-of-life rituals were all undertaken by the family and close friends in the home. Everything from washing the body and preparing it for burial, procuring the coffin from the local carpenter, laying out and keeping watch over the body in the family parlour, to carrying the coffin from home to the church

and the graveyard, and even digging the grave – it was all done by those closest to the deceased.

However, at the start of the 20th century, the intimacy of family and loved ones caring for their dead slowly gave way to a “mortality revolution” that saw a stark change in the way the living interacted with the dead. Gary Laderman (2005) outlines three of the primary social factors that drove this shift: changes in demographic patterns, the rise of hospitals as places of dying, and the growth of modern funeral homes.

## Changes in Demographic Patterns

Save for the pandemic of 1917-1918, mortality rates were steadily decreasing in the early twentieth century: thanks to breakthroughs in medical science and technology, improvements in sanitation and personal hygiene, public health directives, and healthier diets, life expectancy was increasing. Consequently, as people started living longer, they also began to experience the deaths of their friends and close relations much less frequently, making interactions with death more of an exceptional circumstance than a common occurrence. (Laderman, 2005)<sup>5</sup>

The leading causes of death were also starting to shift during this time. Until the mid-nineteenth century it had been primarily parasitic and infectious illnesses that claimed the lives of the population in large numbers, but prolonged lifespans allowed degenerative diseases (like cancer and heart disease) to proliferate. Additionally, an increase in violent deaths through accidents, homicides, and suicides, was taking more lives as well. (Laderman, 2005).

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<sup>4</sup> *The American Way of Death* is an expose first published in 1963 on the American funeral industry and the way in which grieving families are preyed upon while they are most vulnerable.

<sup>5</sup> A fascinating excerpt from Laderman's work: “In one study, demographer Peter Uhlenberg argues that over the course of the twentieth century, declining mortality rates led to structural transformations in family relations as well: ‘As the experience of losing intimate family members moves from a pervasive aspect of life to a rare event, adjustments in family structure become imperative.’ He discusses the social impact of these changes and writes that decreasing infant mortality rates produced intensified bonds of affection between parents and their children, led to fewer adults dying between 20 and 50 years old, which reduced the number of orphaned children, limited the number of deaths an individual encounters within the nuclear family, and ensured that longer life expectancy would allow children to have more time with their grandparents.” (Laderman, 2005)



## Rise of the Hospital System

As people started living longer, dying less frequently, and entering a new era of illness, the changing nature of health and illness saw the emergence of more and more hospitals becoming primary institutions of care for the sick (Laderman, 2005). This also meant that hospitals started becoming the sites of passage from life to death, with medical professionals becoming the authorities on defining, controlling, and declaring death. Laderman explains the deep relevance of this shift on our relationship with death henceforth:

**“The cultural implications of this environmental shift from death in the home to death in the hospital were profound, and contributed to the literal displacement of the dead from the everyday social worlds of the living. Dying in the isolated space of the hospital room institutionalized the experience as a passage requiring scientific, and increasingly technological intervention, rather than the prayers and the presence of the community. ... The dominance of a medic-scientific framework for monitoring, interpreting, and responding to signs of death transformed the ways in which Americans spoke about the process of dying, and replaced the human family drama surrounding the deathbed so common in the home of the nineteenth century with a professional performance at the hospital bedside that depended on equanimity, rationality, and a detached commitment to saving the life of the dying patient.”**

## Growth of Modern Funeral Homes

With death management moving away from the domestic sphere, the funeral industry was ripe to rise as a comfortable alternative. Prior to the funeral home, communities typically had resident undertakers, people who would manage all the operational and administrative duties that come with a death: notifying friends and family, arranging the funeral

service, sourcing a casket, preparing the corpse, etc. At the end of the nineteenth century, undertakers began conferring on themselves the title of “funeral director” and positioning themselves as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and credible experts in funeral services — at a price, of course.

Coinciding with – and perhaps propelling the rise of – the funeral home, were other structural shifts in domesticity. Middle and upper class dwellings, which had typically been equipped with parlours for significant life events (like funerals), were starting to disappear as modern needs and tastes for domestic living spaces began to change. Without a place to keep the body in the home, funeral homes became the natural alternative. As Laderman (2005) continues “Given these kinds of social and cultural changes, the dead were beginning to lose their traditional familiar place in the world of family relationships”.

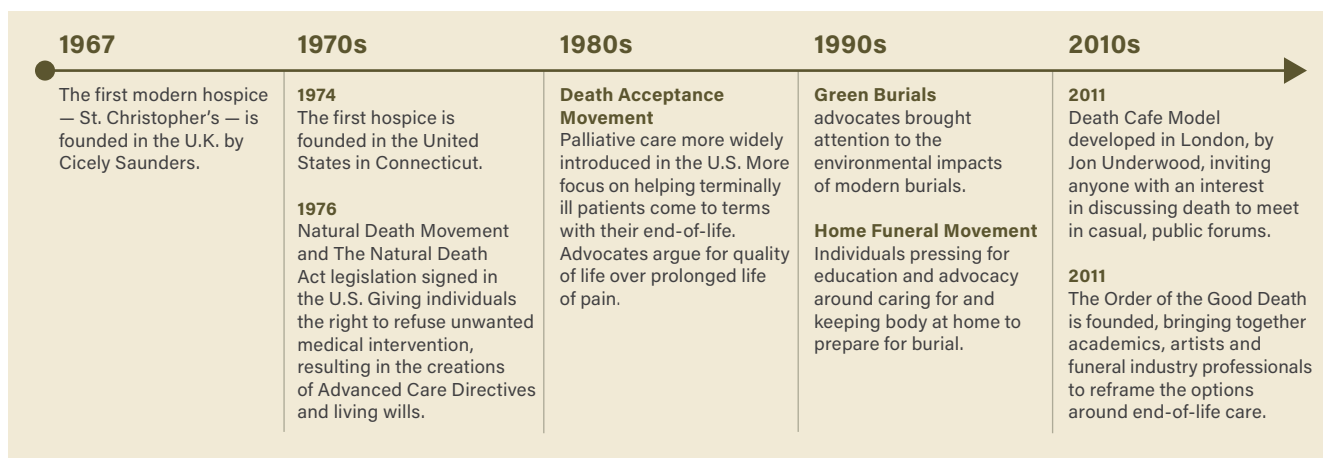
Another crucial aspect that changed our relationship with death was the standardization of embalming bodies before disposal. Embalming was embraced as a necessary element of a funeral for its ability to produce “inoffensive, well-groomed, and appealing corpses” that enabled the bereaved to hold open casket funerals so mourners could have a final look at the deceased – a common ritual in nineteenth century funerals (Laderman, 2005). The embalming process preserved the body for a longer time and offered some relief to mourners needing additional time to travel for the funeral service. Viewed as the masters of the process, embalming solidified the role of funeral directors as authorities and necessary fixtures in death rituals. “Embalming was presented as a thoroughly modern practice, yet part of a new American tradition; it was a scientific procedure that also had religious value for the living; and it was a highly technical, hygienically-beneficial intervention that required the delicate skills of an artist.” (Laderman, 2005).

While the aforementioned trends of lower mortality rates, hospital systems, and the enduring presence of the funeral home remain dominant in shaping societal perceptions of death, there have been movements over the years to shift the paradigm. The 1970s were

an especially important time for death scholarship and exploration, with the rise of movements around hospice care and advance care directives taking theory into practice and challenging existing norms around the death process. Other movements such as green burials, home funerals, and open dialogue about end of life options have enabled the emergence of the Death Positive Movement.

The Death Positive Movement, in which open conversations about death and dying are embraced as the cornerstone of a healthy society, emerged in 2013 from a social media post by mortician Caitlin Doughty in which she asked “Why are there a zillion websites and reference to being sex positive and nothing for being death positive?” The credo of the movement states, “I believe that the culture of silence surrounding death should be broken through discussion, gathering, art, innovation and scholarship.” (See Figure 1)

It is in the spirit of the death positive movement that this project aims to make the case for a more open and transparent discussion of the impacts of grief on the workplace.



**Figure 1.** Timeline of events leading to the emergence of the Death Positive Movement ("History of the Death Positive Movement I The Order of the Good Death")



# Grief Theory

Many of the most prominent grief and bereavement theories involve the use of steps or phases to explain grief, perhaps most notably the popular, but often misinterpreted, Kubler-Ross model. These types of models tend to present grief and bereavement in a very linear way, implying a “normal” grief reaction. However, the reality of grief and bereavement is often much more complex.

Literature on grief and bereavement theory is plentiful, but there was one model I was particularly drawn to for this project: Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut’s (1999) Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement. The Dual Process Model (DPM) is considered a more modern and comprehensive approach to understanding the grieving experience.

## Dual Process Model

The Dual Process Model puts forward the idea that, when experiencing a loss, people experience stressors and cope by undertaking what are known as loss- and restoration-oriented tasks. Rather than creating the favoured stages and phases of its predecessors, the DPM takes a flexible approach for the griever between the two realms of loss and restoration.

Loss orientation refers to the griever engaging in tasks or activities that enable processing of the loss experience. These acts typically focus on the relationship or bond with the deceased person and might manifest as rumination about the deceased, reflections on circumstances and events surrounding their death, looking at old photos of the deceased, or crying over their loss – the range of emotional reactions is expected to be varied. Loss orientation tends to dominate early bereavement.

Restoration orientation refers to secondary stressors, and how they are dealt with. The DPM acknowledges that the death of a loved one will not only result in grief for the bereaved, but it will create substantial secondary consequences of loss. These changes add considerable strain to the burden of loss, giving way to anxiety and distress. Such secondary stressors may include things like administrative arrangements for life without the deceased, taking on the tasks that had been done by the deceased (ex. cooking, finances, etc.), or even coming to terms with a new

identity (ex. no longer a spouse, but now a widow). Stroebe and Schut emphasize the range of possible emotional responses here: from pride in learning a new skill, to loneliness and despair at having to live alone again.

The central component of the DPM is the dynamic process of oscillation, which refers to the bereaved individual alternating between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping mechanisms. At times the bereaved will be faced with their loss and at different periods they will avoid their memories, and seek distraction or relief by involvement in other things. (See Figure 2)



**Figure 2.** The Dual Process Model

The key idea here is that healthy, effective coping permits people to “take time off” from grieving, even to avoid or suppress certain aspects of their grief, as long as they also allow for engagement to deal with practical aspects of the loss. The oscillation between restorative and loss oriented tasks is part of a healthy, adaptive grieving process. In fact, in stark contrast to other grief theories, the DPM acknowledges the benefits of occasional denial for the bereaved, as long as it is not extreme or persistent.

There are advantages of occupying two worlds after a loss, with the home as a space for grieving and the workplace full of “instrumental rationality” (Walter, 2009). There is value to the bereaved in being able to leave the mourning environment of their home while they go to work, where there will be fewer reminders of the loss and the opportunity to engage in activities that prove to the bereaved that despite their grief, they can still function and contribute to society — both now and in the future.

## Other Models

Many well-known grief theories and models take the form of steps or phases, with common themes and linear patterns, while the Dual Process Model was born out of a direct response to limitations and critiques identified in those models.

For this reason it is important to examine the older, traditional models to understand the evolution of grief theory. Here, I provide a brief overview of some of the more popular grief theories to provide context for how the DPM came to be and why it is the preferred model for this study. (See Figure 3)

people to engage in three tasks: emancipation from bondage to the deceased, readjustment to a new environment in which the deceased is missing, and the formation of new relationships. I take umbrage with the idea of breaking bonds with the deceased as a way to heal from grief, and for this reason I did not champion this theory in my work.

### Sigmund Freud (1961)

Freud based his theories about grief from his clinical experience working with people who were depressed. He viewed grief as a solitary process of gradual detachment from the deceased, in which the

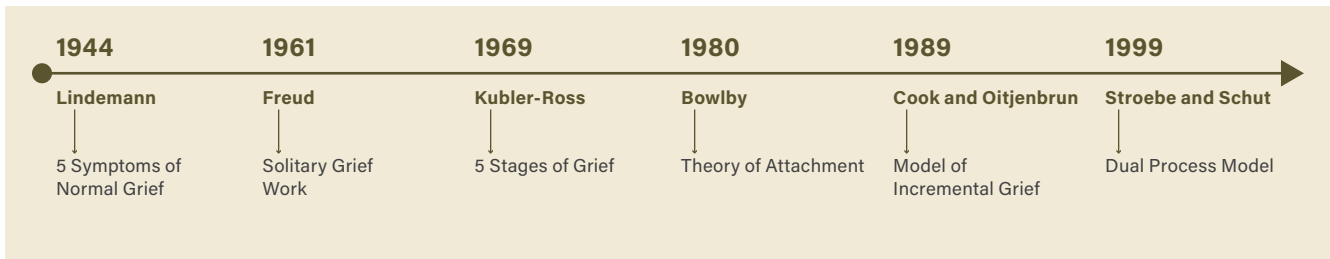


Figure 3. Timeline of Grief Theories

### Erich Lindemann (1944)

Among the earlier grief theorists, psychiatrist Erich Lindemann believed that grief manifested symptomatically in five main ways:

1. Somatic disturbance (ex. Difficulty breathing, loss of appetite, exhaustion etc...)
2. Preoccupation with the image of the deceased
3. Guilt relating to the deceased or circumstances of the death
4. Hostile reactions
5. The inability to function as one had before the loss

Lindemann's work was significant in that it spoke to not only the psychological effects of grief, but the physical as well. He said that grief reactions could take a "normal" or "morbid" trajectory, though one could return to a normal reaction with the help of a psychiatrist. He was an early proponent of the idea of "grief work" — the process of psychologically coping with a significant loss — and believed that it required

bereaved withdrew from the world. Freud saw grief work as fundamental to overcoming the loss.

### Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969)

Among the most prolific and well-known grief theories is Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' Five Stages of Grief model. The five stages are often misinterpreted in their application for the bereaved when, in fact, they evolved from her psychiatry work with terminally ill patients who were facing their own deaths. The five stages (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) have been more widely criticized in recent years for their rigidity and oversimplification of a complex process.

### John Bowlby (1980)

British psychiatrist John Bowlby pioneered attachment theory in children. His theory of attachment takes that work and applies it to grief and bereavement using four overlapping, flexible phases: Shock, yearning and protest, despair, and recovery. The theory emphasises

the importance of human attachments and bonds that are developed early in life.

### **William Worden (1991)**

Worden's theory borrows from developmental psychology and the idea that children who do not complete certain developmental tasks (emotional, social, physical, and mental) on a lower level "will be impaired when trying to complete similar tasks at a higher level." Applying this idea to mourning, Worden stresses that the bereaved individual must address the issue of the four tasks in order to be able to adapt to the loss.

He identified the four tasks of mourning as:

1. Acknowledging the reality of the loss;
2. Processing the pain of grief;
3. Adjusting to a world without the deceased;
4. Finding an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life

### **Colin Murray Parkes (1998)**

Similar to Bowlby's phased theory, Parkes' Four Phases of Mourning suggests that there is a pattern to the grieving process. Parkes outlines four successive phases that the bereaved must move through in order to resolve their grief. The first phase is numbness. Following the death, numbness reflects the surreal nature of the loss and sees mourners deny the death for a brief period of time. This eventually gives way to the second phase of yearning, when the bereaved persistently longs for the deceased to return and tends to deny the permanence of the loss. The third phase of mourning is known as disorganization and despair, when the bereaved accepts that everything has changed and will never go back to how it once was. The final phase is termed reorganization and recovery, in which life begins to be rebuilt and faith in the future is slowly restored.

### **Cook and Oltjenbrun (1989/1998)**

A predecessor to the Dual Process Model, Cook and Oltjenbrun's Model of Incremental Grief considers the effects of compounding losses. Often a loss will trigger or enable another loss, known as secondary grief, that is not directly due to the death itself.

## **History of the Office Workplace**

The attitudes and dynamics of the office as it exists today did not emerge fully formed, rather they evolved over time as the nature of work changed and the modern day office emerged. Thus, I felt it was important to set context and look back at how the office workplace came to be.

It's difficult to assign a precise time for the advent of the office. For a comprehensive history of evolution, one could trace the origins of the office back to ancient times, when medieval monks worked in individual "scriptoriums" to transcribe manuscripts and illuminate texts (Chevez and Huppatz, 2017). But for the purpose of this work, understanding the rise of the office as we know it today, one needs only look back as far as the Industrial Revolution. The rise of industrialization brought with it an influx of administrative work involving the organization of bills and ledgers, writing and correspondence, and managing of accounts. As general paperwork started to emerge, so too did the role of the clerk evolve from that of an isolated scribe to an entire class of professionals, with clerks becoming the fastest growing population in business-driven cities by the mid 19th century (Saval, 2014)<sup>6</sup>.

At the midpoint of the century we begin to see the increased specialization of businesses leading to a separation of tasks. Instead of a merchant acting as an importer, exporter, wholesaler, retailer, banker and insurer, for example, each of these areas became the domain of different entities. The separation of tasks led to the development of offices being physically separate from factories where the dirty and manual tasks were being done. As more offices moved into the city, the buildings themselves began to be given certain architectural traits, (such as large retail display windows), designed to give the idea of office work as noble and important (Saval, 2014)<sup>6</sup>.

As clerical workers were moving into offices in the 17th century, it was a turning point for creating a "cultural distinction between the office, associated with work, and the home, associated with comfort, privacy and intimacy" (Chevez and Huppatz, 2017). The divide between work and home was becoming more distinct. As Saval (2014) explains, "Clerical

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<sup>6</sup> However, this growth in numbers did not shield the clerking class from derision of the public and the press, who disdained the nature of their work — deemed antithetical to more masculine professions of farming, building, shipping and manufacturing. Yet this furor would prove inconsequential to the rise of the office, as by the mid-nineteenth century clerks and "white collar work" would be firmly established as a modern way of doing business.

workers were uprooted from the close-knit world of families and farms, where knowledge was passed down from father to son. Other clerks were merely their competition; they had no one to rely on but themselves." Whereas work had once been a family affair, personal familial relationships were increasingly being severed from the workplace, planting the seed of separation between the personal and the professional as the norm.

The first modern office building, the Larkin Administration Building, was designed by legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright in 1906. Just 30 years later, SC Johnson Wax opened the first open-plan office building. However, it wasn't until the 1960s that the open office became a ubiquitous design choice in an attempt to enable interaction among colleagues and democratize the workplace. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was some backlash to the complete openness of the office space, with the president of Herman Miller Research Corp. saying the office "saps vitality, blocks talent, frustrates accomplishment. It is the daily scene of unfulfilled intentions and failed effort." It was this dissatisfaction that prompted the creation of the "Action Office" which introduced flexible cubicles as a way to provide employees with some privacy while not inhibiting movement within the space (Dishman, 2021).

While the separation of the workplace from home has been the dominant cultural norm in the last century, the pandemic has now upended all conventional understanding of the office workplace by necessitating employees to work remotely from home. As the pandemic enters its third year, calls for returning to the office are growing louder, though there is a great deal of resistance from employees who have adjusted to the new way of being.

## Separation of Personal and Professional

Much like death became severed from our daily lives, so too did the realm of "professionalism" in the office workplace become separate and distinct from the domestic and personal.

As the office workplace evolved from men working in solitary chambers to a complex ecosystem of people of all gender identities working together in a common space, codes of conduct (both written and unwritten) emerged, creating rules around what constitutes acceptable professional behaviour in the workplace. The boundary metaphor is used in work-life research to explain how public and private places are considered separate, bounded environments in which certain acts and feelings are suitable in one space, but not in the other (Bauer and Murray, 2018). Public spaces demand a calm, pleasant, and rational demeanour, leaving emotions like anger, sadness, despondency, and the like for the personal realm, and expressly discouraged in the public/professional realm.

With people no longer working alongside their families and actively leaving their homes to engage in work, the distinction between the domestic and the working world enabled the creation of a professional identity versus a personal one. As Bauer and Murray (2018) expound on in their work on bereavement, organizational space, and professional identity, "Organizations aim to be a separate sphere where family life should not intrude: 'while you are here [at work], you will act as though you have no other loyalties, no other life.'"

This idea that employees will be able to keep the realities of their personal lives at bay in the workplace is aspirational, but improbable when one considers human factors. Compartmentalizing emotions to such a degree that work would be completely unaffected by the events of one's personal life is unrealistic and impossible. Just as a pilot or a nurse who hasn't had enough sleep may make a fatal mistake in their workplace, an office employee who is enduring tremendous trauma or disruption to their home life is likely to make errors or have a lapse in judgement. While in some respects, boundaries between work and home are necessary for healthy minds, the risk of crossover is inevitable.

## Bereavement Grief in the Office Workplace

The separation of personal and professional identity becomes much more complicated when employees have to contend with a loss. The professional ideal of acceptable behaviour in most organizations is not well aligned with the emotions brought about by grief. As Bauer and Murray (2018) explain, “for many, it is a time of ‘undoing’ around the professional status quo, and so bereaved workers may find themselves in uncharted territory as they navigate new work/life and professional/ personal tensions.” Grieving employees must contend with keeping their professional identity intact while simultaneously renegotiating their personal identity as it relates to their loss (Douglass, 1990-1991 as cited in Bauer and Murray, 2018).

In this sense, individuals find true freedom in the home where they can express their feelings among their family unit and find refuge from work pressures. However, the domestic realm comes with its own set of pressures and emotional obligations, especially after the death of a loved one, so in this context one might find relief in the workplace from familial and emotional obligations (Pitimson, 2020). Outside of their families, the workplace functions as a vital support network for many people, and so returning to the office after a loss can be seen as an essential part of the bereavement process in which the employee begins to reintegrate into their social domain with the context of their fundamentally altered interpersonal reality (Pitimson, 2020).

While the behavioural manifestations of grief are generally in stark contrast to dominant organizational values, how employees express their grief in the workplace (if at all), will depend, in part, on the cultural norms of the individual office environment. As ever, Bauer and Murray describe it thusly:

The emotional aspects of grief are strongly influenced by cultural norms and feeling rules within the organizational context (Doka, 1989; Fineman, 2003). Waldron (1994) asserted that “organizations influence not only how members express emotion but also how they assign meaning to the emotional experiences of themselves and others” (pp. 401–402). Professional workers read directives for appropriate emotional displays from their physical and cultural environment. Grief in particular is a phenomenon that many consider a direct contrast to dominant organizational values and logics (Stein & Winokuer, 1989, p. 92). Subsequently, one challenge to managing grief in the context of American work organizations is the normalized pressure to remain silent and hide feelings of grief in the workplace (Lattanzi-Licht, 2002, p. 172).

— Bauer and Murray, 2018

In today’s workplaces, mourning is a private experience, making it difficult for the bereaved employee to find adequate support in the workplace. The key mourners (those most affected by the death) of a deceased individual likely spend their workdays separate from each other and among co-workers who likely did not know or interact with the deceased (Walter, 2009). This makes it difficult for workplace colleagues to have lasting understanding or empathy with the bereaved employee. Though within the context of the pandemic, perhaps we may see this change as remote work becomes a more common, long-term practice. As colleagues meet over video conferencing software direct from their homes, bits and pieces of their lives play out in the background, on various degrees of display for their colleagues to see, allowing them to create a relationship of sorts through the screen. Even if there is no direct interaction, having witnessed signs of the physical presence of a co-worker’s child or partner (or even pet), grounds their existence in reality for colleagues who may have

never met them in real life, and would perhaps garner more long term empathy for a colleague should they experience a loss in their immediate domestic dwelling.

Fineman (1993b as cited in Pitimson, 2020) suggests that there is an emotional framework within organizations wherein individuals may feel comfortable sharing emotions in certain spaces with certain people where they feel free from the performance expectations of their supervisors. It is in these spaces, physical or symbolic, that “hidden emotions can emerge – a moment of being emotionally outside of work while physically still inside of it.” (Pitimson, 2020)

### Current State of Bereavement Leave in the Office

Research on the impact of grief and bereavement on work, careers, and the workplace is not extensive, although most workers will likely experience the death of a close friend or family members over the course of their work lives (Wilson et al, 2020). Several studies cited that bereavement can affect employee performance and that the impacts of grief can last “for weeks, if not months or years.” (Wilson et al., 2020). Despite this, it is common for employees to return to work just a few days after taking bereavement leave. While some organizations may offer more substantial leave for employees, in Ontario the provincial mandate for bereavement leave states that “most employees have the right to take up to two days of unpaid job-protected leave each calendar year” but this only applies for “certain family members.” (“Bereavement Leave, 2019”).

Employers can make their own policies around bereavement leave, though as a general rule of thumb, most will adhere to the minimum legal requirements as identified in their state, province, or territory. Across Canada employees are, on average, entitled to three days of paid bereavement leave, ranging from 1 day in Prince Edward Island to 7 days in the Northwest Territories depending on whether the service is outside the employee’s local community. (See Table 1)

While a bereaved employee may only require a day or two to attend a funeral or memorial service, grief is a

Province	Unpaid Leave
Alberta	3 days
British Columbia	3 days
Manitoba	3 days
New Brunswick	up to 5 days
Newfoundland	3 days
Northwest Territories	3 days <i>(if service is within the employee's community)</i> 7 days <i>(if service is outside the employee's community)</i>
Nova Scotia	up to 5 days
Nunavut	No statute regarding leave
Ontario	2 days
Prince Edward Island	1 day paid, 2 days unpaid
Quebec	5 days
Saskatchewan	5 days
Yukon	5 days

**Table 1.** Bereavement Leave Mandates by Province (Blake, 2021)

much longer term endeavour and, depending on the depth of the loss, a handful of days is hardly sufficient time for a person to grieve and then return to work in a state of mental wellness.

Additionally, if the employee has been named as an estate trustee and is legally obligated to attend to administrative matters of closing out the deceased’s estate, a handful of days are insufficient to fulfill such a role. Depending on complexity, estates can potentially take years to close out and require ongoing attention and time off work. There is currently no provincial policy or caveat that accounts for the time such a role requires, which can make it harder to justify or explain the need for flexibility with days off for loss-related reasons. For one, Quebec’s policy states that “the days off must be taken between the death and the funeral. This means that some days could be taken at the time of death and, after the worker has returned to work, other days could be taken for the funeral,” but this accounts for no



flexibility or understanding that grief may emerge post-funeral service, or for simply practical purposes an employee might need to attend to an estate matter during the working day and should not be penalized.

Another complicating factor is if an employee experiences more than one loss in the year, they may not have the time available to them to take paid leave from work in order to attend a funeral or memorial service. In light of the severity of the pandemic, it is not unreasonable to consider that some employees will have experienced multiple deaths in their families, compounding the need for sufficient leave from work.

The majority of provincial bereavement leave policies state that employees are permitted to take bereavement leave for family, though the definition of which family members qualify for the employee to take leave ranges quite drastically from province to province. For instance, Nova Scotia lists a spouse, child, parents, siblings, grandparents, grandchildren, and in-laws as permissible for leave, while Manitoba's policy defines family quite broadly, even stating that "the definition also includes those who are not related, but whom the employee considers to be like a close relative."

The Nova Scotian list is typical of most provinces, and infers a narrow and normative understanding of the family, cutting out those who may not have immediate family, and those who do not have close relationships with the family members listed, but who may require leave for those not on the list. Family dynamics can be complicated, and we must question why our provincial policies do not reflect or take into account the changing nature of family and relationships. (See Figure 5)

### Impacts of Grief in the Workplace

Our personal lives and our work help us make sense of who we are as people. For many individuals, the roles taken on in domestic life (parent, child, sibling, friend, etc.) and those taken on at work provide a sense of identity. This is why, when a person experiences a loss, it can have a huge impact on their sense of self and significantly disrupt their life. Knowing this, it's no surprise that for bereaved employees, returning to work after a loss can take

#### Reasons Bereavement Leave may be Taken

An employee who is entitled to bereavement leave can take up to two unpaid days of leave each calendar year because of the death of the following family members:

- **Spouse** (includes both married and unmarried couples, of the same or opposite genders)
- **Parent, Step-Parent, Foster Parent, Child, Step-Child, Foster Child, Grandparent, Step-Grandparent, Grandchild, or Step-Grandchild** of the employee or the employee's spouse
- **Spouse of the employee's Child**
- **Brother or Sister** of the employee
- **Relative of the employee who is dependent** on the employee for care or assistance

Figure 4: Ontario Government Official Reasons for Taking Bereavement Leave

on additional importance and complexity for their identity, especially if the expectation is for the employee to keep up a professional demeanour and compartmentalize the personal and professional.

At a certain point, being at home may have diminishing returns in the comforts it offers the bereaved, and in that way, returning to the workplace can be a place of stability and refuge, providing comfort for the employee in familiarity, routine, and structure. (Pitimson, 2020). However, it can also be a challenging environment depending on how the employee's grief manifests and lingers, especially in a changing and unpredictable workplace environment, and many concerns may arise for the bereaved employee (Charles-Edwards, 2009).

Showing emotion or expressing vulnerability can affect how employees are treated by their colleagues and other stakeholders. This may cause employees to feel they need to suppress their feelings, which can actually be more distracting than open, honest dialogue about the impact of their loss. It is important for employers to be aware of these impacts and understand the importance of the kind of support they cultivate in the workplace, especially as a bereaved

employee is more likely to bounce back to being motivated and productive in a supportive workplace versus one of alienation (Charles-Edwards, 2009).

Research and personal experience reveal that attitudes around bereavement continue to operate under the false impression that time limits exist on grief. In fact, grief can be long standing: participants in Donna Wilson's (2021) study examining the impacts of bereavement grief on the workplace spoke about experiencing periods of intense grief a decade after the occurrence of a sudden death, as another added "the grief is always there."

**"For all participants, the grief over the death of their loved one was identified as extreme and this high intensity grief continued for weeks, if not months or years. The intensity of this grief was revealed by all, including Participant #14 who stated: 'I am still the walking wounded (6 months after his death). I thought I had done my grieving prior to his death, during his long illness when I knew he was dying, but I was just starting the work of grieving them.' She had recently returned to work after a 6-month bereavement leave as she was needed at work, but she felt she could have used another 6 months or more to get ready to return to work and be effective at work." (Wilson, 2021)**

Given the discomfort around the topic, it's safe to say that grief is not a common topic of conversation in the workplace, leading to misunderstandings about the nature of this very natural reaction. Grief can be draining, distracting, and all encompassing, so it should be expected that mourning employees would have a reduced ability to work after the death of a loved one and for a good deal of time afterwards. But while grief may be long lasting, it is entirely possible for people to heal and recover from their grief and return to a healthy, functioning state after a traumatic loss (Bonanno, 2005 as cited in Wilson, 2020). In fact, work can be a helpful factor in enabling that healing. Employers that facilitate grief recovery for their bereaved employees

by providing accommodations and additional safety protections would see considerable direct benefit by coworkers and workplaces (Wilson 2020).

For the best chance of positive impact, it is vital that employers speak with the bereaved employees about what they think they might need for a successful return to the office, or else they run the risk of failing the response. Two of the most important steps that can be taken are around accommodations, and acknowledgement.

### Accommodations

Accommodations are changes that are implemented to the workplace to enable and assist in an employee's return to work and their capacity or ability to perform tasks. (Wilson, 2020). Accommodation is a common need for bereaved employees and, in fact, a duty to accommodate is a legal requirement to be offered to employees in Canada (Government of Canada, 2011). Most often accommodation takes the form of less time in the office, either in the form of fewer work days per week, or shorter hours per day, with a slow or abrupt increase back to normal hours (Wilson, 2020).

Accommodations may take unexpected forms. In her research Donna Wilson (2020) reported on a participant citing the use of "the washroom without resentment from her coworkers whenever she needed to go somewhere to cry." Other accommodations mentioned were weekly counselling, the use of sick days, and relocating the bereaved employee in a lower stress location within the office.

In my own experience returning to the office after the death of my mother, my employer granted me accommodation in the form of a private office, secluded at the back of the floor. This was a kind and generous offer, but felt somewhat impractical in my role as the office receptionist at the time. As the most junior employee on the payroll, I felt uncomfortable occupying a space that was typically occupied by lawyers or legal students, and I was unsure of the firm's expectations for what I should be doing day to day if I wasn't answering the phone. I came up with some of my own projects, just for a desire to feel



purposeful, but eventually I set up a meeting with my supervisor to ask if I might return to my rightful desk and role. My employer was understanding and immediately set things back to normal, though they explained that they had wanted to be sensitive to my needs, as I had experienced such a profound loss.

## Acknowledgement

Blessedly simple, among the most important things employers can do for bereaved participants in their return to work is simply to acknowledge their grief. For an employee to experience a life changing loss and then return to work and face silence from co-workers is not only painful, but sends a powerful message — that their feelings are uncomfortable, invalid, and inconvenient.

In Natalie Pitimson's (2020) work around returning to work after a bereavement, she noted a common longing among her study participants for "someone to 'let' them explain their grief". She describes her participants as needing permission to express and communicate the emotions around their loss, as it didn't feel safe to share without explicit prompting or invitation from colleagues. But when a bereaved employee was given the green light to share their stories, that action was described as "immensely powerful and important exchanges for them and their grief journey" (Pitimson, 2020). From my own experience, I deeply relate to the relief of being asked about my parents and invited to talk about my loss. When a co-worker at a previous job had learned that the anniversary of my mother's death was coming up, she gently checked in on me on the day, and insisted on taking me out after work for a slice of cake to fulfil the tradition my siblings and I had started long ago of calling every missed milestone or anniversary a "cake day". In acknowledging that the day would be difficult for me and therefore giving me the space to share about my experience, it made me feel like I was still valid in feeling my pain, even 7 years after the loss.

Workplaces that not only understand that the returning employee is bringing their grief with them, but support them in doing so, allow employees to know they are safe to feel their emotions and openly acknowledge their grief and how it might be impacting them in the

workplace, while feeling feel useful and productive (Pitimson, 2020). In my own experience, being able to speak freely and being given the space to share about how my experiences with how my loss still impacted me on a regular basis gave me a better impression of my manager and direct colleagues, and helped me feel safer in bringing my whole self to work.

## Impediments to Returning to Work

In her research on the impact of bereavement grief on workers, work, careers, and the workplace, Donna Wilson (2020) identified eight primary impediments for employees returning to work. Several of these elements relate to each other so I have further grouped them into three thematic groups:

### Lack of knowledge

1. A lack of organizational knowledge about bereavement
2. Inaccurate and unhelpful advice

It stands to reason that organizations that do not possess institutional knowledge about the potential impacts of bereavement and grief, both in the short and long term, would be ill-equipped to offer any kind of helpful advice to grieving employees. Organizations tend to overlook the fact that at some point in time, their employees will experience the loss of a loved one, leaving the organization unprepared to deal with the outcomes that may occur. Often employees are made to feel like they need to "suck it up and get going again" (Wilson, 2020), which is hardly an effective way of working through one's grief. When individuals receive advice from people who have not experienced loss or don't understand their specific situation, there is even more incentive for employees to bury their grief.

### Apathetic Staff

3. Unsupportive immediate manager
4. Unsupportive and unsympathetic coworkers
5. Uninformed human relations staff

One of the most challenging things about returning to the workplace is facing uncaring colleagues who exhibit no patience or understanding for the experience of loss. From HR calling on the day of a loved one's funeral to ask for proof of the reason for

an employee's absence, to co-workers who accuse a bereaved employee of not doing their fair share of work, to a completely unsympathetic manager who makes it clear they do not understand why a bereaved employee requires time off — and even threatens to replace them should they need more time, Wilson's (2020) study participants describe a multitude of reasons that an employee would have difficulty returning to the office after a loss. Feeling unsupported and misunderstood in the workplace is an isolating experience that fuels anxiety and reluctance to return.

### **Bureaucracy and Red Tape**

6. Few organizational programs and services to support bereaved persons
7. Having to apply for and qualify for leaves because of mental illness
8. Needing time to heal or recovery from the loss while organizations need people to work

The final hurdles to bereaved employees returning to work is the bureaucracy and red tape of the matter. To begin with are the sparse policies around bereavement leave and few, if any, assistance programs that set up employees for short or long term support. Examples cited by Wilson (2020) include new employees who have not earned sick days or vacation time, or those without benefits needing counselling. For those who qualify for short or long term leaves, the process of applying and filling out the requisite paperwork is itself a huge mental strain that raises concerns about stigma and long term consequences of having a "mental health issue" on one's employment record as the reason for taking leave. Finally, the issue of many employees needing more time than they are granted was cited as a common and ongoing issue of concern. As Natalie Pitimson (2020) aptly summarizes the issue in her work:

**"The real human need to have longer than a fortnight away from one's job following a death is superseded within company policy by a more pressing concern for the need for productivity to continue. But this is not a time limit that most bereaved people can accommodate and subsequent embarrassment at one's inadequacy to do so has underpinned the experience of many grieving employees (Granek, 2014).**

It is important for employers to recognize that there is no one way that grief is experienced, and each employee will have their own needs to be met when returning to the office. By letting the grieving employee lead, there will be the best chance of success for reintegration and a return to productive outputs.

# Understanding the System

The discipline of systems thinking is a philosophy, conceptual framework, and a set of tools and methods that have been developed to help people look at the world more holistically and figure out how to make change more effectively (Senge, 1990). In this work it is essential to make use of a systems perspective so that we can understand how the different parts of this research (grief and bereavement, work and the workplace, and the pandemic) interact with and influence each other.

A systemic perspective helps explain how the personal and professional realms interact with one another, leading to changes or disruptions in one to impact the other. It also helps expand our view of loss and identify the underlying causes for how and why we deal with loss in the workplace the way we do.

## Archetypes

The Systems Archetypes are ten<sup>7</sup> common patterns of behaviour that can be used to identify and reflect on the underlying structures of a system. They are highly effective in uncovering insights into how the existing patterns of behaviour came to be and why they are perpetuated, and they are helpful for testing out whether proposed strategies will result in the desired change, or continue feeding into existing structures (Braun, 2002).

When considering the common issues surrounding grief and bereavement in the workplace, I was able to identify three primary archetypes that succinctly explain how the issues are perpetuated: Fixes that Fail, Shifting the Burden, and Success to the Successful.

### Fixes that Fail

In this archetype, a problem symptom is made worse by the supposed “fix” used to correct it. Because the problem is not actually solved, the fix, after a delay, creates a reinforcing loop, leading to a worsening of the initial problem symptom. The quick fix leads to an unintended consequence that creates another reinforcing loop, amplifying the original problem symptom.

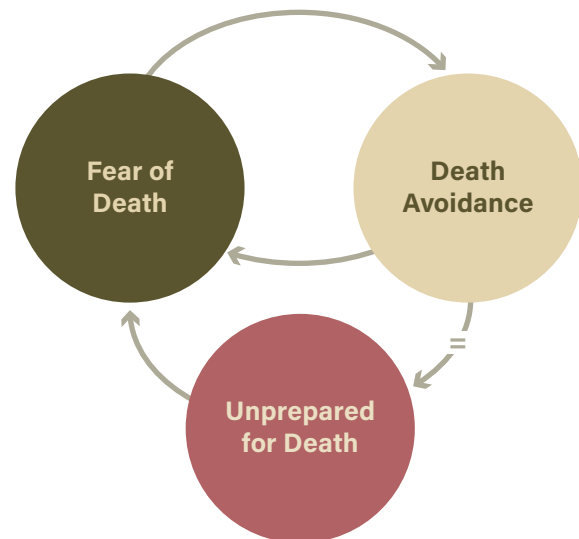


Figure 5: Fixes that Fail

Applied to this topic, the archetype is used more broadly to illustrate common attitudes about death in modern western society. An ongoing fear of death is “fixed” by avoiding the subject; however that avoidance simply exacerbates the existing fear. Additionally, the unintended consequence that arises from this avoidance is a lack of preparation for death – how to talk about it, how to comfort the bereaved, understanding the effects of grief, and so on – leading to the continuation of the initial problem symptom, a fear of death.

We see this pattern perpetuated in an office environment where employees are unsure of what to say or do in the event that one of their colleagues experiences a death. The fear and discomfort with death leads to silence about how the loss might impact the bereaved employee as they process their grief, as well as how other colleagues may be indirectly impacted by their bereaved colleague, such as being on the receiving end of a distressed response or witnessing a change in their performance.

<sup>7</sup> The full ten archetypes are: Limits to Growth, Shifting the Burden, Eroding Goals, Escalation, Success to the Successful, Tragedy of the Commons, Fixes that Fail, Growth and Underinvestment, Accidental Adversaries, and the Attractiveness Principle

### Shifting the Burden

This archetype purports that a problem symptom can be resolved in one of two ways: with a symptomatic solution, or a fundamental one. When a symptomatic solution is used, it is seen as addressing the problem symptom while reducing the pressure to implement a fundamental solution, which would actually solve the problem symptom. As a result, the symptomatic solution undermines the impetus to implement the fundamental solution.

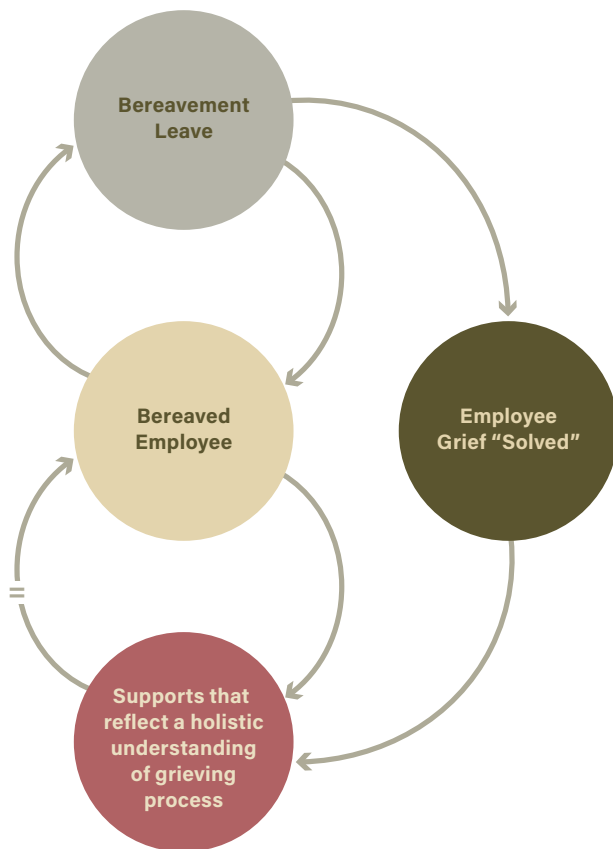


Figure 6. Shifting the Burden

Applied to this topic, the problem symptom is the employee experiencing bereavement, thought to be “resolved” with bereavement leave as the symptomatic solution. The leave is thought to have alleviated the employee’s bereavement grief by providing a few days off work, and thus little thought

is given to implement a fundamental solution — one that provides a variety of supports that reflect a holistic understanding of the grieving process.

Leave is important for bereaved employees, but given the short length of standard bereavement leaves in office environments, time off alone is unlikely to be the solution for the employee’s grief. Accommodations such as a lighter workload, taking the time to check in with the employee once they return to the office, or even being mindful that certain dates may be difficult for them, could all be part of that more fulsome toolkit.

### Success to the Successful

This archetype illustrates the common pattern of good performance being rewarded with more resources and support, enabling continual improvement and sustained success. Poor performance is typically deprived of those supports, resulting in poor outputs and an ongoing demise. This pattern reinforces the belief that the successful are more entitled to, and/or have earned, additional resources as proven by their consistent “good” performance. Conversely, there is an equal and opposite assumption that a person, product, or department that has under-performed is not as deserving of support or additional resources, even while they do not possess a lack of skill, or capacity for improvement.

Applied to this research question, this archetype reflects issues around employee performance in the workplace. An employee affected by bereavement and grief may suffer career setbacks if their non-grieving colleagues are given more resources and opportunities for advancement. The intentions behind this pattern may stem from a good place, with management not wanting to overwhelm the bereaved employee, but such actions can inadvertently have negative consequences in the long term, such as missing out on promotions or exciting project opportunities. Alternatively, workplaces or managers may pass over an employee for additional opportunities or support if they do not have empathy or understanding of the grieving process. They may view the bereaved employee as weak, lazy, or underperforming when they may simply be suffering the effects of grief.

In an office environment the expectations around behaviour can influence how employees are treated. Those who exhibit favourable emotions benefit from higher pay, more support, and positive evaluations (Staw, Sutton, & Pellard, 1994 as cited in Bauer and Murray, 2018). If grieving employees receive less support, opportunity, and compensation than their colleagues, one untimely loss could have compounding impacts on their career while their colleagues are able to advance and reap the benefits of continual success. This also has implications for those who come into leadership and management positions, as they may not have the same kind of empathy for bereaved employees as someone who has experienced loss, compounding the issue even further and perpetuating the pattern.

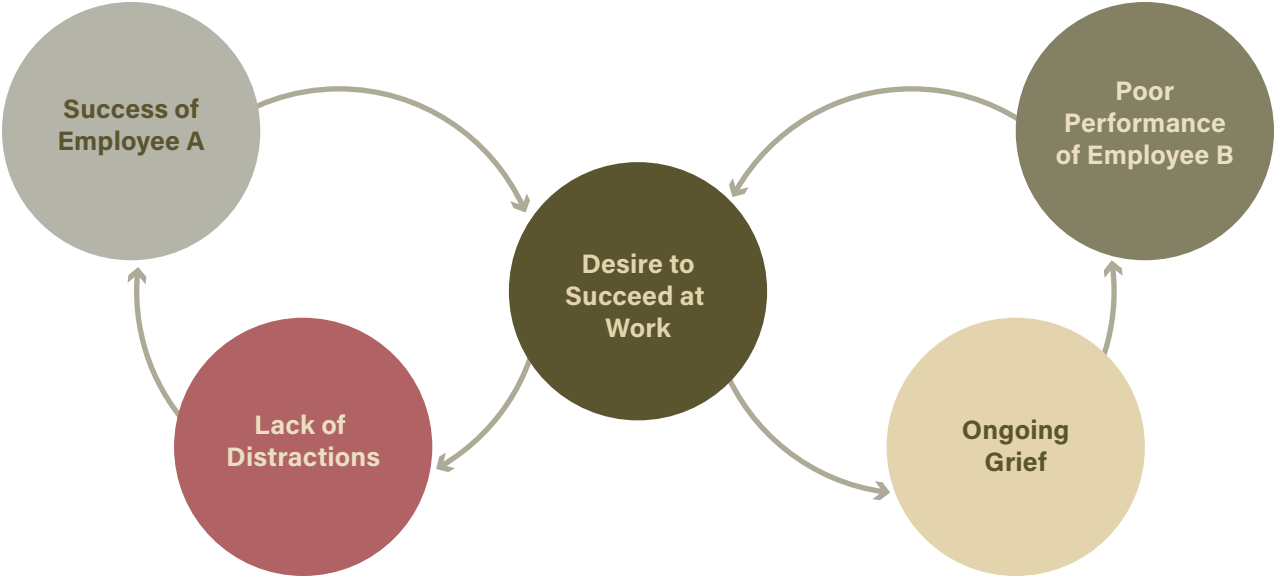


Figure 7: Success to the Successful

## Causal Layered Analysis

The Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) is a tool used to unpack the four layers of causality that enable a system to function. The intention of this analysis is to integrate all four layers of understanding into the creation of alternative futures (Inayatullah, 2004). In this CLA, I examine the core problems and causes of our reluctant relationship with death and grief, and the expectations of the workplace. I then go on to identify worldviews and myths and metaphors that anchor the problems and causes.

impacts, and refrain from sharing their emotions (Lattanza-Licht, 2002 as cited in Pitimson, 2020). During a time of loss the bereaved benefit from personal interactions and social contact with others, but frequently the discomfort people feel talking about death and grief means mourners are left in isolation in the name of “giving people space” (Tehan and Thompson, 2012-2013 as cited in Pitimson, 2020). Avoiding the issue surrounds it in shame, making employees feel as if they have to hide the reality of experiencing an event that is a natural part of life.

<b>Problem</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Uncomfortable communications about death</li> <li>▪ Avoidance of issue</li> <li>▪ I am my position</li> <li>▪ Separation of work/home</li> </ul>
<b>Causes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Capitalism</li> <li>▪ Medicalization of death</li> <li>▪ Changing demographic patterns</li> <li>▪ Funeral industry</li> <li>▪ Death denial</li> </ul>
<b>Worldview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Your worth is tied to your productivity</li> <li>▪ Nobody wants to talk about death or grief</li> <li>▪ Compartmentalization is possible and preferable</li> <li>▪ “Professional” means never being vulnerable</li> <li>▪ Business can’t run if people have personal lives</li> </ul>
<b>Metaphors and Myths</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Ant and the Grasshopper</li> <li>▪ Work will make you free</li> </ul>

**Table 2.** Causal Layered Analysis

### Problem

In the wider western world, the topic of death is uncomfortable to speak about — this is especially true in the office workplace, a domain of professionalism that discourages the sharing of intimate, personal realities. The unspoken expectation of the office is for employees to keep their personal lives separate from their work lives, as if they are two separate people unaffected by the realities of the other, resulting in peak productivity for the organization.

This attitude becomes especially problematic when an employee experiences a loss. For bereaved employees, there is significant pressure in the workplace to keep quiet about their grief and its

Complicating the issue is the way people are taught to tie their personhood to their work. Peter Senge (1990) writes about people being trained to be so loyal to their jobs that they begin to associate their position with their identity, a cog “within a system over which they have little or no influence.” This understanding of the self becomes inherently problematic given that workplaces are structured to encourage division between the personal and professional. When faced with a personal event that has impacts that extend beyond the domestic realm (such as the death of a loved one), it can be difficult to reconcile how to behave in the context of the workplace where one understands themselves to fit a particular professional identity. We are meant to keep these parts of ourselves separate, but when the professional cannot

deny the influence of the personal, employees face an identity crisis that asks them to compartmentalize their person.

This dynamic is further complicated with the pandemic forcing office employees to transition to remote work. Many people have had to continue doing their jobs in the spaces associated with their personal lives. This clashing of worlds blurs the lines between the personal and professional – if co-workers can now see into your home and, to a certain extent, see your personal life on display, this further exacerbates the issue of maintaining boundaries between your personal and professional personas.

## Causes

The forces of capitalism are strong and resilient. Despite the entire world undergoing a traumatic, life-altering event that threatened the lives, health, and wellbeing of all, expectations remained that workers should retain the same degree of output and productivity of their pre-pandemic lives, despite the wildly different circumstances.

The ‘ideal mourner’ is one that keeps producing and functioning despite their loss and emotional pain. (Granek, 2014 as cited in Pitimson, 2020). In a capitalistic society the expectation is for the bereaved employee to take on the individual responsibility of regulating their emotions so that they can return to being “productive, functioning and contributing members of capitalist society” (Pitimson, 2020).

As previously explored in the history of our relationship with death, much of our societal death denial can be traced back to changing demographic patterns, the medicalization of death, and the rise of the funeral home. As people started living longer, we experienced death less frequently, especially as advancements in the medical field moved more people at the end of their lives into the hospitals rather than remaining in the home. As these barriers between ourselves and our dying loved ones increased, so too did our discomfort with being too close to the dead. This created the perfect environment for the funeral industry to emerge as people offered themselves up as experts in the field,

a necessity at end-of-life that encouraged increased spending by the living to prove their love and appreciation for the dead.

## Worldview

There is a very specific but pervasive understanding of what it means to be an office employee; professionalism<sup>8</sup> is the golden rule for all who work in office environments, implying certain acceptable behaviours that never get too familiar. It may be implicitly understood that employees have personal lives, but those personal lives should never cross too far into the work realm and impact the organization in a negative way. While in the past few years we have seen some influential voices championing the importance and power of vulnerability<sup>9</sup>, the prevalent attitude is one of “keep your emotions at home”.

The notion of separation between the personal and professional implies that individuals are able to compartmentalize the things that happen in their personal lives from their work lives. In fact, the dominant worldview is that employees would prefer to keep their work and personal lives separate. But to scan the desktops of any office in the world, you would be hard-pressed not to find workspaces decorated with pictures of employee’s loved ones or tchotchkes relating to personal interests, intentionally placed at one’s desk to bring comfort or amusement throughout the work day.

To demand the absence of all personal identity is to suggest that business is impeded by the personal lives of employees. And while the realities of a personal life (caring for a sick child, driving a parent to an appointment, grieving the death of a sibling etc...), may result in an employee taking time off work, to sound the expectation that an individual only bring part of themselves to the workplace is to sow discontent and breed resentment at the expense of the organization’s resilience.

Death and grief may be topics of taboo and discomfort for many, but the assumption that all office employees universally share the desire to avoid such topics in conversation disregards the life experiences that many have gone through, and the

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<sup>8</sup> Popular career website Glassdoor describes employees “who dress well, have integrity, and are calm, cool, and collected” to generally be considered professional. They also go on to say that professionalism on the job entails staying calm under pressure, “being the brand”, pairing complaints with solutions, and refraining from acting too familiar with coworkers or managers.

<sup>9</sup> Shoutout Brene Brown



ones they will go through in the future. Indeed, should an employee experience a significant loss, they may resent the silence they face from their colleagues in their attempt to avoid an awkward conversation. Employees who are able to share the more vulnerable parts of themselves by engaging in more serious and personal conversation may even help form bonds with other colleagues, ironically enabling even better productivity among them.

### Metaphors and Myths

The old fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper tells the story of two insects over the course of a year as they anticipate the coming of winter. The Ant is industrious and careful, working hard everyday to build his house, gather supplies, and refrain from any distractions so he will be ready to face the long winter. The Grasshopper, on the other hand, plays music and dances, joyous and free, without a care in the world. When the winter arrives and the Grasshopper is without sustenance, he approaches the Ant and begs for a morsel of food. The Ant refuses, saying "Those who drink, sing, and dance in the summer, must starve in the winter." The moral of the story being that one should work hard in the summer of one's life in order to be properly sustained in the old age of winter.

Applying this myth to the issue at hand, the story it informs is that work should take precedence over all things in life until one is old and ready to retire. Essentially instilling the notion that "you'll sleep when you're dead" from childhood. The story feeds into other ideas of work as a moral high ground, and that time spent wasted on frivolities like dancing and music will amount to nothing more than short lived pleasure over the pragmatic, long term sustenance brought about by working.



Part 3 — The Pandemic Present



The World Health Organization's declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 was the beginning of a traumatic global event that impacted every person on the planet. As the virus spread across the globe, so too did uncertainty and fear as stories and images of sickness and death became part of our daily reality. People were forced to grapple with their own mortality as we were confronted with the very real possibility of ourselves or our loved ones contracting the virus and dying.

There was good reason for concern: death tolls soared not only from Covid infections but also from unrelated causes, some of which were attributed to postponed treatments for other conditions, and some to staying clear of health care facilities in order to avoid infection (Stroebe and Schut, 2021). Naturally, an increase in deaths gives way to an increase in bereaved people, the social impact rippling out beyond a scope for which we, as a society, are prepared. At the time of writing, Canada's Covid death toll tallied to just over 39,000 deaths (Ritchie et al, 2022). Studies say that for every person who dies, an average of nine people are affected by grief (Verderey et al, 2020), thus doing the grief-math suggests that approximately 351,000 people in Canada would be affected by Covid related deaths.

But numbers only tell part of the story: it's not just that more people have died and more people are grieving, the circumstances of these deaths have complicated the process of grief and bereavement. Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut describe the impacts thusly:

**"The changed circumstances and defining features relating to COVID-19 deaths include the circumstances of final illness: isolation of the terminally ill person frequently without the presence of loved ones, depersonalization of protective clothing and communication through masks or visors and the wearing of gowns, with observation often from a distance, rapid occurrence of death (frequently sudden and/or unexpected), and removal of the corpse, also in isolation, and remote identification of the body. Funerals/burials are likely to be sharply curtailed, postponed or held remotely (and with very few persons present). There is sometimes little chance to say farewell in accustomed ways, or to observe cultural or religious mourning practices; there may be regrets or anger about possible preventability of the death. A persisting difficulty has been noted: social isolation has brought with it the lack of physical support from family and friends or physically-present spiritual support, reflecting sometimes severe societal disruptions in general." (Stroebe and Schut, 2021)**

Covid caught the world by surprise, highlighting just how unprepared we were to deal with its myriad of consequences in every aspect. Here, I elaborate on the impacts of the pandemic on office employees, mental health, and grief.

## Impact On Office Employees

In the early stages of the pandemic, employees that were able to continue working from home — primarily office workers and those with desk jobs — counted their blessings; at a time of massive layoffs and uncertainty, newly remote workers were in the privileged position of being able to keep their jobs, avoid commuting, and earn an income (with many even saving money!<sup>10</sup>) In fact, in the early months of the pandemic, remote workers were less likely to report depression and anxiety than unemployed (Hewlett et al., 2021). However, despite these perceived soft silver linings, there were also many negative impacts on office employees.

### Physical Space

While companies quickly pivoted to set their employees up to work from home, the rushed nature of the shift presented a challenge for the workforce to set up a sufficient dedicated workspace somewhere in their dwelling. Research shows that having a separate, dedicated workspace in the home is important for remote employees to help with mental and physical boundaries and enable productivity.

However, for employees with limited space, this was much more challenging, and concerns arose around availability of space, sufficient privacy, and uncontrollable noise impeding their work. Physical considerations such as appropriate furniture (with special attention paid to the work chair), longer periods of sedentary work, and increased screen time from teleconference meetings also had a negative impact on office workers (Awada et al., 2021)

### Technology

Working in an office setting, technology issues like dual monitors, headsets and hardware, and internet speeds and connectivity were items individual employees did not typically have to worry about. Communal office spaces ensure that all employees are on an even playing field, connected to the same internet network, with access to similar hardware options and, should a technical issue arise, are able to easily source assistance from a colleague. When the pandemic took that away, personal choices made by employees about their technology

impacted their ability to perform their duties and even brought up the risk of reflecting badly on them to colleagues, management, and clients. Effective communication may be thwarted by choppy internet or audio difficulties, causing delays, frustrations, and inefficiencies that may negatively impact how employees are perceived and in how they produce.

### Caregiving

For employees with children, navigating work and child care has been another huge set of hurdles on top of the base pandemic stressors. Specifically employed parents contend with increased responsibilities at work and home, less work-life balance, increased isolation and a lack of social support, along with increased safety concerns around Covid infection (Coe et al., 2021). Parents sought to work without distraction, but the reality was that many needed to monitor their children as they either navigated online school or needed more sustained, hands-on attention. They might choose to work early mornings or late nights in order to get work done and avoid interruptions, sacrificing sleep or leisure time in the process (Xiao et al., 2021). A McKinsey report showed that employed parents experienced increased feelings of apathy and fatigue and a sense of failure of being unable to live up to their own or social expectations as a parent, partner, friend, or family member (Xiao et al., 2021). Employed parents reported higher rates of burnout than nonparents, and were more likely to miss work because of their burnout. Parenting during the pandemic also came with a host of equity issues that disproportionately affected women in single-parent households (Xiao et al., 2021). Mental health for working parents was worse off than those employed without children, with working women reporting larger declines in mental health than men (Hewlett et al., 2021)

### Health

It was much easier to remain sedentary in a work from home situation. No longer needing to commute to work, or walk to different locations within a building for meetings, cut down on physical movement significantly. Additionally, extended screen time from video meetings had both physical and mental impacts. Employees reported eye strain, fatigue,

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<sup>10</sup> On average, Canadians who were able to keep their jobs and stay healthy saved about \$5,000 in the first year of the pandemic thanks to government support programs and reduced spending. (Bakx, 2021)

headaches, and tiredness, and “Zoom burnout” was not uncommon (Xiao et. al, 2021). For employees who live alone, working from home could take an additional toll on mental health by diminishing an individual's face-to-face social interactions and support (Xiao et al., 2021).

### **Personal and Professional lines are blurred**

With work and home suddenly occupying the same space, it becomes difficult to have a hard separation from the workplace (Xiao et. al, 2021). For remote workers, it became easy to overwork by hopping back onto the work computer to send an email or finish off a report. Without clear expectations from employers about how employees should be working, how much they should be working, and whether they can turn off their cameras, the boundaries between the two realms become easily blurred. This also leads to questions about what becomes appropriate in each domain. Video calls meant that we were getting glimpses into people's personal lives in a way we never had before. Viewers could potentially be seeing into someone's bedroom, seeing their family or people they live with – things they might not necessarily want to share with their co-workers. The privacy of home is taken away.

### **Impact On Mental Health**

Without question, mental health has suffered during the pandemic. The disruption of daily life led to loss of jobs, livelihoods, financial security, hopes and dreams, and shattered assumptions about the things we presumed to be true. Front line and essential workers faced increased demands in riskier environments without adequate protections, posing serious hazards to their mental and physical health. School closures disrupted education at all levels, and abruptly left many young people without the safety and support they were receiving from their schools. Unfortunately, rates in domestic violence have increased, as have opioid overdoses ("COVID-19 and Mental Health", 2020).

The Covid situation has characteristics that have previously been linked to mental health issues (PTSD, anxiety disorders, complicated mourning) or risk factors (e.g. abrupt and/or violent death) (Stroebe & Schut, 2021), creating a perfect storm for ruinous mental health impacts.

An OECD (2021) report on the mental health impact of the Covid-19 pandemic outlined some disturbing facts: Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020 the prevalence of depression and anxiety in general population increased significantly, in some cases even doubling the pre-pandemic levels reported by OECD countries (2021). The highest reported rates of depression and anxiety occurred during periods of high death rates and strict lockdown measures to prevent transmission.

### **Disproportional Demographic Impacts**

In spring 2021 Statistics Canada reported an increase in the number of Canadians 18 years and older that reported having symptoms of depression, anxiety, or PTSD, from one in five in fall 2020, to one in four. Between Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 young adults screened positive for depression and anxiety in higher proportions, as well as reporting experiencing negative impacts like loneliness and increased physical health issues, due to the pandemic.

Certain demographic groups faced much higher rates of mental distress during the pandemic versus the general population. In particular, people who fall into a lower socio-economic status, with less education, higher financial insecurity, and higher rates of unemployment, youth, and those living alone were hardest hit for mental wellness. Low socio-economic status was already a well known risk factor for poor mental before the pandemic, but through an increase in additional burdens such as financial insecurity, unemployment, and fear, combined with a decrease in preventative factors like social connection, employment, educational engagement, daily routines, access to physical exercise, and health services, at-risk groups were put at an increasingly bigger disadvantage for mental health care (Hewlett et al., 2021).

### **Disruptions to Care and Services**

Mental health services were already in high demand before the pandemic, but Covid exacerbated a system that was already struggling to provide patients with care. In the second quarter of 2020, the World Health Organization conducted a survey that reported disruptions in mental health services in more than 60% of countries worldwide (Hewlett et al., 2021). The safety nets relied on by so many saw a drop in services provided, with 67% of countries reporting disruptions to counselling and psychotherapy, 65% for critical harm reduction, and 35% for emergency interventions (WHO, 2020 as cited in Hewlett et al., 2021). For those already living with mental health conditions, including substance use and addictions, the pandemic took a harsher toll. Interruptions in access and treatment have negative consequences for recovery, as progress can be undone and circumstances may lead individuals to regress without proper support.

### **New Forms of Delivery**

These disruptions forced a necessary shift to how services were delivered, with a big focus on telemedicine and digital mental health tools such as online therapy, mobile apps, and distress lines. However, while quick action was taken to implement these supports, and uptake was high — The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) saw an increase in virtual care visits by 750% from March to April 2020 (Hewlett et al., 2021) — many people have still slipped through the cracks. Digital tools require safe and reliable access and technological know-how to use them effectively, and should one be lacking either of these things, the new forms of delivery are meaningless and leave behind the most vulnerable.

## **Impact On Grief**

### **Complicated Grief**

In the first year of the pandemic, advocates raised concerns that even if or when Covid-19 came under control, the events that unfolded would give way to yet another pandemic — but one of complicated grief.

Normal grief and bereavement includes a range of emotions including sadness, numbness, and sometimes anger or guilt, but these feelings gradually ease over time and the bereaved is able to move forward after accepting the loss. Complicated grief is when these feelings fail to dissipate and the painful emotions of grief are prolonged and so severe that the individual has trouble recovering from the loss and resuming their life. Symptoms may include extreme focus and rumination over the loss of a loved one, problems accepting the death, intense and persistent longing or pining for the deceased, numbness or detachment, feelings that life holds no meaning, irritability or agitation. ("Complicated Grief — Symptoms and Causes", 2022)

In an open letter to the President of the United States of America, Kenneth Doka (2021), Senior Bereavement Consultant at The Hospice Foundation of America outlined a myriad of ways the pandemic would contribute to complicated grief. (See Table 3)

### **Health Impacts**

The health impacts of complicated grief are not to be underestimated; there are very real consequences including depression, substance misuse, heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure, suicidal thinking, sleep disruption, and impaired immune functions (Prigerson et al., 1997). To be sure, the health crisis caused by Covid extends far beyond the single mutating virus — the cascading effects are seen in the bereaved and the grieving.

### **Lonelier Loss**

For those who have experienced a death during the pandemic, especially during times of lockdown, the confinement to the home provides an added element of struggle. The inability to connect with others outside the home to mourn and grieve the deceased creates an additional element of loss around

<b>Anger and Disenfranchisement</b>	Deaths that were not Covid-related may cause anger that the virus compromised or limited the ways in which the bereaved could support the dying person, or conduct funeral rituals once they had died.
<b>A “bad” death</b>	The pandemic has caused many people to die alone in hospitals or long term care homes without the presence of loved ones nearby to say final goodbyes or provide closure, comfort, and validation.
<b>Concurrent Loss</b>	The pandemic disrupted life so fully that many individuals may be experiencing multiple, non-death related losses (loss of income, loss of jobs, loss of purpose, etc.)
<b>Cumulative Grief</b>	For people from marginalized communities, the disproportionate rates of infection and deaths from the pandemic underscore ongoing inequitable treatment
<b>Isolation</b>	Rituals for death and dying are hindered by quarantines, physical distancing, gathering limits, and travel restrictions, including funeral rites and in-person supports from loved ones, counsellors, or support groups
<b>Perceptions of Preventability</b>	Masking, regular handwashing, social distancing, increased ventilation and vaccinations are all measures known to protect against infection of Covid-19. When a Covid-death comes about despite this knowledge there can be frustration and anger that these measures were not taken
<b>Spiritual Questions</b>	The pandemic may inspire people to ask why this has happened and to question their long held belief systems
<b>Survivor Guilt</b>	People may have difficulty with the knowledge that a loved one died and they survived, particularly if they were both infected, or there is suspicion that the person who infected the deceased did not encounter any difficulties with the virus
<b>Trauma</b>	Treatments for Covid, such as intubation, are quite intrusive and can be traumatic, and can still lead to sudden and unpredictable deaths

**Table 3.** Consequences of complicated grief as a result of the pandemic

funeral rituals and remembrance, and fraying social connections. Covid-bereaved have spoken of the ways in which friends and family who may have normally been present and supportive had become distant and unhelpful, burnt out by the pandemic (Yong, 2022) For those who lived with the deceased, remaining at home in an emptier dwelling serves as a constant and inescapable reminder of how life has changed.

### Expanded Understanding

A piece published in the Harvard Business Review in March 2020 called “That Discomfort You’re Feeling is Grief” (Berinato), went viral in the early months of the pandemic, and provided a new perspective on the nature of grief, who experiences it, and why. Grief is a natural reaction to loss of any kind and is not only limited to experiences of death. For those who have not experienced the death of a loved one, grief may have seemed irrelevant, but the losses

of the pandemic meant that disenfranchised grief proliferated. Disenfranchised grief describes “the grief experienced by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (Doka, 1999). From the high school students who missed their senior prom, to young couples who had to postpone their weddings, to those with active social calendars suddenly finding themselves at home alone, the grief was real, even if it felt unusual.



# Interview Findings

This research included an anonymous survey (see Appendix A), and confidential interviews with people who identified with one or more of three categories: bereaved employees, human resources professionals, and those in management or leadership positions. There is some crossover in my findings from my bereaved employees and my managerial employees, as many of the participants occupying managerial roles had also experienced the loss of a loved one while employed in an office workplace – so while our conversations may have started off with a focus on one perspective, their experience from the other point of view also came into play.

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“And no one ever told me about the laziness of grief. Except at my job – where the machine seems to run on much as usual – I loathe the slightest effort. Not only writing but even reading a letter is too much. Even shaving. What does it matter now whether my cheek is rough or smooth?” — C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

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## The Bereavement Leave Process

Overall, the bereavement leave process is fairly straightforward. This may be because most leave policies are not that extensive (as one participant commented when asked if they were familiar with the policy at their organization, “yeah, all two lines of it”), but it may speak to the fact that organizations generally comply with whatever the employment standards are in the place of operation. For most participants, their current workplaces provided 3 days paid leave, typically for closer relatives, and 1 day for others like close friends, though some had recently increased to 5 days off. Many participants agreed that their organizations could be providing more time for bereaved employees, even just for the practical purposes of planning a funeral service.

Many managerial participants expressed a fairly flexible attitude toward the official policy, either being mandated by the organization (a lot of flexibility for taking extra days) or by the manager themselves. As one individual said, “my reports are all adults – I tell them to take the time they need and I’ll figure it out.”

All agreed that there was room to work with individual employees directly on a case-by-case basis for additional time, if needed.

In the experience of most HR and managerial participants, employees generally return back to the workplace without any issue around reintegration, though this assessment seemed to change when the loss was unexpected and/or of a close family member. One individual spoke of the need to make sure that company policies are clearly laid out for employees so that there is no confusion for them during times of crisis. He emphasized the importance of checking in on employees when they return and trying to keep them involved and included so they know they have not been forgotten or overlooked during their time of need.

Interestingly, all participants who identified themselves as occupying a leadership role had also experienced their own personal losses, and acknowledged that their experiences with loss had an impact on how they interacted with their direct report and made them feel more prepared to deal with their situation.

## The Bereavement Leave Experience

Participants' experiences in the workplace after losing a loved one were mixed. The participants who had a positive experience with their workplace were eager to share, in part so they could "balance out" the assumed very negative experiences of others. This in itself is interesting to unpack – that employees expect that a positive experience would be the exception and not the norm is telling of the trust and overall negative perception of dealing with workplace administration.

### The Good

I asked participants to share, either from their own experience with loss or from the perspective of the organization, what contributed to their generally positive bereavement experience in the office. The aspects that were noted by participants fall under four categories:

1. Paid time off
2. Support and acknowledgement from colleagues
3. Accommodations
4. Personal gestures

#### **Paid Time Off**

Paid time off from work was the number one factor that bereaved employees cited as shaping their experience in a positive light, and the number one thing that management and HR cited as what they felt their organizations were doing well. Individual experiences varied, but all participants were able to take more than the standard 3-5 days of leave, though for some this meant using vacation days to cover the time off. As one individual said, "I got 10 days off, but that was more than most of my family got, so I counted myself pretty lucky."

For some participants, the timing of their loss coincided with their organization's winter holiday shutdown and they were able to take advantage of extended time away from the office that didn't impact their paid time off. These participants expressed that the additional time was very helpful and that they felt ready – even eager – to get back to the office when the holidays were over. Those who were able to take as much time as they needed without worrying about being penalized by their workplace expressed gratitude and relief. As one interviewee said, "It was a

very terrible time in my life, but knowing that my job was secure made for a less terrible time. It was one less thing to worry about when I was worrying about everything."

One participant shared a moving story about her colleagues taking up a collection and donating two weeks worth of PTO to her while she attended to her mother at end-of-life. In addition, the same participant shared that her boss had been able to pull some strings that allowed her to use her own sick days while she sat with her mother in hospice. Between the donated time off, the sick days, the five days of bereavement leave given by her company and her vacation time, she was able to take seven weeks in total, allowing her to be with her mother at the end of her life, arrange her funeral service, and deal with estate matters.

#### **Support and acknowledgement from colleagues**

Participants spoke with deep gratitude and appreciation for the support that they received from colleagues calling certain gestures "above and beyond." Other participants spoke of their coworkers who made the concerted effort to check in and acknowledge their situation. One individual recalled how, upon her return to work, her desk was decorated with flowers, sweets, and some self care items, and her colleagues would continually check in and see if she needed anything. Another participant recalled how her mother's passing was mentioned in an internal company newsletter which resulted in her receiving sympathy cards from people she didn't even know, but who felt compelled to reach out and express condolences. These gestures of support were well received and remarked upon favourably.

#### **Accommodations and Benefits**

Accommodations can take a variety of forms. One participant cited his appreciation for the lightening of his workload through the transferring of files to other colleagues and not being contacted with questions while he was off the clock. Private coverage and mental health benefits through Employee Assistance Plans (EAPs) were also regarded as favourable elements in dealing with bereavement.



### **Personal Gestures**

There were some key moments that stood out to participants even years after the fact. One individual shared that his boss had shared his personal phone number and told him “if you need anything, just give me a call.” Another participant emphasized the importance of his colleagues continuing to speak about and say the name of his son: “The best thing people do is say his name...the best is when people recognize it, but it’s so hard for them to do.” The participant spoke of how meaningful it was to hear from friends and colleagues who would reach out on significant dates and anniversaries to show support and acknowledge the pain and difficulty that would be faced those days, as well as sharing their own rituals, like having a spaghetti dinner (his favourite meal) in his honour on those days.

### **The Bad**

On the opposite end of the spectrum, participants also noted negative aspects of their experience centering around three main categories:

1. “Fragility” treatment
2. “Back to business” attitude and lack of support from upper management
3. Policy over human experience

#### **“Fragility” treatment**

The most frequently repeated sentiment from participants was the frustration of feeling like their colleagues were treating them ultra tentatively. The word most used was “fragile” even though, as one person said, “I didn’t feel fragile at the time”. One individual recalled feeling infantilized by her co-worker’s reactions when she was back in the office, expressing frustration that despite going through a profound loss and effectively dealing with all the enormous tasks required of her, she felt her colleagues were perceiving her “as a little girl”.

Another individual described his nerves at the thought of going back to work “and being that person that has changed. I’m a different person than I was then, and it was hard to experience that. It’s like they’re waiting for me to break down, just waiting for that moment.” Another individual remarked that he grew tired of people approaching him in a tentative fashion

and asking “how are you doing?” in such a way that implied they were expecting him to be outwardly more upset or emotional.

The change in treatment from colleagues stirred up a lot of emotions in participants, such as frustration, outrage, and annoyance. Participants explained that they did not feel like talking about their experience or their feelings in depth at work, for reasons of privacy and wanting to keep the workplace separate from their personal, emotional journey. Part of the motivation to keep things private could stem from the concern that colleagues would perceive these individuals as less capable or competent in fulfilling their duties at work, from which could spiral long term negative consequences on their career.

#### **“Back to business” attitude and lack of support from upper management**

Some participants expressed great disappointment in the reactions they received from upper management. An overall lack of support and seeing senior leadership take a step back from engaging in the situation was particularly difficult for one participant. “It was very disheartening to see that your leaders have disappeared during the hardest time.” The sense of “get back in or get out” put incredible pressure on the individual who was dealing with a profound loss of his young child. Without leadership support, employees feel confused and get the sense that they have limited value to the organization outside of their ability to produce, which is hugely demoralizing.

Hand in hand with lack of support from leaders is the “back to business” attitude. One participant spoke about how his return to the office resulted in an outsized workload that was exhausting to keep up with after the sudden loss of his father. Though he had received 10 days of leave, there was no transition period when he came back to work and this made it very difficult to keep time commitments in check and had him working unreasonable hours. Death and grief are exhausting experiences and are very effective at draining a person’s energy. If there is no understanding of this from the workplace, employees become run down and burnt out.

### **Policy over human experience**

One participant shared her shock and dismay at her workplace's strict adherence to their written bereavement policy. She recalled how, after her father died and she had informed work that she would not be coming in that day, HR called 3 hours later to let her know she had three days of bereavement leave. Upon her return to the office, HR reminded her that she would have to use her vacation days to cover the extra bereavement days she took. Further to this encounter, this individual shared how her colleagues told her that many of them had wanted to attend the funeral service for her father, but were told by management that they could not because "there's still a business to run."

One manager noted that at their company accommodations for employees were nearly non-existent. "There has never been any sort of accommodation where work is taken off your plate and you have smaller projects to work on, or you get a longer lunch break, or anything like that. You come back and unless you have a medical note, it's business as usual." In fact, when this individual shared how she tried to push for bereavement leave approval for a report who had lost a loved one who was not a blood relation but thought of as "her second mother", the participant was chastised about trying to supersede the workplace policies; "I got a stern talking-to that I couldn't just do what I thought was right."

### **Room for Improvement**

Participants mentioned certain aspects that could have gone better or where there easily could have been improvements made. They generally fell into the categories of:

1. Communication
2. Extreme response
3. Time before the loss
4. Care outside of crisis

### **Communication**

The major area for improvement centered around communication. For bereaved employees, a lack of clarity around who in their office was aware of their situation made for awkward and confusing interactions with coworkers. For one bereaved employee recently back to the office, working on projects with multiple teams who were not communicating with each other about how much work they were assigning him led to confusion around his capacity levels. The one team that thought they were being kind and accommodating with the lower capacity levels were confused at the outputs of this employee, not realizing the amount of work being assigned from another team at an already difficult reintegration period, was stretching him quite thin.

Another participant reflected on the fact that her manager had shared the news of her mother's passing with her team as a double edged sword. On the one hand she was relieved that she didn't have to explain over and over to people what had happened, but on the other hand, people kept bringing up the subject over and over.

Another individual spoke to the need for better communication and clearer internal processes to ensure fewer crossed wires around logistics between HR, management, and the employee when dealing with a loss. It would also be helpful to have some kind of training for staff, or even simple talking points around how to support someone who has experienced a deep loss, as well as thinking about what kind of support an employee might need when transitioning back into work.

### **Extreme Response**

Some participants were uncomfortable with their workplace's extreme response upon their return. For one individual, the response felt too extreme: he was either on the clock and working full time at full capacity, or the workplace swung too far in the other direction, taking him off the clock and giving him no work. What would have been preferable was a reduced workload that gradually allowed the individual to reintegrate into the workplace, while giving him grace for readjusting to the world.

### **Time before the loss**

A participant who had been dealing with a long term illness of his father lamented that he had not been able to take more time before his father's passing so that he could've spent more time with him in his last days. The time after the passing was appreciated — though he could have used more — but when it had become clear that his father's condition was deteriorating rapidly and there was not much time left, that's when the time off from work would have been most useful.

### **Feeling of care outside crisis**

One participant reflected that he wished that the sense of support and care that he'd received from his workplace hadn't had to wait until he was undergoing a crisis. The individual went on to critique the clinical approach favoured by many in management or leadership positions that only summons empathy and care "when the acute thing calls for it."

### **Impact of Bereavement Grief on Job Performance**

Some participants expressed relief at the outlet that the office offered to them after their loss. As one person shared, "Work gave me a sense of normalcy. I felt like I performed better at work because it was somewhere I didn't have to think about my mom." For some, returning to work was a welcome distraction after their loss, providing an opportunity to throw oneself into projects, though some noted that such behaviour was "probably not that healthy." Others reflected that, with the timing of their loss coinciding with the winter holiday break, the extended time away from the office contributed to a feeling of readiness to get back into the workplace and focus on "normal" tasks.

That said, a fair number of interviewees indicated that their work performance did suffer, post-loss. One individual shared that she was not aware of a change in her performance until she was put on a performance improvement plan without warning.

**"If they had evaluated my performance from a grief-informed perspective they would know that those (spelling mistakes, poor attention to detail, missing deadlines) are all very normal symptoms of immediate grief. You can't keep track of details, you have no idea what dates are, your head is so cloudy with the stress and trauma you've experienced. I just remember feeling so sad in that moment and even saying to my manager at that time 'Do you not realize my mom just died?'"**

Other participants commented on the effect of grief on their mental health, leading to long term issues like depression, and impacting their energy levels and ability to take in, process, and remember information. Some individuals recalled that they were aware that their performance was suffering as they had received feedback to that effect, but given the gravity of what they had just experienced, and were still processing, to a certain degree they didn't care, hoping that co-workers would be understanding of the situation. One individual noted that they have since learned to cope and grow around their grief, and having the knowledge of their triggers allows them to be upfront with their team and ask for grace at times when they know their grief might have an impact on their performance.

Management and HR participants reported a mixture of behaviours in bereaved employees returning to the office after leave. Most noted that people seemed to dive back in without much trouble, though there was a consensus that in hard, life changing situations (death of a child, partner, suicide etc...) one was more likely to see a change in behaviour and difficulty in returning to the office. Participants were mindful that most employees would not want a spotlight on them when they return, and one individual emphasized the importance of not treating the bereaved employee with pity, but instead looking for ways one could help and making sure that employees stayed informed of what they'd missed while away, and that people were around to support them.

## Impact of Bereavement on Career Trajectory

When it came to assessing the impact of one's loss on overall career trajectory, answers were less conclusive. Many commented that they didn't see a direct correlation between their loss and their career trajectory, though some respondents were more established in their careers at the time of their loss, in which case it's possible that the loss would not have derailed them from their path so easily.

For participants that did note an impact on their career trajectory, sentiments seemed to fall along two sides of a spectrum, with one end focused on feelings around missed opportunity and regret, fear, and risk aversion, and the other around setting better boundaries at work, exploring other career paths previously not considered, and an overall feeling that "life is short" and one should take more chances and work to find their passion.

One individual spoke about how his loss eventually forced him to quit his job after an extended leave and as a result left him paralyzed and fearful about his next steps. As he put it, "I'm much more risk-averse because I don't want everything taken away from me. The trauma response of not wanting everything to disappear again is very tough because there are a whole bunch of ventures and things I want to do, but ... it just stops. They just stop because you think 'I can't continue on because I don't know what's next.'"

Others lamented that the time they spent dealing with different aspects of their losses (pre-loss caregiving, estate administration, emotional trauma, etc.) had derailed them from focusing on career moves and progression. For the sake of stability in a time of family tragedy, one participant missed what is widely regarded in his industry as a common turning point for junior practitioners to pivot from their current scope of practice to explore another.

## Impact of Bereavement in the Workplace

While difficult to experience, many participants shared that they felt their losses had made them better teammates in the workplace. Multiple people commented that they felt better equipped to support their colleagues when they experienced hardships as they were better attuned to what kind of actions would be considered helpful and comforting. One participant noted that in a previous workplace she had felt sheepish about sharing a loss she'd experienced as the environment made that feel unwelcome, but after another serious loss in a new workplace she became more vocal about her experience as a way to signal to others that she was a safe place for support and sharing about their own losses.

Those in managerial positions who had experienced loss spoke to how it impacted their own management style. One individual shared that he suspected his experience had changed the way he might have previously responded from a managerial perspective to an employee needing to take time off. Participants spoke with gratitude about how well they were treated by their workplace colleagues around the time of their loss, and emphasized how important it felt to them to carry forward those gestures to reports going through a similarly difficult time. One individual who had experienced significant pushback from her workplace while advocating for her report expressed how unacceptable it felt to her that someone would be offered just one day off for their loss.

Participants' reactions to their bereaved reports varied widely. Many spoke about putting aside extra time to check in with their report and being a safe place for them to speak openly about their loss, or sharing resources they were aware of outside of the generic workplace offerings.

Some interesting perspectives arose on the topic of sending a physical token to the bereaved, such as flowers or a small gift. One participant spoke about the importance of sending something on behalf of his whole team without any expectations for monetary contributions because of the power dynamics at play, while another recalled that while they used to

spend a great deal of time crafting a personal email to their bereaved reports, they now opt for a quick call to express condolences as that gesture seems more personal. On the topic of attending funeral or memorial services, one leader shared that they had to consider if attending was appropriate given their professional and personal relationship with the bereaved employee, and whether his presence would be distracting for them at an emotionally difficult time.

Most managers spoke about trying to stay abreast of what is going on with their reports' lives beyond just work without being too invasive, but two particularly striking insights stood out to me. One emphasized the importance of making sure their reports know they care about them, and spoke about leading with the question "is this exhibiting care?" as a North Star. Another individual went on to say:

**"What I would like to think is that people feel, bottom line, that the organization and the people within it have their back. And they especially have their back when someone they love and care about is no longer there and they have to go through the process of dealing with that. My hope is that the general belief and feeling on most life-issue matters – that there's the same recognition, the same flexibility. We are not rigid in the application of policies because, generally, there's no need to be rigid."**

### **Accommodations and Extended Leave**

Some losses require more time than the standard bereavement leave period. At what point does that become an issue of concern for the organization? One individual noted that the 3 month mark is typically when difficulties arise because the organization has to decide whether to hold the job or not. It is considered best practice to put an end date on an extended leave because it leaves space for a conversation and reevaluation of what that person's options are; perhaps it is possible to go on a short term disability leave, which provides the individual with the time and support they need without feeling pressure to return

to the workplace too soon, and the organization can have more clarity about what kind of period they need to cover off for the individual.

That said, without a formal extended leave, concerns do come up around coverage. The bereaved employee's work is generally spread around to the rest of the team, which is typically fine for the short term. But as remaining team mates have less capacity, concerns start to arise about the psychological management of the rest of the team. The empathy and understanding of other team members might wane over time as they begin to wonder how much longer they will be expected to take on additional duties that encroach on their ability to do their own job – and without extra compensation. One participant noted that their team could handle someone being on an unexpected leave for about four weeks before larger conversations need to be had about the person's role and the distribution of work among the team.

### **Impact of Pandemic on Grief, Mental Health, and the Workplace**

The common theme among interviewees regarding the effects of the pandemic on grief, mental health, and the workplace: It's been a rollercoaster.

#### **Burnout**

The top issue brought up by management was the unprecedented level of general burnout being experienced by all employees. Managing the constant uncertainty of the last couple years has taken a huge toll on people. The lack of separation between work and home has made it quite difficult for people to disconnect, and easy to overwork. One participant noted he would get messages from people at 10 or 11 at night, or even 2 in the morning, as if there was an unspoken thought among workers needing to prove to people that they were working since they couldn't rely on physical cues in the office. That constant need to demonstrate that they were working led to putting in more hours and more work than usual, which would inevitably lead to burnout. As he put it "They just want to disconnect from work but then they're thinking 'If I ask for a leave, do I look like a person who is asking for a leave while being at home?'"

The idea of dealing with a loss of a close loved one on top of the intense burnout everyone is already feeling made one participant state that their organization should be more proactive about addressing such a scenario.

### **Isolation**

One of the hardest hurdles for employees to face has been isolation. The lockdown periods where people were unable to go anywhere were noted as being particularly difficult and directly linked to deteriorating mental health. Participants noted that constantly being on video calls without physical interaction, and employees not getting out of their houses as much, were also contributing factors to isolation.

To target this issue, some companies set up more meetings for their teams. One individual spoke about the importance of creating space for his team to safely express themselves during this stressful time and went from hosting weekly check-ins with his team to a daily touch base.

Most interesting was the creation of a weekly ritual for reflection and intention setting: on Mondays the team would virtually gather and the manager would lead them in the practice of closing their eyes and thinking about what they hoped the week would look like, and what they could do to make it better. On Friday, at the end of the week, the team would gather once more to close their eyes and reflect on what went well and what didn't go so well. The hope was to create space to punctuate the start and the finish of the week with a moment of positive or simply peaceful reflection to curb feelings of despair. While the team was reluctant at first, they grew to enjoy it, noting that they looked forward to the moment each week because it felt like the one time when they actually had the time to carve out space for themselves and their thoughts.

An HR participant noted that two years into the pandemic, employees are now demanding fewer meetings, leaving HR looking for ways to keep connections alive while staying aware of people's mental health.

### **Stress**

Stress levels among staff ranged significantly depending on individual circumstances and attitudes. Participants reported hearing from employees who were extremely stressed and anxious, to those of the "let's get this over with and get back to normal" attitude. One interviewee spoke of her efforts to connect individually with all employees during the pandemic and the insights that came from those conversations, including one from a particularly anxious employee: she had confided that she was a single mom and if she got sick she would be on her own with no one to look after her son, a dilemma that the interviewee reported, "just hadn't crossed my mind."

To combat stress and show care, one participant cited the formation of a wellness committee that would share advice about how to adjust to working from home, emphasize the importance of taking mental health days, and encourage employees to take advantage of resources, repeatedly saying the company was there to help support anyone having difficulty. Another manager spoke of the importance of letting people know they didn't have to put on a brave face, trying to let employees know they had permission to express how awful things were, and provided them with the knowledge that the team was there for support.

### **Secondary Losses**

For bereaved employees the pandemic has highlighted certain losses that perhaps would not have previously been an issue. One interviewee noted their awareness of the lack of family support they had available to them, as compared to their colleagues. They said, "During the pandemic, while others were able to find comfort or escape to their parents' houses, I had nowhere to go. It really revealed my lack of family support during hard times. I wanted that safety of going to my parents' house but I was alone with more time to contend with the gravity of my loss and experience, and what that means in the middle of a global crisis."

For participants who had been heavily reliant on in-person support, like grief groups, extended family, and



medical professionals, the isolation of the pandemic exacerbated their mental health struggles. Many spoke about how the pandemic increased their loneliness, anxiety, and sadness. For individuals who found themselves out of work at the start of the pandemic, the isolation at home presented another challenge as looking for new work felt impossible in light of so many layoffs. The lack of control led to anxiety about work, which increased as time went on. He shared his thoughts on the process: "I would wonder 'What are people going to think when they look at my resume? Maybe I'm not good enough, maybe I'll never work again, maybe this grief is too much.'"

Some bereaved participants did note that given their experiences with loss, they found it hard to relate to their colleagues expressing how hard and stressful the pandemic situation was for them. One individual in particular lost his father right at the start of the pandemic and spoke of how it made him feel out of sync with his colleagues; "It felt like my dad died and the world never went back to normal."

That said, not all participants expressed issues with the pandemic exacerbating or impacting their grief. Some said that because their loss had occurred long before the pandemic had happened they felt they'd mostly settled their feelings and grief wasn't the daily disruptor it once was.

### **Silver Linings**

Despite the overwhelmingly negative responses participants had to the pandemic, there were two positive changes they noted: more flexibility around work arrangements from organizations, and an increased willingness among colleagues to share and connect in the office.

Prior to the pandemic many employers would claim that options like remote work arrangements would be impossible to implement, but over the last two years those same employers have been proven wrong. Even though the pandemic pivot came from necessity rather than strategic choice, the successful implementation of flexible work arrangements signalled that workplaces do have the ability to change and set a precedent that indeed they should.

Some participants noted that the difficulty of the pandemic seemed to offer their work colleagues an opening to speak candidly about their mental health. This kind of openness among colleagues helped foster connection, understanding, and even friendship and helped team members feel a greater sense of support in the workplace.

# Discussion

The rich insights garnered from interview participants highlighted that while there were many positive experiences with dealing with bereavement in the workplace, there is also definitely room for improvement. From this body of inquiry I noted five key takeaways:

## 1. Quality bereavement support is more than just time off

When asking participants about bereavement in the workplace, one of the first things to come up was protected paid time off from work. This makes sense because a set number of days for bereavement leave is typically the extent of any formal workplace policy. However, given the conversations with interview participants, it is clear that time off work is only a portion of what is needed by bereaved employees when they experience a loss. Effective bereavement support takes many forms and should consider timing, and both emotional and practical needs of the employee.

**Time:** Bereaved employees typically are shown the most support in the immediate aftermath of their loss and when they return to the office. However, grief is not linear nor contained by a neat timeline. Employees may return to work after their bereavement leave and feel perfectly fine, but then find themselves experiencing grief bursts weeks or months after their loss. Being aware of possible triggers and being flexible in when time is offered for bereaved employees would offer more fulsome support.

**Emotional Needs:** Participants spoke with deep appreciation for informed and thoughtful gestures received from colleagues who understood that grief over a loss does not disappear over the course of a few days off. Managers and colleagues that take care to check in with bereaved employees about what they need and offer support through frequent check-ins can provide psychological safety for the bereaved, ensuring their emotional distress is acknowledged and monitored.

**Practical Needs:** Despite the emotional journey of grief, there are some concerns that are simply practical. Practical support can include administrative help and clear policies (for example, making sure

that employees are aware of the workplace policies on bereavement, or providing hassle-free assistance with paperwork or insurance etc...) It can also include accommodations in the workplace, like a quieter desk or a distributed workload.

## 2. Loss-informed leaders understand the importance of offering fulsome support to bereaved employees.

Though the study was not intentionally set up this way, all interview participants who spoke to their experience as managers in the workplace also happened to have personal experience with loss. It was clear from the thoughtful insights provided by participants that — whether directly or indirectly — their experiences informed their management philosophies and provided them with valuable first hand knowledge on how to support bereaved employees.

Participants displayed genuine empathy for their reports and spoke about how they related to the difficulties they might be going through. There was a strong desire to “pay forward” the positive ways they were treated by their employers when experiencing their own losses. Leaders who understand the pain and upset that comes from the death of a loved one do not only have the empathy and understanding to make that experience better for their employees, they have the power.



### 3. Successful reintegration to the workplace requires trust, understanding, and flexibility

**Understanding:** Grief can easily impact the behaviour of an employee in the workplace. This may manifest in ways like employees paying less attention to detail, or experiencing confusion, distraction, and forgetfulness. Some employers may react to such things with punitive measures, like negative performance reviews or verbal warnings. This approach is short sighted and exhibits zero understanding of the experience of bereaved employees. Employers who can show empathy and patience with individuals experiencing grief after a loss are more likely to help the employee recover and return to pre-loss performance levels — and earn their respect and appreciation.

**Trust:** Trust is a form of showing respect, and if an employer does not trust their employee, it implies they don't respect them. During interviews, several participants spoke about how they told their bereaved reports to take the time and space they needed to heal and to come back to the office when they were ready. Trusting their reports to be honest and clear about what they needed and not take advantage of the situation generated appreciation from the employees.

**Flexibility:** The pandemic proved that even the most rigid and traditional workplaces can adapt and change and still effectively function — and even excel! The successful transition to work-from-home (though not without its difficulties, still effective), proves that flexible work options for employees can work. Applying this philosophy to bereavement, successful reintegration into the workplace after a loss comes from having options and knowing that one's employer is ok with change. As one interview participant said, there is simply no need to be so rigid with policy.

### 4. Managers and staff need education and training about the nature of grief

The majority of the negative experiences in the workplace cited by bereaved participants appear to stem from lack of knowledge and a misunderstanding of what it is like to experience bereavement grief. Those who have not experienced grief from the death of a loved one may not realize the impacts that it can have on day-to-day life, but these insights can be taught along with effective strategies for how to handle delicate personal situations at work. In fact, the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace<sup>11</sup> recommends mental health training for managers and leaders as a way to develop workplaces that promote mentally healthy working environments. As the OECD explains, "Effective management...can contribute to a workplace culture that is conducive to open discussion of mental health, help prevent workplace conflicts that are major risk factors for poor mental health, and promote earlier identification of possible mental health issues." (2021).

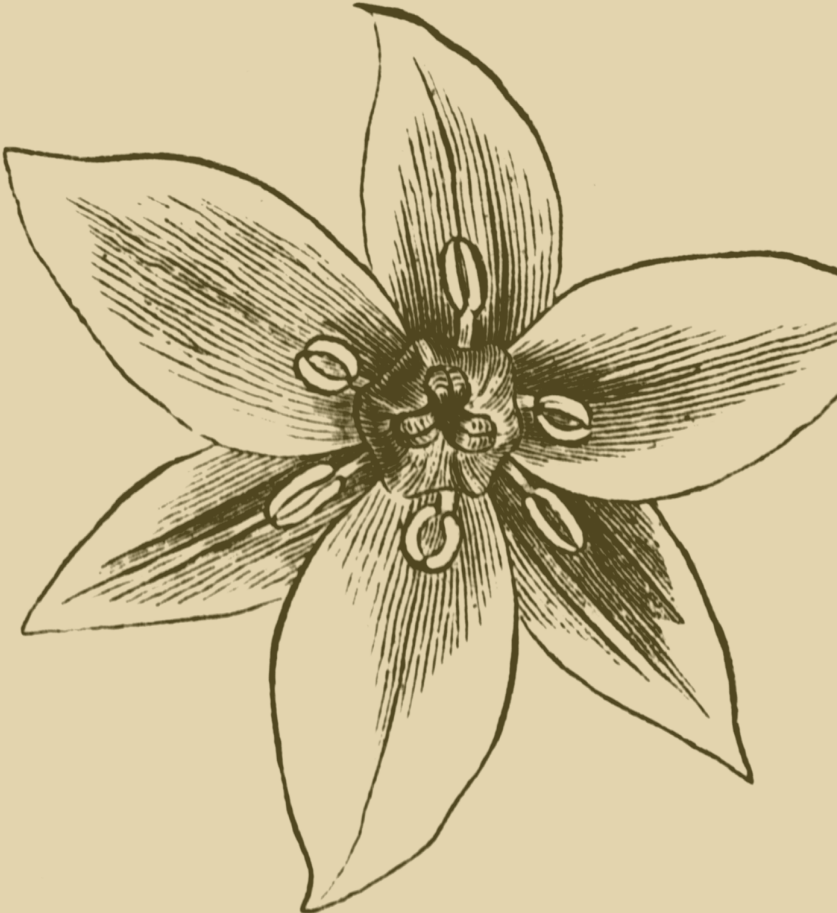
Multiple participants called for the implementation of some kind of training for managers and colleagues to create more awareness about the effects of grief, and even provide direction on how to engage with a bereaved colleague, such as learning the appropriate things to say versus what kind of comments can be unintentionally hurtful, and even how to be an ally in grief. Knowledge can help people feel more comfortable, and given the stigma around death and bereavement, any way to provide comfort will be helpful.

### 5. Grief and bereavement demands a human-centered approach

Grief is not linear or straightforward and it looks different for everyone. Emotions do not neatly conform to even the best intentioned corporate policies and procedures. Understanding this, employers should be taking a human-centered approach to bereavement policy in order to provide the best support for their employees. Organizations can do this by intentionally asking for input from employees about what their needs are, and then inviting them to be part of the policy development process. The process should be iterative and proposed solutions regularly tested for effectiveness.



Part 4 — The Future



# Existing Innovative Approaches

As dialogue about mental health becomes increasingly commonplace, more and more companies are shifting their policies to prioritize the mental health of their employees, offering perks like “wellness days”, extended health coverage and Employee Assistance Plans to cover counselling, and flexible or unlimited paid time off. While bereavement leave is not typically regarded as a “perk”, one possible implication of the high rate of deaths from the Covid pandemic may be a demand for better bereavement policies.

Thinking about solutioning, I scanned for existing innovations around grief and bereavement that were already being implemented in corporate office workplaces. I was pleased to find that even prior to the pandemic, innovative policies around bereavement were taking shape. In 2017, Facebook employees (now Meta) were provided with up to 20 paid days of bereavement leave for an immediate family member, with up to 10 paid days for an extended family member (Fiegerman, 2017). In addition, employees were also able to take 6 weeks paid time off for long term caregiving duties of a sick relative and 3 days to care for a family member with a short term illness (Fiegerman, 2017).

In 2015, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg lost her husband suddenly, leaving her to experience first hand the complications of grief. Unsurprisingly, this profound loss highlighted to Sandberg the immense impact that grief can have on one’s work life as it wreaks havoc on the personal, undoubtedly influencing her own ambitions to revamp Facebook’s bereavement policy. In her own words about the experience of loss and the workplace Sandberg said:

**“Amid the nightmare of Dave’s death when my kids needed me more than ever, I was grateful every day to work for a company that provides bereavement leave and flexibility. I needed both to start my recovery.**

**I know how rare that is, and I believe strongly that it shouldn’t be. People should be able both to work and be there for their families. No one should face this trade-off. We need public policies that make it easier for people to care for their children and aging parents and for families to mourn and heal after loss. Making it easier for more Americans to be the workers and family members they want to be will make our economy and country stronger. Companies that stand by the people who work for them do the right thing and the smart thing - it helps them serve their mission, live their values, and improve their bottom line by increasing the loyalty and performance of their workforce. (2017)**

The importance of Sandberg’s comments cannot be understated. Leadership plays a crucial part in how bereavement and grief are handled at work in the long term — something I saw in my own interviews quite clearly — and when someone of authority understands and advocates for the importance of better policies, everyone benefits. When employees report dissatisfaction with their workplace, it translates to lower energy, engagement,

and excitement about work; negative outcomes for employees become negative outcomes for organizations (Dhingra et al., 2021). Leaders who shine a light on the impacts of personal tragedy give employees permission to bring more of their full selves to work. This is in an organization's best interest as, according to a McKinsey report, "People who live their purpose at work are more productive than people who don't. They are also healthier, more resilient, and more likely to stay at the company. Moreover, when employees feel that their purpose is aligned with the organization's purpose, the benefits expand to include stronger employee engagement, heightened loyalty, and a greater willingness to recommend the company to others." (Dhingra et al., 2021).

Aside from offering bereaved employees more time off, there are a number of other actions organizations can take to support their staff as cited in the Harvard Business Review by Mita Mallick (2020):

- Offering a more flexible definition of family that doesn't exclude or distinguish between immediate and extended family members. Organizations that make assumptions about the nature of employee relationships and arbitrarily decide that certain people in their lives merit more time for grieving than others remove autonomy from them
- Including miscarriage as eligible for coverage under the bereavement policy, as tech giants like Uber and Reddit have already done.
- Not asking employees for proof of death; requiring documentation such as a death certificate or obituary implies a lack of trust in employees. The likelihood of someone lying about a death in the family is low and to make the suggestion that they would, would only stoke resentment and bad feelings from the employee.

## Solution Ideation

The original intention for this project was to host a co-design session with willing participants from my 3 different representative groups. However, time restraints and other factors (namely a change in advisor, falling ill with Covid, and a death in the family) pushed me in a different direction.

After compiling the data from my interviews, I conducted an affinity mapping exercise to sort insights from my participants and spot patterns or common threads among them. Then, based on the data I collected, I created personas to represent each participant group (bereaved employees, management, and HR professionals), to help streamline my thinking about the needs, wants and pain points from each perspective (See Appendix B). I then mapped out user journeys for each persona thinking about what each one would think, feel, and do in the workplace when experiencing a loss themselves, or from the organizational and management perspective (See Appendix C). Doing this work gave me a fulsome and empathetic understanding of each persona, and highlighted the areas that would be most effective to address. (See *Figure 9 & 10*)

When I began the ideation process, I was hopeful that my research, combined with my own personal experience, would enable me to come up with a groundbreaking, revolutionary solution that would "fix" the bereavement experience for office employees. After multiple attempts at solutioning that ended with me coming up against a wall, I had to remind myself that loss, and the consequences thereof, is not a problem meant to be solved, nor can it be; death, grief, and bereavement are a part of life and the human experience. The process of each does not — and cannot — be eliminated or fixed, but there is room to shape the human response to these situations into a more healthy approach.

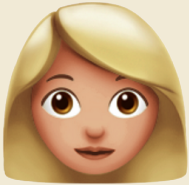
<p><b>Bereaved Employee</b></p>  <p><b>Julia Katz</b> Employee, Operations</p>	<p><b>Demographics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 25 years old</li> <li>• Lives with a roommate</li> <li>• 3 years as Operations Coordinator</li> </ul> <p><b>Functions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Running reports</li> <li>• Making production quotes</li> <li>• Creating client contracts</li> </ul>	<p><b>Work Philosophy</b></p> <p>Julia has seen first hand that life is short. If she has to work, she wants to spend her time doing something she loves or at least feels excited about.</p>
<p><b>About</b></p> <p>Julia had been working at her company for 3 years when her mother suddenly passed away. She had 3 days of paid leave and took 2 more days of vacation so she could be with her family.</p> <p>It took a few months for Julia to get back to the groove of working again, but she has found a new normal. She did not intend to stay at this job this long, but needed some stability after her world was shaken up.</p>	<p><b>Goals and Motivations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To find a job she feels passionate about</li> <li>• To earn enough money to for her own apartment</li> <li>• To make her mom proud</li> <li>• To find time to volunteer</li> <li>• To spend more time with her dad</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pains and Frustrations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating with manager and co-workers about her loss</li> <li>• Some days are really tough with grief, being mindful of triggers and reminders</li> <li>• People treating her like she is fragile and breakable — just treat her like normal</li> <li>• But also show her some grace because she's just gone through something big</li> </ul>

Figure 8. Bereaved Employee Persona

Journey Steps	Pre-Loss	The Loss Event	The Bereavement Period	The Return to Work
<b>Think</b>	If not underlying reasons to anticipate loss: mentally running through the tasks I need to accomplish. I hope my kid doesn't catch Covid.	What just happened? This can't be true. I'm devastated. I have to look after Dad.	I should tell Mom about this — oh, wait... This grief is overwhelming! I wonder who will come to the service...	The world seems to be carrying on as if nothing has changed. I can't believe I missed 2 days in the office and all this work piled up. I wish people understood that I'm not going to be the same smiley person I was before
<b>Feel</b>	<b>Regular:</b> Feeling good about my place. A little stressed about delivering a project on time. A little overwhelmed trying to parent and work at home at the same time. <b>Anticipating:</b> Guilty for spending time at work, worried about what the future holds, stressed about how work will react when they know what's going on.	Stressed and worried about asking for time off work. In shock that Mom is gone. Surreal that I'll never talk to or see her again.	Saddened by the extreme change. A sense of things being "off" somehow. Emotional thinking about a future without Mom.	Uncomfortable about coming back to work and colleagues wanting to ask "how are you doing?" Distracted by the major life change that just happened.
<b>Do</b>	<b>Regular:</b> Carrying out work and parenting duties, looking after the home, cooking and relaxing. <b>Anticipating:</b> Caregiving, picking up medication, spending time at the hospital, keeping up good hand washing hygiene.	Inform others about the passing, send flowers, share stories of the deceased and find comfort in others.	Plan and attend funeral and wake, attend to administrative issues. Make arrangements to meet with lawyer and accountant.	Check in with manager and HR. Catch up on what was missed while away. Try to concentrate on tasks at hand.
<b>Outward Expression</b>	 	 	 	 

Figure 10. Bereaved Employee Journey Map

As with most wicked problems, there is no single silver bullet that can fix societal attitudes to grief and bereavement that doesn't involve a complete paradigm shift. This may have been why I found myself struggling — innovation and disruption have become such buzzwords in the business world that it is easy to think that small ideas, devoid of technological features could even be meaningful or effective. But change is incremental, and innovation does not have to be complex to be effective.<sup>12</sup>

In this spirit, I opted to look for simple and practical measures that could be easily implemented by any organization and, taken collectively, would hopefully address and improve some of the key concerns around this topic.

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<sup>12</sup> See: Any fitted sheet with labels identifying the long and short sides. Making the bed doesn't have to be hard!

# Prototype: The CARE Model

Throughout my research process I looked for the emergence of common themes and insights to help inform my solution. I developed the CARE Model as a way for organizations to take small, manageable steps to destigmatize and demystify the grief and bereavement process, while better supporting bereaved employees and the organization at large. The CARE Model is a holistic approach made up of four strategies that have a low barrier to implementation but go a long way to improving the employee experience.

## Community

There is an inherent isolation to modern loss that has only been heightened during the pandemic. Experiencing a loss in the workplace can be especially lonely as the bereaved employee typically carries their grief alone, working among people who are not dealing with the emotional disruption they are facing. The nature of the modern workplace — requiring employees to commute to a common office space pre-pandemic — means that the bereaved person's colleagues would likely not have personally know or interacted with the deceased, further isolating the employee as they would have no one to share their grief or commiserate with during the workday.

As the world hopes for a return to "normalcy" some workplaces will push for employees to return to the office, while others will carry on with remote working environments. What will this mean for office workers who experience a loss while working remotely? What if they live alone? Without the office as a physical refuge to escape to, without other people to connect with, how will that change how they carry their grief? Community is about fostering a safe, open environment in the workplace that lets employees feel like events in their personal lives will not be held against them. Loss does not occur in a vacuum, nor should one be expected to heal in one.

## How to Implement

Office workplaces are their own little communities, commonly making time and space in the workplace to come together for colleagues celebrating weddings, new babies, and birthdays, but we lack rituals and knowledge about what to do when a colleague experiences loss. What do we say? Do we acknowledge it at all?

Workplaces can create their own rituals around loss or crises. This can be as simple as taking the time to mark a moment of silence during a staff meeting to collectively acknowledge that all team members are humans first, and they may be dealing with personal struggles. In taking a moment for reflection and centering, an organization can cultivate community and caring in seamless fashion. One such way of doing this would be to implement the practice of Community Acknowledgement as a way to let employees know that they are seen and supported by their workplace community. (For an example see Appendix D, Community Acknowledgement)

## Adapt

Organizational policies and procedures tend to follow base assumptions that most people react to situations in the same way or have the same basic needs. However, grief manifests differently for everyone — one person might need extra time away from the office, while another may want zero accommodation and to just get back to their routine with no one asking them any follow up questions. There may be a difference in the attitude and behaviour of the employee; their personal priorities and responsibilities might have changed in light of the death, so perhaps they no longer have the capacity to take on certain



tasks or responsibilities in the workplace — it's important to recognize that the changes change who we are. Being flexible with policy and taking the lead from employees is among the best things an organization can do to support its bereaved employees.

### **How to Implement**

There are a myriad of ways that workplaces can offer flexibility and accommodation to the bereaved. Derived from participant responses and my own experience, below are just a few ideas:

- If meetings are too draining or overwhelming, consider allowing the bereaved to provide virtual status updates on their projects or tasks
- The bereaved may be feeling well enough to complete their tasks, but having difficulty physically making themselves professionally presentable; consider letting them keep their camera off during virtual meetings
- Weeks or months after the loss, the bereaved may need to take a day to deal with an estate matter, or perhaps they just need a mental health day to embrace their grief; consider allowing them to use a sick day to cover this time, or simply trust that they will get their work done regardless of whether they take a day off.

Perhaps the bereaved are having difficulty with the pre-loss work schedule they had been used to; consider flexible hours — this could take the form of a day off every-other Friday, a late morning start to the day, or agreeing not to book any meetings over the 3-5pm time slot. The key here is to be open to getting things done in a different way than usual, and trusting that it will work.

### **Relate**

Relating is about acknowledgement and empathy for the person going through a loss. It is about recognizing the individual personal challenges that can come from bereavement (such as prolonged or complicated grief, financial strain, changes in personal identity, familial pressures, and increased responsibilities), and understanding that the bereaved may not be ready or able to function in the office as they had prior to their loss. Relating is the most basic way to support a bereaved employee — by letting them know they are seen and heard and extending grace for their situation.

Opening the lines of communication for this kind of conversation early on benefits both the employee and the organization. In my own experience, when I started a new job two and a half years after my mother died, I shared my situation with my manager in an early conversation and how I expected it might impact me in the workplace, in my performance, or in my need to deal with some administrative aspects of her estate (yes, still). Even if it didn't impact me much in the day to day, knowing my manager had insight into the fact that I was dealing with some significant personal challenges made me feel understood and trusting that the organization would support me.

### **How to Implement**

Acknowledge the employee's loss in a direct and empathetic manner and assure them they will be supported by the workplace. Grieving people don't have the energy to come up with innovative solutions they have no control over, so provide specific examples of what that support can look like. Set up a time to discuss the employee's needs and how they might be accommodated by the organization. Stressful personal situations can cause anxiety because they take us out of our expected routines. Creating some structure and familiarity to a topic that can bring up a lot of discomfort for people helps alleviate uncertainty in a stressful situation.

# Study Limitations

## Educate

Research shows that employees require accommodations and management support in order to successfully fulfil their roles upon return to the office, though the majority of managers lack sufficient training in order to do so (Charles-Edwards, 2009). To ensure that employees — especially management — are prepared for instances when colleagues experience a loss, it is recommended that organizations look for ways to incorporate training about grief and bereavement. Ignorant remarks and insensitive treatment toward bereaved employees can be avoided through education about the signs of grief, how it can impact employee behaviour, how to identify signs of distress, and guidance on what to say to an employee when they experience a loss (beyond “my condolences”).

## How to Implement

Opportunities for education abound in the office environment: staff meetings, lunch and learns, professional development, operational reviews, monthly newsletters, all-hands meetings — whatever the nomenclature, chances are existing structures built into an organization’s standard operations can be leveraged to integrate conversations around grief, loss, and bereavement.

## Research Samples

For this project I spoke to a relatively small sample of people (11 in total) many of whom were either direct connections or not too far removed from my personal network. For a truly representative cross section of office workers, an expanded recruitment campaign that targeted more diversity of voices would have been helpful and no doubt enriched the insights of this work. Though I was pleased to achieve a balanced gender ratio, this work would have been enriched by the perspectives brought from a more diverse cross section of people who could speak to their experiences in corporate office settings and how they might be impacted by their varying degrees of privilege and different lived experience, particularly from a BIPOC point of view.

## Methodology

This research was initially meant to culminate in a co-design session with participants from my three different subject groups that would see us collectively ideate possible interventions for the workplace. Ultimately due to time constraints (and a series of unfortunate events) I was unable to execute the co-design session. Based on my research I made my best attempts at coming up with a proposal that took into account the priorities and perspectives of my subject groups, but I am keenly aware that I am missing valuable insights from my final solution as a result of this non-event. Future researchers should take care to prioritize this step as it would undoubtedly yield even better results.

## Personal Bias

My own experience, background, and personal biases mean that this study comes from a western-centric place that inherently centres Christian grief rituals and the white, corporate experience in Canada.

## Considerations for Future Research

There were so many things I wanted to cover in this study, but at a certain point I had to concede that this is an expansive topic with so many possible areas of exploration that I simply would not be able to include all aspects of interest or relevance into this project.

This project focused specifically on bereavement grief, but over the last two years the pandemic has created loss of some kind for everyone in the world. It would be particularly interesting to see the effects of disenfranchised grief in the office workplace, especially around how to make the case to an organization to offer support for employees experiencing more ambiguous forms of loss.

I chose to focus on the office workplace for this study, partly because of my familiarity with such environments, partly because of the unique shifts that employees in these roles faced during the pandemic, and partly because of the traditional formality of those spaces transitioning to personal environments struck me as a particularly interesting juxtaposition to examine. However, full time employees in these spaces are generally covered by employment standards and entitled to the provincial minimum job-protected leave for bereavement, which is not always the case for part time employees, and workers in other sectors that are gig-based, freelance, and all those who have been more precariously employed during the pandemic. There is much to uncover around bereavement, grief, and other realms of employment — particularly front line workers and health care workers who witnessed so much trauma during the pandemic and were at much higher risk of contracting — and passing on — Covid-19.

Office workplaces are inherently gendered spaces and further examination into this realm of study would greatly benefit this research. Closer examination of how gender affects grief in the workplace, and investigating the imbalances in how the pandemic impacted women in the workplace would offer rich, additional insights.

Research around mass grief events like 9/11 that investigates what it was like for employees who worked in the Twin Towers and surrounding office buildings to return to work after the tragedy in 2001 offers much food for thought for this topic. Considering these strategies in light of employees returning to work after the Covid pandemic could inform organizations of what elements they should be aware of in coordinating the return, and what they should look out for as potentially dangerous aspects for their employees.

This research came from a western lens, but there's a whole wide world out there and we did not all experience the pandemic in the same way. Comparing how different countries handled the pandemic and the grief that it brought would enrich this research greatly. Cultural rituals and understandings around death feed into workplace culture and it would be fascinating to hear how offices in other countries deal with issues that North American culture generally pushes off to the side.

# Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the most serious health crises of our time that will have untold social, economic, and political ramifications for years to come. As the world was forced to shut down and stop all semblance of normalcy and routine, the definitive feature of the pandemic soon emerged to be loss. Whether it was the death of a loved one, or the isolation that eradicated reliable social interactions, or shuttering of a business taking away one's livelihood, the losses faced showed us that the things we thought we knew and could rely on were more fragile than we thought. However, even though the world seemed to become more volatile and chaotic, it is also in these moments of great disruption that opportunities for intentional change can arise.

It was with this context that this research study sought to use the pandemic as a lens to investigate how to reimagine the experience of grief and bereavement for employees in the office workplace.

Of all the impacts the pandemic had on our lives, the way it changed our relationship with work was one of the most disruptive. Where, when and how people worked changed overnight, with corporate office workplaces suddenly transitioning employees to remote work in an effort to stop the spread of the virus. This blurring of boundaries between the personal and professional was unprecedented, and not without its challenges (social isolation, increased responsibilities, physical ailments etc.), yet workers persevered and continued to produce from their homes for over two years during a deadly pandemic.

In light of this new arrangement, this research project looked closely at the office workplace, how organizations typically handle grief and bereavement among their employees, and how they could learn from the lessons of the pandemic about the importance of supporting employees more fulsomely during times of great distress. This project used secondary research to establish a strong foundational understanding of how current societal attitudes towards the office workplace and death and grief to be, where the core issues around bereavement in the workplace stem from, and where it might be possible to intervene for

improvement. These findings were further developed using tools like systems archetypes and Causal Layered Analysis enabled a deeper, more systemic understanding of how these two forces — work and grief — interact with and influence each other.

Utilizing first person interviews with bereaved employees, managers, and HR professionals, I was able to gather first hand insights as to what employees need, what constraints organizations are under, and how the pandemic impacted them all. I sorted my findings by conducting an affinity mapping exercise to spot patterns and common themes. I then compiled my information to generate user personas, empathy maps, and user journeys to have a clear conception of each group's perspective. From my conversations and subsequent analysis I pulled out five key insights:

### **That quality bereavement support requires more than just time off;**

Loss-informed leaders understand the importance of offering fulsome support for bereaved employees;

- Successful reintegration into the workplace requires trust, understanding, and flexibility;
- Managers and staff need training about the nature of grief;
- Grief and bereavement requires a human-centered approach.

In an attempt to use these insights in a practical and easily implementable way, I proposed the CARE Model; a four pronged approach to support bereaved and grieving employees by embracing the concepts of Community, Adaptation, Relating, and Education. Community focuses on battling the isolation that can ensnare bereaved employees when they undergo a significant loss; community is about supporting employees so they know they do not have to shoulder their struggles alone. Adaptation is about providing flexibility for employees and accommodating the changes they may need in order to perform their job and deal with their grief. Relating is about open communication and providing space for employees to share what they are going through. Finally, Education is about training management and staff about grief, how it can affect people in the long and short term, and how to recognize the signs if someone needs help.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought the reality of death and grief closer to people all around the world, presenting an important opportunity for social literacy about death and grief and, to a wider extent, about trauma and mental health. Organizations that embrace the opportunity to learn from the experiences of the past two years and proactively look for ways to support their bereaved and grieving employees will set themselves up to foster a more productive and resilient workforce for the future.

# Postscript

No one is ever ready for death, but I especially wasn't ready when my mom died. Newly pregnant with my first child, I was already hormonal and emotional about everything, I couldn't imagine how I was going to carry on without her. It's cliché, but my mother was my best friend. She had been so excited when I told her the news about my little one! And now with her gone, my world was spinning off its axis. Who would I turn to for help or advice? How could I know how to be a mom without my mom? The loss was so devastating that everything else took a backseat.

Truthfully, I don't remember those first few days very well. My dad was also a wreck, but thankfully my sister was stepping in to take charge of all the funeral arrangements and logistics. She always was the responsible one. In fact, it was my sister who reminded me to get in touch with work! It was so strange, when mom died it was like reality took a backseat — all there was were my memories and my tears. But of course I had to tell work what happened, so thank goodness for my sister.

I sent my boss an email — no pleasantries, just to the point.

"Hi Rob, my mom died yesterday. I won't be coming into the office. Hope that's ok!"

It feels absurd, looking back on it. Why did I ask if that was ok? My mom had just died! Of course I wasn't going to be coming into the office!

Luckily Rob didn't seem bothered by my casual but abrupt tone. He was very understanding, assuring me that of course it was ok for me to take time off. "Take all the time you need," he said, "don't worry about anything on this end. The most important thing is for you to be with your family right now. I will tell the team you'll be taking some time — let me know if you'd prefer I keep the reason vague. I will also reach out to HR and to my manager, just so they are aware of what's going on. Is there anyone else you'd like to know?"

I thought it was so nice of him to check about sharing the news — he knows that I can be a bit private about

my personal life at work. But in this case, I wanted people to know — at least my direct team, anyway. Once the news was out, a few of them wanted to reach out with messages and find out the funeral details. Thankfully Rob cut them off at the pass and suggested that everyone who wanted to reach out write me a handwritten card instead and leave it at my desk for when I got back. It actually worked out so well because I didn't get overwhelmed with calls or texts from colleagues during one of the most stressful and upsetting periods of my life, and when I did come back into the office there were all these wonderful notes there for me to read and feel supported.

Speaking of which, I came back to the office after two full weeks off, and it turned out that wasn't quite enough time for me. The first day back I just couldn't handle it — I was pretty good for the morning but something about the afternoon just hit me like a ton of bricks. I used to call my mom on my lunch break while I walked around the neighbourhood, so I guess that might have had something to do with it, but I never saw that coming. I came back to my desk after lunch just a total sobbing mess and Rob pulled me aside immediately to see what was going on (even though it was probably already pretty clear to him.) But instead of chastising me or telling me I'd already run through all my bereavement leave (which, at this company, is very generous at ten days!), he told me to go home, take the next day off and then suggested we schedule a meeting for the day after that to chat about what I needed.

How incredible is that?

We scheduled a virtual meeting and I told Rob about my meltdown the other day and that I was having trouble being back in the space. He said he understood that I was grieving and that it could do all sorts of things to people! Then he laid out a number of different options about how we could successfully reintegrate me back into the office. He offered a shortened work week, or that for a few weeks I could put in just mornings or afternoons — likely mornings, since afternoons seemed to be a tricky time for me, or doing a hybrid arrangement where I work virtually on the days that I'm finding really tough. He even offered

to put me on a different project, but I don't think I'll take him up on that because despite everything that's going on, I do kind of like the distraction of this one particular project. It's the last one I started before my mom passed away, and I feel like I want to finish it in her honour.

## 6 Months Later

I can't believe it's been half a year since my mom died. The longest and shortest six months of my life, somehow! I am so grateful to my workplace for all the ongoing support they've shown me during this time. The flexibility that's been offered to me has been more than I could have hoped for.

After my first-day-back meltdown Rob and I agreed that I should ease myself back into work. So I came into the office for just the morning for two days and then worked from home for the rest of the week. The next week I planned on doing the same thing but I ended up staying for the afternoon both days. It actually felt pretty good to be out of the house and focused on something else, but I was grateful for the gradual return — those first few weeks were exhausting. It took me about 4 weeks to get back to being full time and in person at the office, but I still take the occasional day or two to work from home. The pain of losing my mother will always be with me and I will always notice her absence in my life, but I also need to keep on living mine.

Having that extra leeway to mourn my mother during this process of becoming a mother has been so meaningful and special to me. I'll never forget how thoughtful and generous my manager and my colleagues were. Whether I stay here for the next 10 years or I change jobs, I will carry their kindness forward with me wherever I go, for the rest of my life.



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## Appendix

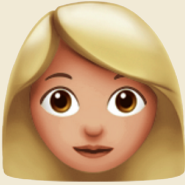
# Appendix A: Survey Results

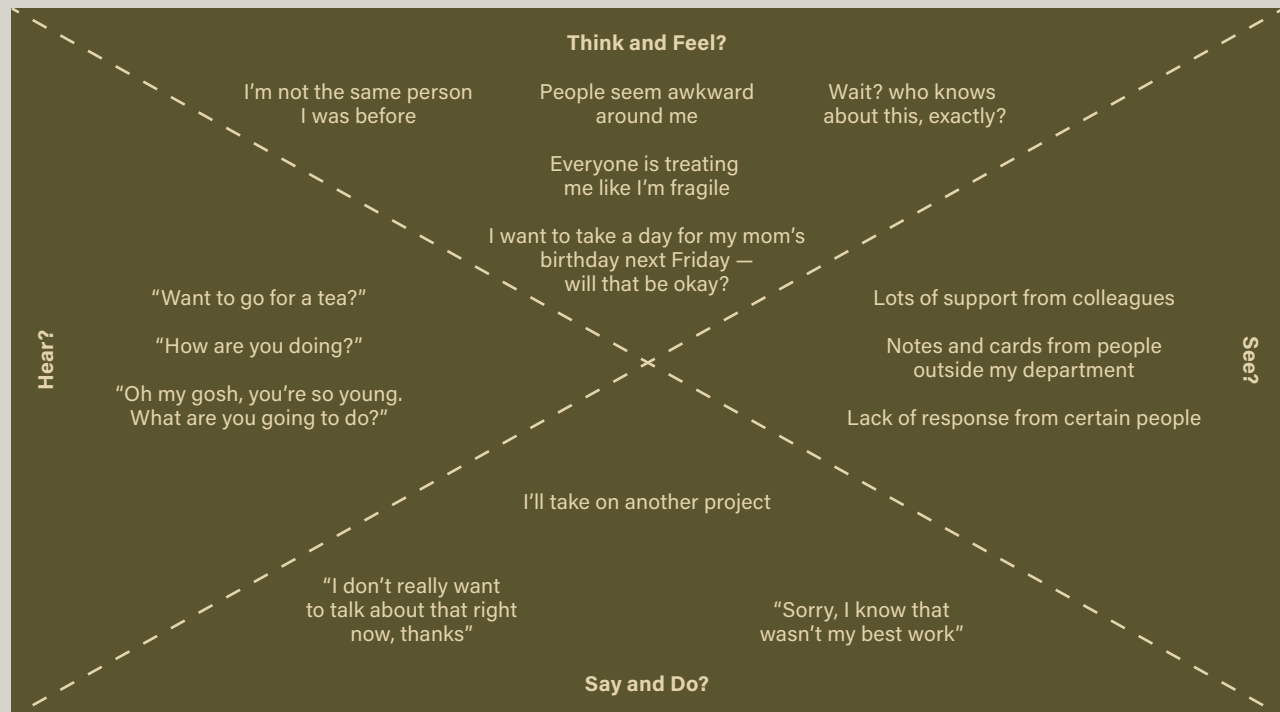
Out of 25 completed surveys, 19 participants identified as female, and the remaining 6 identified as male. 18 participants identified as having experienced the death of a loved one while employed in an office environment, and 15 participants identified as being in a management or leadership position, implying a crossover in perspectives and a sign of likely motivation for wishing to participate in such a project in any capacity.

Out of 25 respondents, 20 indicated they had experienced a loss while in the workplace, with 11 respondents indicating they lost a parent, 6 a grandparents, 4 an aunt or uncle, and one each a cousin, a friend, a roommate and 2 citing "other". The losses took place over a span of 16 years from 2005 to 2021.

The majority of respondents (13) who indicated experiencing a loss cited the experience with their workplace as mostly positive, with 3 saying it was mostly negative, and 4 saying it was somewhere in between.

# Appendix B: Personas and Empathy Maps


<p><b>Bereaved Employee</b></p>  <p><b>Julia Katz</b> Employee, Operations</p>	<p><b>Demographics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 25 years old</li> <li>• Lives with a roommate</li> <li>• 3 years as Operations Coordinator</li> </ul> <p><b>Functions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Running reports</li> <li>• Making production quotes</li> <li>• Creating client contracts</li> </ul>	<p><b>Work Philosophy</b></p> <p>Julia has seen first hand that life is short. If she has to work, she wants to spend her time doing something she loves or at least feels excited about.</p>
<p><b>About</b></p> <p>Julia had been working at her company for 3 years when her mother suddenly passed away. She had 3 days of paid leave and took 2 more days of vacation so she could be with her family.</p> <p>It took a few months for Julia to get back to the groove of working again, but she has found a new normal. She did not intend to stay at this job this long, but needed some stability after her world was shaken up.</p>	<p><b>Goals and Motivations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To find a job she feels passionate about</li> <li>• To earn enough money to for her own apartment</li> <li>• To make her mom proud</li> <li>• To find time to volunteer</li> <li>• To spend more time with her dad</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pains and Frustrations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating with manager and co-workers about her loss</li> <li>• Some days are really tough with grief, being mindful of triggers and reminders</li> <li>• People treating her like she is fragile and breakable — just treat her like normal</li> <li>• But also show her some grace because she's just gone through something big</li> </ul>

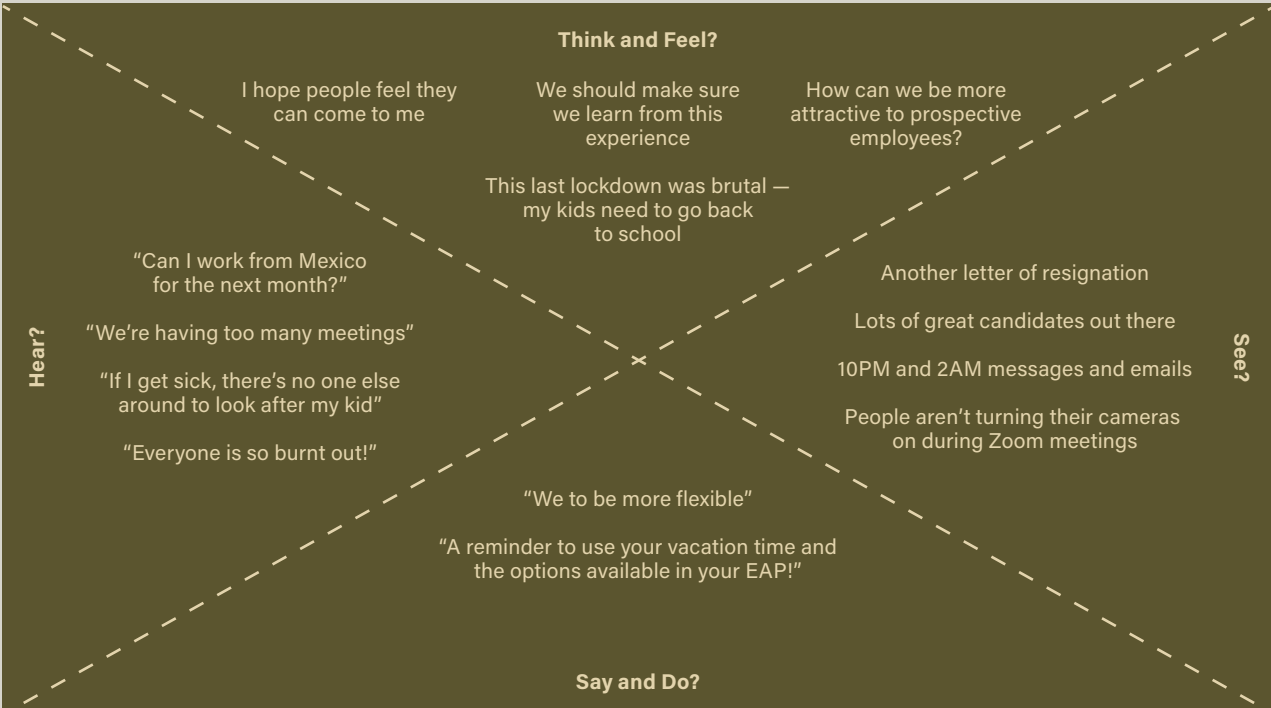


## Appendix B: Personas and Empathy Maps cont.

<p><b>Manager</b></p>  <p><b>Marco Diaz</b> Manager, Strategy Team</p>	<p><b>Demographics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>35 years old</li> <li>Husband and 2 cats at home</li> <li>8 years in Management Role</li> </ul> <p><b>Functions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project management</li> <li>Developing strategic plans</li> <li>Handing escalation of client issues</li> <li>Training new employees</li> </ul>	<p><b>Work Philosophy</b></p> <p>Marco has always been a high achiever at work and recognizes much of his success was achieved with support from previous managers. He strives to mentor his team so he can be there in the same way for them.</p> <p>It is important to Marco that his team knows that he cares about them and wants to see them succeed. This is his guiding principle everyday.</p>
<p><b>About</b></p> <p>Marco is driven, smart and approachable. His quiet presence makes his reports trust and look up to him. Sometimes he feels frustrated because he doesn't necessarily feel the same support from his own superiors that he tries to give to his team.</p> <p>In his personal life, Marco is a long distance runner who loves to travel to beach destinations with his husband.</p>	<p><b>Goals and Motivations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To successfully achieve all KPIs each quarter</li> <li>To help his team achieve their goals</li> <li>To complete a marathon in the top 10%</li> <li>To earn his yearly bonus</li> <li>To grow his client list</li> <li>To expand his own skillset and continue climbing the ladder</li> <li>To eventually be in a VP role</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pains and Frustrations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wishes he had more autonomy to provide support to his direct reports when going through a bad time</li> <li>Sometimes it feels like "company policy" is used as an excuse to do the bare minimum for employees</li> <li>His competency sometimes feels like an excuse for his manager not to nurture him or show up for him like he needs them to</li> </ul>



<p><b>Manager</b></p>  <p><b>Margaret Lam</b> HR Director, Tech Sector</p>	<p><b>Demographics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 40 years old</li> <li>• Husband, 2 kids and a dog</li> <li>• 16 years in HR</li> </ul> <p><b>Functions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiring and recruitment</li> <li>• Onboarding new employees</li> <li>• Administration: including benefits, policy review and creation</li> <li>• Employee satisfaction</li> </ul>	<p><b>Work Philosophy</b></p> <p>Margaret sees her role as being there as a support for the employees at her company be their best.</p> <p>There do need to be certain checks and balances in place for the company to operate, but Margaret does her best to take an empathy-first approach and really does try to advocate for employees. Everyone has a life outside of work — and they shouldn't be punished for that.</p>
<p><b>About</b></p> <p>Margaret is friendly, organized and caring. She loves working with people and takes great satisfaction in helping people with all manner of issues.</p> <p>Margaret has a lot on her plate at home with 2 active kids (10 and 12). She sometimes brings her dog to work, which she hopes makes her seem more approachable!</p>	<p><b>Goals and Motivations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To attract and hire the best talent</li> <li>• To support all employees to be their best</li> <li>• To champion equitable practices and ensure nobody is being mistreated</li> <li>• To maintain a safe and enjoyable company culture</li> <li>• To make Rainbow Garden a great place where people love to work!</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pains and Frustrations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting people to open up and trust me as HR — people seem suspicious of me sometimes</li> <li>• Having to hear all the distressing personal situations people are dealing with and having to make tough decisions</li> <li>• It can be a challenge to make sure I'm protecting the organization and also doing right by our employees</li> </ul>



# Appendix C: Journey Maps

## Bereaved Employee

Journey Steps	Pre-Loss	The Loss Event	The Bereavement Period	The Return to Work
Think	If not underlying reasons to anticipate loss: metnally running through the tasks I need to accomplish. I hope my kid doesn't catch Covid.	What just happened? This can't be true. I'm devastated. I have to look after Dad.	I should tell Mom about this – oh, wait... This grief is overwhelming! I wonder who will come to the service...	The world seems to be carrying on as if nothing has changed. I can't believe I missed 2 days in the office and all this work piled up. I wish people understood that I'm not going to be the same smiley person I was before
Feel	<b>Regular:</b> Feeling good about my place. A little stressed about delivering a project on time. A little overwhelmed trying to parent and work at home at the same time. <b>Anticipating:</b> Guilty for spending time at work, worried about what the future holds, stressed about how work will react when they know what's going on.	Stressed and worried about asking for time off work. In shock that Mom is gone. Surreal that I'll never talk to or see her again.	Saddened by the extreme change. A sense of things being "off" somehow. Emotional thinking about a future without Mom.	Uncomfortable about coming back to work and colleagues wanting to ask "how are you doing?" Distracted by the major life change that just happened.
Do	<b>Regular:</b> Carrying out work and parenting duties, looking after the home, cooking and relaxing. <b>Anticipating:</b> Caregiving, picking up medication, spending time at the hospital, keeping up good hand washing hygiene.	Inform others about the passing, send flowers, share stories of the deceased and find comfort in others.	Plan and attend funeral and wake, attend to administrative issues. Make arrangements to meet with lawyer and accountant.	Check in with manager and HR. Catch up on what was missed while away. Try to concentrate on tasks at hand.
Outward Expression	 	 	 	 



Manager

Journey Steps	Pre-Loss	The Loss Event	The Bereavement Period	The Return to Work
<b>Think</b>	How will we distribute the tasks among the team for upcoming projects?  We're heading into a busy period!	Oh wow, I can't even imagine what this person is going through.  I hope I didn't say the wrong thing or a dumb cliché.  I'm going to have to reassess the project plans.	Everyone really stepped up to the plate to help out.  Things seems to be going ok even with the last-minute pivots.	Last week was a lot, it's nice to be returning back to normal capacity.
<b>Feel</b>	Happy with how my team is performing against KPIs  Slightly stressed about the pipeline of projects coming up.	Shocked that this happened to team member.  Feeling out of my depth in knowing what to do or say in this moment.	Ready for the team member to return so we can get back to normal.  Pleased to see that everything is running smoothly.	Concerned about team member and if they needed more time off.
<b>Do</b>	Normal work tasks, planning the next vacation, feeding the cats, cooking and cleaning at home.	Inform others about the passing, send flowers from the team.  Connect with HR to make sure I've done everything correctly.  Re-evaluate work assignments for the next few weeks.	Pitch in where the team needs help.  Talk to team about what we should do to show support for team member when they return.	Schedule check-in coffee with team member to see how they're doing.  Touch base with HR to see what has happened with other employees in the past with similar situations.
<b>Outward Expression</b>		 	 	

## Appendix C: Journey Maps cont.

### Human Resources

Journey Steps	Pre-Loss	The Loss Event	The Bereavement Period	The Return to Work
Think	I need to start putting together job postings for some of our new positions.	Oh dear, that's such sad news! Hmm... 3 days doesn't seem like quite enough time for a loss like this.	Sounds like the employee's manager has checked in a few times.	They must be a bit nervous about coming back.
Feel	Slight worries about rate of burnout from employees.  Hopeful people are doing ok and feel they can reach out to me.	Concerned about bereaved employee.  Must maintain professional nature even though this is a sad personal event.	Curious if this is going to become a bigger issue.	Cautiously optimistic that the employee will be able to readjust back to the office without too much trouble.  Ready to look at other options if that is not the case.
Do	Review upcoming summer vacation schedule.  Remind people about upcoming inclusivity seminar.	Check in with manager to make sure they understand the administrative procedures for bereavement leave.  Check in with employee to offer condolences and let them know about bereavement leave policy.	Get status update from manager about the plan for bereaved employee's return to work.	Schedule a check-in meeting with bereaved employee to see how they are and if they need any accommodations.  Remind employee about EAP and other benefits and supports available.
Outward Expression				

## Appendix D: Community Acknowledgement Script Prototype

"Before we get started with our meeting today, we want to pause and acknowledge that everyone on this team is a human being with their own joys, struggles, priorities and pleasures. Some of us may be dealing with some difficult issues right now that we may have shared with the team or are keeping private for now. Either way, let's collectively take a moment to honour each other's humanity and silently but warmly send support to those among us who may really need it right now."