



Well@Work Podcast Episode 3: Grief and Loss

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is being brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA to the Department of Behavioral Health. On this episode of the podcast, Dr. Tracy Clemens discusses how grief and loss can impact health care workers and give some tips for coping with this grief and loss. And now, Dr. Tracy Clemens. Hello, I am Dr. Tracy Clemens, a clinician and training specialist for the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. I'm a psychologist and have worked in the field of mental health for 20 years, including several years where I provided palliative and end-of-life care counseling with children and adults and their families. Welcome to this episode of the Well@Work podcast, where we will be talking about healthcare professional experiences of grief and loss related to COVID-19.

Experiencing patient deaths under normal circumstances can result in stress, anxiety, and grief for healthcare workers. However, providers are experiencing much greater than normal patient loss because of the COVID-19 crisis. And the circumstances surrounding these deaths are unusual. Patients are spending their last days alone, causing healthcare professionals to become the de facto support system. This makes an already stressful work environment more challenging, especially if there are limited resources to meet needs and protect yourself. It is important to recognize the range of challenges faced by healthcare providers right now. From providing care to critically ill patients, to dealing with losses of routines and ever-changing end-of-life care conditions. As healthcare workers you may be isolating from your friends and family for fear of spreading infection.

This may be the right thing to do, but this lack of emotional and social support and connection can interfere with your normal healthy coping strategies. Under normal circumstances, health care workers have more time to grieve and manage stress following the death of a patient. With increased deaths, the psychological impact of grief and the risk of burnout increases. The first step to managing grief is recognizing the symptoms. There is no one-size-fits-all and symptoms of grief may vary from person to person. Healthcare workers may experience a variety of reactions due to unaddressed or cumulative grief. For example, some may have problems sleeping, experience increased fatigue, problems focusing, and feel more isolated. Others may have increased anger, irritability, sadness, a loss of self-worth, helplessness, hopelessness, or feel emotionally numb. Sometimes, workers can experience increased anxiety, depression, guilt, or shame and have changes in their eating habits. When feelings of grief are not processed naturally, professionals may become preoccupied with the circumstances surrounding their patient deaths. It's almost as if they've become stuck.

A friend of mine who's a health care worker in Florida has been on the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis, I'll call him John. John recently spoke with me about the loss of a patient and the resulting grief he experienced. John has been an emergency medicine physician for 20 years. A few weeks ago, he's treating a teenage girl who was dying from COVID-19. Despite his patient having a large family, they were not allowed to visit because of the hospital's strict visitation policy. He stated it was the nurses, respiratory therapist, and himself who talked and prayed with her as she was dying. They did not want her to die alone and without the comfort of others nearby. John was accustomed to sometimes seeing his patients die, however, he described this loss as much more difficult and has been surprised by his reaction. He indicated that he has never witnessed a dying patient who was unable to have family at the bedside to say their goodbyes. John is experiencing cumulative grief from this loss and several others in

recent months. He's having difficulty sleeping, is more irritable, feels guilty, and believes he should have done more to get the hospital to prove an exception for her family to visit. He shared he can't stop thinking there's more he could have done to help facilitate this visit and these thoughts overplay in his head. He reports feeling isolated and uncomfortable revealing his feelings to his colleagues and is coping by throwing himself deeper into his work.

So, what can you do if you are experiencing grief related to patient deaths like John? Here are some things that might help. It's really important to acknowledge that these are uncertain times, and you're going to have reactions to this uncertainty, and all of these reactions are okay. It's important to express your feelings that have been triggered by these losses. Another helpful strategy is to give yourself the space and time for reflection. Think about your role in caring for your patient, recognize the contributions you've made, and think about how these align with your personal values. You may have spiritual beliefs that can help support the complex emotions you are experiencing. Talking with the chaplain or spiritual care provider may provide you comfort and create a space for processing these feelings. It is not uncommon for healthcare providers to feel like they have to manage their grief on their own. However, sharing your experiences with your colleagues may help in the grieving process. Keeping up with daily routines like getting regular exercise, good sleep, making time for relaxation, and engaging in hobbies you enjoy is key.

Engaging in strategies that help you manage your emotions and stress level is also very important. For example, my friend John loves mindfulness, so naturally it was helpful for him to increase his meditation practice while coping with the loss of his patient. Coping mechanisms that you've used in the past may be enough to manage cumulative grief. Think about what works for you, is it being among nature, going on walks with your dog, practicing deep breathing, confiding with a close friend? Recall these coping strategies and write them down.

Commit to engaging in regular healthy coping during this challenging season. Lastly, we have some resources and programs to support you and your colleagues during this challenging time. Check those out at the websites listed on the screen. These links are also available in the video description below. I would like to end today with a quote by Annie Roiphe, "Grief is in two parts. The first is loss, the second is the remaking of life." Thank you so much for your time today and remember to stay well at work. Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast. Follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@ Work website, and of course stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.