

**Emotional Intelligence**

# Make Space for Grief After a Year of Loss

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Illustration by Michal Bednarski

**Summary.** This pandemic year, grief is everywhere but we have nowhere to mourn, except online. There have been lives lost, and also jobs and the closeness of relationships in daily life. Those combined losses can put us at risk, and they require managing. First we need to... [more](#)

For nearly 20 years, after his first heart attack, I feared losing my dad from a distance, without being able to comfort him or to say to goodbye. And then one day I did.

He died suddenly on a September morning. I flew back to my childhood home that afternoon. He was still there yet gone — his body resting, as they say, or rather, spent. A small crowd of familiar faces hovered as I walked in and hugged him, reaching for what I will always miss most. He was a great hugger. I was too late.

I fell into a pattern in the week that followed. The days were frantic. There were rituals, visits, arrangements to be made, hours of intense sociality and sorrow. The nights were still. When the commotion ceased, I sat at my dad's desk, opened my laptop, and caught up with work. I found it soothing, as I found getting back to the office soon after. Duties, deadlines, and colleagues simultaneously gave me a break and made me feel my dad's presence. Work was the place where I had seen him most alive, after all. The place where I could always find him.

I return to those memories often in these days that are so full of loss — of loved ones, of work, of proximity, of a way of life. This year, grief is everywhere, and though it's been written about and discussed, it's still going to be felt more acutely at year's end. Hearing a holiday song, someone told me the other day, brought them to tears. I'm not surprised. "All I want for Christmas is you" takes on a different meaning when you have suffered a loss.

Yes, this year grief is everywhere, but we have nowhere to mourn, except online. With social and working lives going virtual many have lost access to familiar customs, gatherings, and routines that used to

comfort the bereft. Those combined losses can put us at risk, and they require managing. A different kind of managing than that we have long been accustomed to.

## **Complicated Grief**

Grief is the personal experience of loss. Mourning is the process through which, with help from others, we learn to face loss, muddle through it, and slowly return to life. Last year, after reading her poignant book *Grief Works*, I interviewed British psychotherapist Julia Samuel for a piece I wrote with Oxford professor Sally Maitlis about mourning in the office. Samuel had impressed upon me “how physical the experience of loss really is.” Grieving is something we do with our bodies and with each other. It takes stamina and space.

She had also stressed that, for many people, as was true for me, working — and the workplace — can be one of those spaces that help with mourning. Work can offer a sense of stability and predictability, the office some comfort and respite. Routine is soothing. Caring coworkers, at times, can be as valuable and less demanding than family. We hug colleagues who have lost a loved one; our team sits together when facing the loss of one of its own; or we just work quietly next to others and get a reprieve from grieving.

So what happens now that we are besieged by grief while we work and live at a distance for many, many months? “A lot of grief will remain frozen,” Samuel told me recently, “because many people won’t have enough support, enough ritual, to grieve.” Those are circumstances in which the normal and healthy experience of grieving can take a debilitating turn known as “complicated grief.” The term refers to the persistence of acute pain, apathy, and disorientation long after a loss. Reports of exhaustion, angst, and numbness are now beginning to emerge in the workplace. Those experiences are often understood as symptoms of burnout after a

burst of panicked productivity earlier in a nine-month-old crisis. But in a year of many losses and much distance, those experiences might well be expressions of a collective bout of complicated grief.

Even those of us who embrace virtual work, I suspect, are struggling with virtual mourning. Recently, for example, I learned that LinkedIn data revealed a change of mores. In 2020, people have been discussing being bereft with their networks in far greater numbers. Those virtual exchanges might be touching, so to speak, but they don't quite work like actual touch, according to Bill Cornell, an American psychotherapist and author who specializes on the embodied nature of relationships and losses. Cornell advocates using the word *remote* rather than *virtual* work to remind ourselves that working this way involves a loss too, that of physical proximity.

Once we acknowledge our remoteness, we can try to understand its impact, Cornell argues. The fatigue that we feel after a video conference, for example, might stem from the fact that each Zoom meeting subtly reminds us that even if our colleagues are very much alive, there are ways that we have lost each other, too. In the same spirit, Samuel reminded me that losing the camaraderie and routines of office life does not end our relationships with work and coworkers. But finding new ways to muster presence, patience, and support requires making room for loss.

## **How to Make Room For Loss**

Many losses cannot be undone, but spaces for mourning those losses can be rebuilt at work. And managers are best positioned to do that. Those who can hold people through loss, whether it involves death or work or proximity, will help them stay healthy, loyal, and productive.

This is how to go about it.

First, acknowledge that people will be anxious, vulnerable, and disoriented — and so are you. Don't just pretend that things are normal: Share your experience, invite people to share theirs, and make *that* behavior normal. Even just sharing what you miss most of your old working days at the office, and how you are struggling to learn how to deal with it, might be liberating.

Second, right after sympathy, offer truth. Here is the data. Here is what we are dealing with right now. Take questions. It will soothe people's anxiety to be heard, even if you don't have answers to their queries. If it is hard to make long-term predictions, better not make any. Sharing your company monthly revenues and your plans to deal with a steep drop, for example, will be more honest and useful than giving people a pep talk about how bright the next quarter will be.

Third, simplify the work. Make it more manageable. When we are anxious and remote, it helps to focus on clear and concrete goals, to know what is expected and what is enough. Such clarity is ever more important as people return to the office, but not to old normality. Knowing where, when, and how long people are expected to work, for example, is grounding. Grief hijacks the imagination, filling it with catastrophic projections. Just like mourners can find some comfort focusing on their breath, a meal, or regular exercise, there is value in manageable work. Grief erases our sense of agency, and work can help restore it. "Having a task that you can complete when you feel powerless is very helpful," Samuel advises.

All of these actions help to ground your colleagues in reality and orient them to the present. That is the best work can offer: Reminding us that we are here for now. We often tell those who manage and lead to portray confidence, spark the imagination, and

focus on the future. That future orientation is “all well and good,” Cornell cautions, “but it’s difficult when you are sitting with people who have no idea what next week will be like, let alone the future.”

I do not mean to say, with all this, that we need to just get on with an ill-defined “new normal.” That would be like telling those who have lost a loved one that they “will get over it.” We never do. But staying in the present, focusing on the reality of uncertainty and remoteness, can keep us going and connected as we learn to live with loss and maybe, slowly, grow through it.

For managers to make room for loss, however, they must brave a loss of their own: of principles and prescriptions that have long oriented them. By turning from the future to the present, from a sparked imagination to a held heart, from confidence to care, a manager can help us regain our footing and, slowly, some hope. Letting those old prescriptions go, I have written before, might help us humanize management. Likewise, these months in which we have lost each other might end up humanizing work. If it reminds us that we need space to share and soothe our grief, remoteness might even bring us closer. That might be a hopeful ending for a year of loss.

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