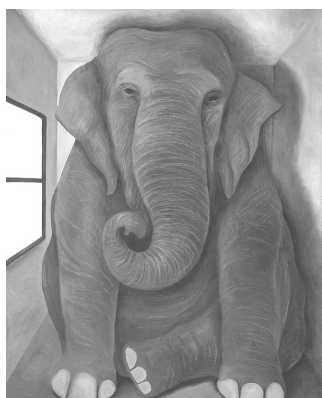




# Grief in the Workplace

## The Case for Compassion at Work

By Deb Higgins



The death of a loved one is one of life's most painful experiences. The intense emotions of grief shake us to our core and we feel the effects in every aspect of our selves: physical, emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and social. It is all-encompassing.

The holistic nature of grief means we cannot set it aside and attend to it only outside of work. Sadly, despite spending most of our waking hours at work, a common expectation is to check our difficult emotions at the door.

This is unfortunate for several reasons. First, we know that a grieving person will heal best when they are supported in all parts of their lives, including at work. In fact, a lack of support at work becomes a secondary loss, compounding the effects of our grief.

Secondly, grief presents a significant cost to the employer. Grieving employees have a reduced ability to concentrate and may experience other manifestations of grief such as memory lapses, lack of motivation, difficulty decision-making, social withdrawal, fatigue, increased risk of injury, more frequent illness, among others.

These indicators of grief translate to reduced productivity at work. The term for this is 'presenteeism' (when we are at work, but 'out of it') and studies show it is even more costly to employers than absenteeism.

What can be done?

The key lies in building a compassionate workplace. When people feel cared for and supported during difficult times they will not only heal more quickly but also resume productivity at work sooner. The benefit is reciprocal and creates a ripple effect that raises morale and reverberates throughout the organization.

Former YG Deputy Minister Kelvin Leary believes in the benefits of a heart-centered leadership approach. He shares what he has learned about the importance of planning for loss and instituting compassion as a guiding principle in the workplace:

*'Workplaces are a microcosm of our lives outside of work. Inevitably the effects of loss and grief that happen in our private lives will impact the places we work. How we prepare for these events is a key determinant for a healthy workplace,*

*one where compassion prevails over policy.'*

*In a healthy workplace, leaders recognize that grief and loss have a significant impact on employees and will proactively plan how to respond.*

*They will create an environment where employees can safely grieve, where there are quiet places to reflect, and flexible ways to meet individual needs.*

*A solid strategy for dealing with grief and loss won't eliminate the impacts on individuals but it will make workplaces a safe and compassionate place to recover.'*

In these pages are stories and tools to help inspire and inform a new paradigm for approaching loss in the workplace.

Our hope is that organizational leaders will recognize that the benefits of building a compassionate workplace will serve the grieving employee, their co-workers and the organization as a whole.

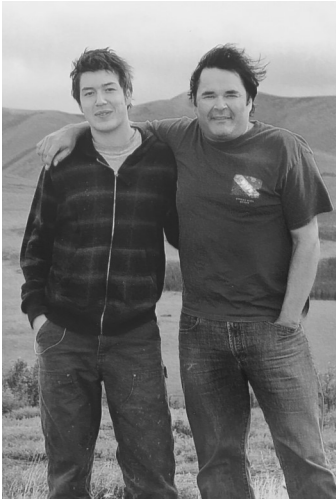
*'Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish.'*

*Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.'*

Henri J.M. Nouwen



## Stephen Mills' Story of Loss in the Workplace



Stephen Mills with his son, Stephen Mills Jr.

For the past 29 years Hospice has been dedicated to responding to the changing needs of our Yukon community when it comes to end-of-life and grief. In recent years, we have seen public education move to the forefront of those needs, both for people in their personal lives, as well as in the workplace.

*Supporting Your Staff Through Loss and Grief* is a workshop Hospice Yukon developed several years ago to give workplace leaders tools to institute compassion as a guiding principle in their workplace. In developing this workshop we spoke to several workplace leaders from both the public and private sectors who had experience with loss in the workplace and believed in the importance of educating others in leadership roles.

Stephen Mills was the Chairperson at YESAB at that time and he shared with us what he had learned from navigating loss at work. His heart-centered approach to creating a compassionate workplace has been foundational in creating Hospice Yukon's guidelines for workplace loss (*next page*).

Stephen first came to Hospice for support in 2010 when Aleisha Narain, a young and much beloved colleague at YESAB was killed in a highway accident. He and all the staff were reeling from this devastating and untimely loss.

When tragedy strikes people are often at a loss at what to say or do. Stephen came to Hospice for resources (handout packets, books and feelie heart kits). He also intuitively knew to do several things that helped create an environment of healing and community at YESAB following Aliesha's death.

In the early days Stephen made it optional for staff to come to work, honouring that they may prefer to absorb the shocking news at home or in their own space. As it turned out, all of the staff came to work; a true testament to the supportive environment in the workplace.

They created a special place for Aliesha with photos and flowers. This was located in a prominent spot in the front office so that all who entered would be aware of the loss and have the opportunity to honour her.

He also set aside a common space in the office where people could gather. The staff sat around together and sewed feelie hearts while remembering and telling stories about their friend and coworker.

(Feelie hearts are small, hand sewn, plush hearts. Small enough to put in a pocket, they are a comforting reminder to hold our own hearts tenderly. At Hospice we have given out thousands over the years, all lovingly made by volunteers).

Having a safe space for staff to find comfort in one another while focusing on the simple collective task of sewing feelie hearts was healing. Dozens of hearts were hand-sewn in that circle. Stitch by stitch, they remembered and honoured Aliesha. Stephen sat with his staff and joined in with sewing feelie hearts and in doing so he not only provided great leadership, but he tended to his own sorrow and healing as well.

Many of the feelie hearts made were offered to Aliesha's parents; some were cremated with her and many were brought home by her grateful family.

Stephen invited Aliesha's family to come in and meet her YESAB colleagues. As co-workers navigated this loss together it gave them strength and created a strong sense of community.

These are just a few of the ways in which Stephen guided his staff in building a supportive community in the workplace at a difficult time. The sense of cohesion and support that was nurtured during this time of loss reverberated among staff and contributed to the health of the organization long after the tragedy took place.

A few years later when we sat in Stephen's office taking copious notes about the many things he did at that time to help his staff feel cared for and supported, it was clear that he was a champion to our cause.

*Compassion is an irreplaceable dimension of excellence for any organization that wants to make the most of its human capabilities.*

Dutton & Worline

At our first offering of *Supporting Your Staff Through Loss and Grief*, Stephen participated as a passionate guest speaker.

But life takes unexpected turns, and Stephen's story of loss and healing in the workplace continued. In 2014, while on holiday, Stephen received the devastating news that his 21 year old son, Stephen Mills Jr., had committed suicide.

As Stephen made the long journey back to Canada and made arrangements to bring his son back home to the Yukon, the staff at YESAB contacted Hospice for support.

They pulled together as a team and once again began

making feelie hearts - this time for their colleague and dear friend.

Stephen speaks with incredible openness and vulnerability about that difficult time; about his uneasiness going back to work, unsure about how to face his staff after such a tragic loss.

When he returned he was deeply moved by the outpouring of love and support he was met with. He experienced first-hand the power of the compassionate workplace he had been instrumental in building.

Stephen continues to make time in his very busy schedule

to share his story of navigating loss in the workplace at each offering of our Manager's workshop. We are grateful to be able to share his story here.



*Supporting Your Staff Through Loss and Grief* is offered as a half-day workshop once a year, usually in November, in partnership with Yukon College and the Northern Institute of Social Justice.

To find out the date of the next offering check the Hospice Yukon website [hospiceyukon.net](http://hospiceyukon.net)

*Experiencing compassion at work heightens positive emotions, supports employee engagement, and inspires organizational commitment.*

*Alan Wolfelt*

## From the Hospice Lending Library

Here is an excerpt from *Healing Grief at Work* by Alan D. Wolfelt, available in the Hospice lending library.

*'Our efforts to both give and receive support in the workplace are not simply about helping each other adapt to changes and get 'back to work'. Our efforts to help must be anchored in genuine compassion for our fellow human beings.*

*If you are in grief, remember the importance of self-care. To be self-nurturing is to have the courage to pay attention to your needs, both at home and at work. It will take both time and a willingness to actively participate in the 'work of mourning' before you again feel effective in your workplace. However, if you*

*commit yourself to authentic mourning, you can and will go on to find meaning and purpose both at home and at work.*

*If you are supporting someone in grief, remember that helping from the heart unfolds when we put aside our own life issues, if only for a moment, and just be there for another person.*

*If you are an organization supporting an employee in grief, you are leading the way toward a more caring, supportive, life-enhancing culture. You recognize that while work productivity is vital to your organization's future, compassionate caring is essential to your existence. Grief support is not always easy to achieve or measure, but the alternative is prohibitively expensive.'*

### HEALING GRIEF AT WORK

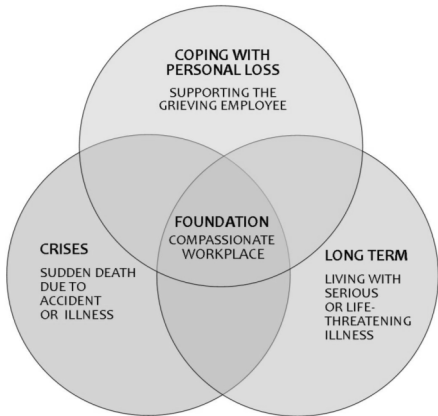
•  
100 PRACTICAL IDEAS  
AFTER YOUR WORKPLACE  
IS TOUCHED BY LOSS



ALAN D. WOLFELT, PH.D.

# Guidelines to a Compassionate Workplace

Hospice Yukon compiled a list of Guidelines for Building a Compassionate Workplace with input from leaders in the public and private sector. This list offers suggestions to help organizations start thinking about ways to implement compassion as a guiding principle in their workplace. For the complete list visit Hospice Yukon in person or online: [hospiceyukon.net](http://hospiceyukon.net)



## Build a Foundation

Include 'compassion' as a workplace value and implement it at all levels.

Integrate the language of compassion in the workplace (empathy, ease suffering, etc.).

Identify and train a workplace compassion or wellness team (can be as small as two people)

Include relationship and team-building as part of the culture.

Be open to and respectful of individual experiences of grief (eg. the death of a pet may be devastating) and individual coping mechanisms (for some, work provides needed structure, others need time off).

Ensure managers are given training as well as flexibility to deal with individual situations.

Determine the scope of flexibility by brainstorming scenarios as a management team.

Understand collective agreement provisions and supports available. Have a list available and communicated to staff (on bulletin boards, etc).

Develop confidentiality protocols for communicating in different loss situations.

Educate staff on the difference between 'equal' treatment (focus on sameness) and 'equitable' treatment (focus on fairness).

## At the Time of Loss

Purchase a sympathy card that all staff can sign.

Send flowers or other culturally suitable gestures of care.

Have clear funeral/leave policies communicated to the employee and coworkers.

Attend the memorial service.

Encourage the employee to get support through counseling and bereavement support.

Provide structure and support for the bereaved employee to renegotiate work expectations and set up regular check-ins.

Offer flexible hours if possible. Some employees who have suffered major losses may need to work half time, job-share or take a leave of absence. Be flexible! Be creative!

Hold a meeting with all staff to brainstorm ways to help.

Always respect the confidential nature of personal or medical information unless permission has been given to share it.

## Employee Returning to Work

How soon & how well people experience 're-entry' is directly related to the relationship with their workplace.

Schedule a pre-return meeting.

Ask how they are doing and listen. Questions to consider:

Would you like me or another person to share information with others? What would you like them to know? What is confidential? Do you want to talk about your experience, or rather concentrate on work?

Do you have any special needs at this time? Privacy? Initially reduced hours? Help to catch up on your work?

The answers to these questions may change on a daily basis. Employee emotions are not yet stable. Keep asking questions and listen to your employee's response.

Expect tears. They are a normal part of the grieving process.

Avoid judging how others grieve. Some people may become numb and the grieving process is delayed for weeks or even months after the death.

You may also need to set limits. Listening may sometimes be difficult for various reasons. Acknowledge what they are saying is important and have the conversation another time.

Holidays and anniversaries can be especially difficult. Ask what you can do to provide extra support during these times. Mark the anniversary on your calendar and send a card.

**Listening is the most important support you can provide.**



**Equality** - everyone gets the same treatment, regardless of individual circumstances



**Equity** - ensuring everyone gets the support they need.

### Sudden Death Due to Accident or Illness

Make the office a safe space where staff feel welcomed to come together to grieve and support one another.

Upon notification of the death of an employee bring together the support team: manager, HR rep and staff members.

Gather the employees most affected by the loss into a safe place to tell them first (may involve bringing in RCMP).

Consider supporting smaller groups rather than one large group.

Have emergency contacts for staff when they are away.

Close the office, if possible, on the day of notification.

Put signs up explaining the office closure without stating specifics.

Cancel meetings and forward all phones to one location.

Give staff the option to stay or leave. If people want to stay, offer tasks.

Create a contact list of who needs to be notified of the death.

New employees who are not as impacted by the loss may agree to fill in for time-sensitive work.

Close office for funeral. Meet at work and go to service together

Respond to all emails personally, including those responding to a group message.

Call all offices. Consider 'telephone tree'.

If death occurs at work, know who needs to be notified.

Call family to offer condolences and assistance.

Organize flowers, card and meals for family of deceased.

Invite family into the office.

Stay in touch. Offer to assist with funeral service.

Create a mourning space at the office for photos, flowers, mementos, notes.

Invite staff to write in a memory book for the family.

If discretionary funds are available, consider: flowers at the office, pictures of the deceased, coffee/food for staff, candles.

Do not rearrange the deceased's office, except with their staff or co-workers. Instead bring in pictures and flowers as a memorial.

Offer counselling options (EAP, Hospice, grief resources).

Gather info for family from HR and insurance, death benefits, holiday pay accrued, etc.

Ideas for memorials: plant a garden, food bank donation, include in annual report, memorial fund, fundraising for family, acknowledge anniversaries.

Offer support to bereaved staff members more than once.

***It is never too late to acknowledge the loss.***

### Living with Serious or Life – Limiting Illness

Pull together a team to assess situation and address different needs: psycho-social, job-related, practical support for employee and family.

Make sure staff knows who these designated leaders are.

Communication plan: request being informed by family when the death has occurred.

Respect confidentiality – assess need to know.

Identify needs on a timeline: immediate, one week, one month, six months.

Consider alternative work arrangements including borrowing from another department, finding less stressful tasks if employee is able to work, and consider flexible hours, job sharing, or working from home.

Explore different leave options and pay options.

Develop individualized return to work plan in collaboration with the returning employee.

Supporting family builds community. Give staff the opportunity to make meals, help with driving, errands, shopping, household maintenance, fundraising, etc.

**Be aware of 'compassion fatigue'. Illness and death is stressful for everyone involved. Continue to encourage self-care with staff, especially with those in supportive roles.**

#### EMPATHY



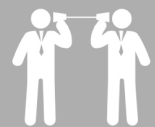
Be sensitive to all kinds of non-verbal cues



No judgement



Put yourself in their shoes



Just listen



Acknowledge emotions - theirs as well as your own



Empathy comes from the heart, not the mind

## A Compassionate Workplace in Action

*TrueNorth Respiratory is a Yukon business that has educated themselves and worked towards building capacity as a compassionate workplace. We asked co-owner Ashley Kostelnik to share what they have learned, how they put it into practice, and the impact it has had on their organization.*



Ashley Kostelnik, co-owner of TrueNorth Respiratory in Whitehorse.

### **Tell us a bit about your business and the kinds of losses you encounter at work.**

TrueNorth Respiratory is a small, locally owned business that provides home oxygen services and lung function (spirometry) testing in the Yukon. We have 11 staff in total.

Loss is a regular occurrence in our workplace. We see a lot of people near the end of their lives, or adjusting to major health changes and loss of independence.

Because loss is part of our work, we feel it is our responsibility to address it openly, to support our staff, and to give them the tools to support others. We talk about loss when training new staff and encourage all staff to speak openly about the losses they experience at work. We make sympathy cards for the family of clients who have passed away and staff have the opportunity to sign the card and remember the client.

My respiratory therapy education did not deal with death and grief even though our primary role is working in acute and critical care (including removing life support at end of life!). When my business partner and I took on our first employees we felt responsible to ensure our staff were supported and had the tools to process grief and loss.

### **What have you done to help staff cope with loss in a healthy way?**

Compassion and moving through loss have been a focus for our organizational development since attending the 2-day Hospice Yukon workshop for Frontline Workers. The tools we learned have helped us support staff during times of loss, both personally and professionally. We have sent staff members to the workshop each year, and they are always genuinely appreciative of this opportunity.

The critical importance of self care has been the number one ‘epiphany’ from this course. Understanding its importance has made such an impact on our organization that we’ve incorporated questions about self-care into our interview process for prospective employees.

In the workshop we learned that the grieving process looks different for each person, and understanding this has helped us be flexible and adapt to the needs of the individual.

It was also helpful for us to learn about Hospice services and how these can support our staff and clients. We are now more comfortable to broach the topic with clients and their family members.

### **How have you supported staff after they have suffered personal losses?**

It has varied depending on the staff member and their needs. Compassion, offering understanding on ‘bad days’, and the

awareness that grief is a long term process are essential.

Immediately following the loss we take time to listen, offer time away from work, check in on how they are doing, reassure them that their work is looked after, and again, listen.

Once back at work we offer flexibility (in worked hours and breaks), reduced workload, and, if possible, help them avoid situations that might be triggering. Supportive colleagues are a big part of what makes this possible.

For a small organization, we have acquired a large history of personal loss over the last two years. Having most of our staff take the Hospice workshop has helped us establish a culture of compassion and understanding. With each loss the overwhelming response from staff has been a sincere desire to help, and to allow our colleague the time and space to grieve. This has shaped us as an organization and has made supporting our staff through loss much easier.

### **What advice would you offer in trying to build a compassionate workplace?**

First, determine what values your staff and management have, and then figure out what culture your organization supports as a whole. We did a brief (20 minute) brainstorming session with our staff

*“The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.”*

Coretta Scott King

to determine what we value in our workplace, how we want to feel supported, and how we want our clients to feel when they are in our care.

'Compassion' was the underlying theme. We want to feel compassion when we're having a hard day, we want management to be compassionate when we're feeling overloaded, and we want our clients to feel that we truly care about their struggles and want to help. It was fortunate that we all shared a similar vision for our team, making it easier to work towards our goal of a compassionate workplace.

For those who aren't necessarily on the same page, I would suggest enrolling in the Hospice workshop. Taking this workshop with other colleagues - even ones you don't feel particularly

compassionate towards - could help generate communication and understanding among co-workers.

***Can you share anything else you about what you've learned?***

No one is immune to loss and the grief that follows it. Everyone moves through their loss in a unique way, and appropriate support is different for not only each person, but for each loss.

Some staff are unable to focus and require time away, while others become hyper-vigilant and almost overly dedicated to their work. Some may look for emotional support at work, while others prefer to move through their work day without speaking about their loss at all.

These tips have helped us:

1. Acknowledge the loss openly with the individual and offer

condolences. No one suffering a loss is satisfied with others 'pretending' everything is fine.

2. Don't try to fix it or find the 'silver lining'. Be honest: if you can't fathom what they must be going through, it's OK to say so. It's also important to know that grief isn't only intense emotions. Many times it's a memory being shared, often with a smile.

3. Ask what they need to feel supported at work and do what you can to make it happen. Be flexible with breaks - an extra few minutes can make all the difference.

4. Remember that there is no end date to grief. Birthdays, anniversaries, special occasions, and memories can all bring grief to the forefront again. These are opportunities to listen and be flexible.



*Some of the staff of TrueNorth Respiratory.*

## Canadian Compassionate Companies

The Canadian Hospice and Palliative Care Association (CHPCA) has created a designation for companies who accommodate employees caring for a family member at end of life.

Over 260,000 Canadians die each year, many of whom are supported by family caregivers in the last year or two of life. Supporting these caregivers is important for the dying person, their family and the community.

Employers have an important role to play. It is a stressful time when a loved one is dying.

The financial security of an employee's family may be jeopardized while caring for a family member who is very ill.

The Government of Canada offers Compassionate Care Benefit for 26 weeks so that employees do not have to choose between keeping their job and caring for their family.

Employees may need more time off work than is covered by their regular leave policies in order to provide care for family members who are terminally ill.

The Canadian Compassionate Company designation (CCC) is awarded by the CHPCA to companies who can show that their company meets at least three out of five of the CCC criteria.

A company interested in receiving this designation should send the relevant portions of their HR policy to the CHPCA for review. Qualified companies can proudly display the CCC logo to show their commitment to supporting their employees.

For more information visit [www.chpca.net](http://www.chpca.net)

Canadian  
Compassionate  
Companies



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## How can we support you?



### **Living with Loss**

A free, 2-hr education session to help you better understand the grieving experience. Offered four times per year.

### **Counselling**

One on one support for those who are dying or grieving and their loved ones.

### **Healing Touch**

Relaxing energy therapy that can offer relief from the pain of grief. Clients lie fully clothed on a massage table and receive gentle, soothing touch.

### **Grief Support Groups**

Various groups (walking, creative, discussion) that help grieving people find support and connection others. See our website for upcoming offerings.

### **Lending Library**

Come in to browse and borrow from our range of books and other resources.

### **Vigil Support**

Bedside support in the final week to days of life.

### **Professional Support**

Support and resources for workplaces facing loss and those in the caring professions.

*All of these programs are offered free of charge.*

*Please call 867 667 7429 or email [info@hospiceyukon.net](mailto:info@hospiceyukon.net) for more info.*

[www.hospiceyukon.net](http://www.hospiceyukon.net)

*Please visit us online at [www.hospiceyukon.net](http://www.hospiceyukon.net)*

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