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Where We Grieve

Kenneth J. Doka

The College of New Rochelle, kdoka@cnr.edu

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Living with Grief

At Work, At School, At Worship

Edited by Joyce D. Davidson and Kenneth J. Doka

Foreword by Jack D. Gordon, President
Hospice Foundation of America
In 1998, as we met to discuss the Hospice Foundation of America’s teleconference for that year, and the accompanying edition *Living With Grief: Who We Are, How We Grieve*, the assembled panel began to consider the ways the factors such as culture, spirituality, gender, and age affect the grieving process. In the midst of this animated discussion, one panelist, Bernice Harper, reminded us not to forget *where* people grieve.

Her advice was sage. While the complexity of the issues at hand allowed us to address that concern only in passing, the idea remained.

*Where* we grieve is, in fact, critical. Our grief spills over, affecting all dimensions of our life. We grieve not only at home, in private moments or times of our own choosing, but in all the places we inhabit. We grieve at work, at school, at worship, and in our communities. The ways that others respond to, acknowledge, and support that grief can either complicate or facilitate the grieving process.

Two examples illustrate this. I recently dealt with a mother whose son, a young adult, had died. She worked in a school cafeteria. Sometimes as she saw the children her sadness would overwhelm her and she would shed tears. The principal called her in and told her that such behavior was inappropriate. Still a probationary employee, she was dismissed.

The insensitivity of the act rakes her still. Now she had to cope with two major losses: her child and her job. Moreover, she was removed from the critical support offered by her co-workers. Her own self-esteem suffered.

Her grief was disenfranchised. Disenfranchised grief refers to losses where the griever is denied the right to grief (Doka, 1989). Grief can be disenfranchised because the relationship is not acknowledged (for example, a friend or lover), the loss is not recognized (pet loss, divorce, job loss), or because griever, such as persons with developmental disabilities or the very young or old, are seen as incapable of grief.

Corr (1998) has expanded the concept of disenfranchised grief.
Many aspects of the grieving experience, he asserts, can be disenfranchised. Where one grieves can be one of these. Probably everyone would acknowledge the right of a mother to grieve the death of a child. But here the message of her employer was that, while we recognize your grief, do not grieve here.

Perhaps we can understand the principal's misguided attempt to protect the children from an event about which they, in reality, know far more than we acknowledge (Doka, 1995). Ironically, he denied them the opportunity both to learn about grief and to learn how to support grieving individuals.

It does not have to be that way. In the summer of 1998 my family and I vacationed on a magical resort in the Bahamas called Atlantis. Its very name suggests an escape from reality, the ambiance that the resort projects. Yet one night, as we dined at one of the resort's most elegant restaurants, we noticed that many of the staff attached a black ribbon to their tuxedos and evening wear. We questioned our waiter. He told us that a very popular employee had died the week before, and the ribbons were a mark of mourning.

I was impressed. It would have been very easy for the restaurant simply to demand that the ribbons be removed as contrary to the tone of the establishment. They chose not to do so. Instead, management enfranchised the grief of their employees.

They did so, I found out, in a number of ways. They allowed employees to take a collection for the family. The restaurant contributed food for a traditional post-funeral meal. Moreover, they were flexible, drawing on staff from other restaurants in the resort so that employees could attend the funeral, even cook and serve the meal.

They had created an environment where people could grieve openly, in a supportive atmosphere. It was not only humane, it was good business. Even in the midst of loss, there was a sense of pride and rising morale in how they were able to respond. I am sure employees felt a renewed sense of commitment and respect to their employers, a sense that, I suspect, would be evident in many measurable, as well as intangible, ways for the restaurant.

So where people grieve, whether at work, at school, or at worship, can be a critical issue because those places afford or deny
support, validation, and empathy. Subsequent sections will explore each of these dimensions.

This introductory section begins that process. Both the foreword by Jack Gordon and the following chapter offer insights and information that establish a foundation. Gordon’s chapter reaffirms why hospices and healthcare organizations should care. Gordon, the president of the Hospice Foundation of America, has long had an interest in the area of grief in the workplace. Bernice Harper’s suggestion gave new urgency to Gordon’s repeated comments that a teleconference should focus upon grief in the workplace. To Gordon, it is an issue for workplaces as well as hospices. As he reminds us, providing support and training in grief is central to hospice’s mission. Just as workplaces will find tangible benefits in offering support to their employees, so will hospices. Such a presence can increase sources of both referral and perhaps even revenue. Most importantly, it can enhance creative partnerships between hospices and other segments of the community.

My chapter attempts to provide a primer on grief. We hope that many people will find this book useful—from employee assistance and human resources personnel to those involved in hospice and in working with bereaved individuals. In such a wide audience, levels of understanding of the grief process may vary considerably. The primer offers a review of current understandings on the process of grief, in a question-and-answer format, that concludes with a brief introduction to the ways that grief may affect individuals at work, at school, and at worship.

Where people grieve is a critical issue. As we become increasingly aware of that importance we may be able to create humane environments at work, at school, and at worship, where grieving individuals may find the compassion and support so critical in their struggle.

Kenneth J. Doka