



The Hidden Cost of Loss at Work

Why grief is already impacting your organization - and what to do about it

Christine Nordhill

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Introduction

Why should you read a report about loss at work?

You might think: “This isn’t work-related.”

But loss is more present in organizations than it appears on the surface. It quietly shapes how people think, perform, and relate to each other.

“Grief is the human response to loss.”

In this report, I will clarify some common misconceptions about grief, show the hidden impact it has on the workplace - both from a human and a financial perspective - and share some first steps towards improving the current situation.

What is grief?

First of all, we need to understand what grief actually is.

For most people, the first thing that comes to mind when grief is mentioned is death. However, grief is not limited to the death of a person or an animal.

Grief shows up as a response to significant life changes - such as going through a divorce, struggling to have children, being betrayed by someone you trust, losing your job, receiving a diagnosis, or caring for someone who is ill.

In many cases, these experiences can be understood as forms of death - the death of a relationship, an identity, or a dream.

Grief is the human response to loss.

It is not a mental illness, a weakness, or a sign that something is wrong. It is a natural and healthy response to change.

Why is it invisible at work?

Grief has existed for as long as humans have. Throughout history, people have always experienced involuntary change and loss. Death is something every human being will encounter, eventually.

“How did something so universal become something we rarely talk about?”

Yet somewhere along the way, modern Western society has become largely grief-illiterate. The topic has become invisible - especially at work, where difficult experiences outside of work are often expected to be left at the door.

It raises an important question:

How did something so universal become something we rarely talk about - particularly in the place where we spend a third of our lives?

Grief is often treated as something out of the ordinary. Something we should avoid. Almost as if it were contagious.

But for the person going through it, avoiding it is not an option.

How grief shows up at work

Most people going through grief cannot simply leave it at the door - even if they would like to. Instead, they show up, put on a brave face, and try to function as usual.

On the surface, everything may look the same. But underneath, something has shifted.

Grief affects us emotionally, but also mentally and physically. It rarely shows up as something clearly labelled "grief". Instead, it appears in ways that are easy to overlook or misinterpret.

It can look like a decrease in performance - or, in some cases, overperformance as a way to cope. It can show up as irritability, withdrawal, tension within a team, lack of initiative, or difficulty concentrating.

In other words, it often shows up as behaviours organizations already try to manage - just without recognising what may be driving them.

The impact on people and performance

Research shows that 94% of people experiencing grief struggle to concentrate, and 91% report reduced productivity.

At the same time, many continue working - doing their best to appear "normal". This often leads to presenteeism: being physically present, but not fully there mentally.

"Organizations end up addressing the symptoms, while the underlying cause remains untouched."

Over time, this can result in lower engagement, reduced commitment, increased sick leave, and in some cases, resignation.

When these behaviours are not understood in context, they are easily misinterpreted. And when behaviour is misinterpreted, the response often misses the mark.

Organizations respond with what they know and recognise - performance improvement plans, corrective conversations, clarified expectations, or sometimes silence.

From a business perspective, this creates a risk: organizations end up addressing the symptoms, while the underlying cause remains untouched.

Why organizations struggle to respond

Grief in itself is not a workplace issue. But when an employee comes to work carrying grief, the workplace inevitably becomes part of how that experience is managed.

One of the reasons this is challenging is that grief does not fit neatly into existing workplace structures. It is not a clear performance issue, a defined health condition, or a straightforward team conflict - yet it can influence all of these.

As a result, it is often unclear who should do what. Both HR and managers may feel uncertain - about what to say, what not to say, and where their responsibility begins and ends.

What this is - and what it is not

This is not about turning managers into therapists.

It is not about forcing employees to share personal matters they would rather keep private.

And it is not about lowering expectations or standards.

It is about broadening the organization's understanding - so that responses become more intentional, and more appropriate to the situation.

It is about recognising that people are not able to switch instantly between a “private self” and a “work self”.

And that acknowledging this can make a significant difference - both for the individual and for the organization.

How common is it?

A common belief is that grief is rare - that it only affects a few unlucky individuals.

In reality, loss is a recurring part of life, and therefore of working life.

Studies show that around 24% of people of working age have experienced a significant loss within the past 12 months.

In Sweden, 44% of adults report having experienced the death of a colleague at some point during their working life.

And these numbers only reflect bereavement.

When we include other forms of loss - such as relationship breakdowns, illness, or major life changes - it becomes clear that grief is not an exception.

It is something that surrounds us, all the time.

The myth of the timeline

Another common belief is that grief follows a clear timeline - that after a certain period, people “move on” and return to normal.

In reality, grief rarely follows a predictable path.

While bereavement leave often lasts a few days, the impact of loss can extend for months or longer.

For many, the most difficult period begins after the formal leave ends - when expectations return to normal, but the person is still at the beginning of finding their new way forward.

The financial impact

From a financial perspective, the impact is significant.

In the UK alone, loss-related productivity costs are estimated at £23 billion annually.

“Absence of visible signs does not mean absence of impact”

Across the EU, the cost of work-related mental ill-health exceeds €100 billion per year - with loss likely being an unrecognised contributing factor.

These figures highlight an important point:
even when grief is not visible, its effects are measurable.

What organizations stand to gain

There is also a clear opportunity.

When organizations develop a more mature and realistic understanding of grief, they are better equipped to respond in ways that support both people and performance.

Employees who feel acknowledged and supported are more likely to remain engaged, recover more effectively, and stay with the organization.

*“It is not about doing more.
It is about responding more accurately.”*

Teams experience less tension, and managers feel more confident in difficult situations.

From an organizational perspective, this can mean reduced turnover, shorter periods of reduced productivity, and a more sustainable work environment over time.

It is not about doing more.

It is about responding more accurately to what is already there.

Closing reflection

“We don’t see any signs of this” is a common response from organizations.

But absence of visible signs does not mean absence of impact. It often points to how invisible this topic still is.

The intention of this report is not to present all the answers, but to bring the question to the surface.

By reading this, you have already taken a first step.

Making loss visible at work starts with awareness - and the willingness to look a little closer.

About the author

Christine Nordhill works with coaching, organizational development and human sustainability, with a particular focus on grief in the workplace.

Her work aims to help organizations better understand and respond to the human experiences that already exist within them - but are rarely addressed.

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