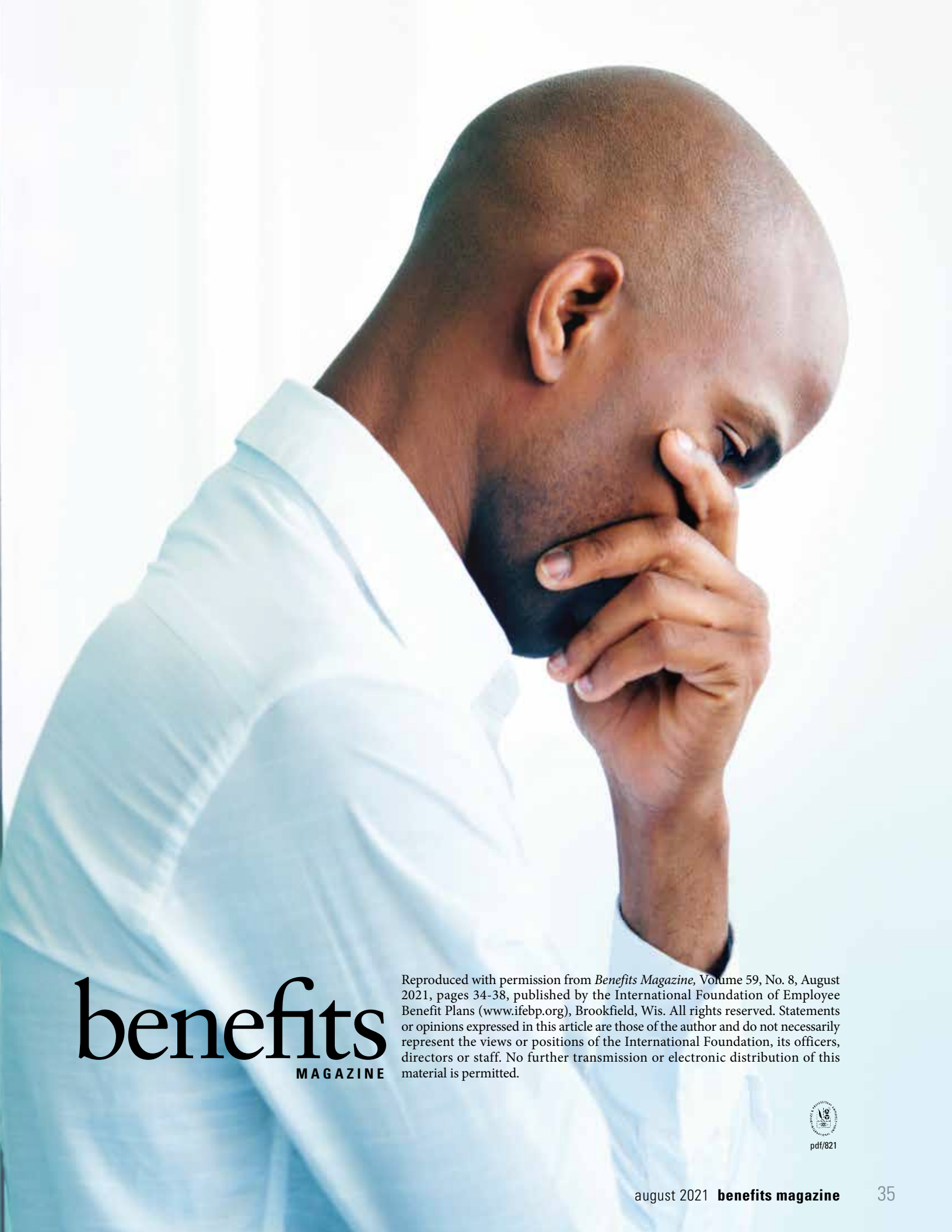


# Grief in the Workplace: Helping Workers Deal With Loss

by | **Judy Plotkin**

The average workplace has become saturated with grief as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many employees are mourning some kind of loss, and employers can support them through the process with policies and programs that address mental health.



# benefits

MAGAZINE

Reproduced with permission from *Benefits Magazine*, Volume 59, No. 8, August 2021, pages 34-38, published by the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans ([www.ifebp.org](http://www.ifebp.org)), Brookfield, Wis. All rights reserved. Statements or opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views or positions of the International Foundation, its officers, directors or staff. No further transmission or electronic distribution of this material is permitted.



pdf/821

In normal times, a manager can expect to have between zero and a few employees grieving the loss of a loved one on any given day, depending on the size of the team. It's a difficult situation, but there's generally enough space, resources and flexibility to support each employee through these life events.

Grief is triggered by many other losses not limited to the death of a loved one. As the world has passed the one-year anniversary of COVID-19 and all that accompanied it, the average workplace has become saturated with grief. Some employees are grieving deaths or illness of loved ones while missing other loved ones, dear colleagues and social connections because of lockdowns, the shift to remote work and other isolation caused by the pandemic. Many are grieving the loss of their previous lives and the loss of financial security, which is a heavy—and daily—burden to bear.

This article will explore the difference between grief and mourning, how COVID-19 grief shows up in the workplace, the “echo pandemic” of mental health issues on the horizon and how employers can support employees during times of individual and collective grief.

## The Difference Between Grief and Mourning

*Grief* is the mental suffering or distress people experience due to loss and regret. *Mourning* is how people outwardly

express grief; it shows up through their thoughts and behaviors. Everyone experiences grief in a personal way, and their reactions depend on their unique emotional makeup, previous life events and past experiences of loss.

Normal reactions to grief include the following:

- Shock, disbelief and confusion
- Anger
- Trouble concentrating and focusing on tasks
- Altered patterns of eating and sleeping
- Physical changes such as dizziness, headaches or upset stomach
- Sadness and yearning
- Memories and thoughts about who or what has been lost
- Withdrawal from usual activities.

With many people working from home and connecting remotely, it can be harder to pick up subtle clues to how employees are managing. It can also be harder to notice those subtle changes that may have triggered concern previously. For example, changes in physical appearance can be hard to notice since many employees and managers are now more casually dressed and presented. Symptoms that can still be noted from a distance include:

- Missing deadlines or meetings
- Making more mistakes than usual
- Talking about or displaying deep fatigue or exhaustion
- Expressing anger or displaying signs of lowered morale
- Feeling less motivated than usual.

Grief is a normal and natural process after a loss, but it can be painful to work through, and grief follows its own time line. The journey of grief includes four key tasks that people have to move through.

1. Accept the reality of the loss.
2. Experience and process the pain of grief.
3. Adjust to the world with the loss.
4. Find a way to maintain a connection to the loss while embarking on life.

## Types of COVID-19 Grief

Due to lockdown restrictions, many standard mourning practices—such as funerals and memorial services—have been restricted, eliminated or altered significantly. A remote funeral doesn't necessarily provide the same sense of closure and communal mourning as comforting in-person rituals. This adds the loss of a proper farewell onto the bigger loss of a loved one.

## takeaways

- Many workers are grieving not only the death of loved ones but also the loss of their normal lives as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- *Grief* is the mental suffering or distress people experience due to loss and regret. *Mourning* is how people outwardly express grief; it shows up through their thoughts and behaviors.
- This grief and other mental health struggles are expected to lead to an “echo pandemic” of mental health issues following the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Employers and benefit plan sponsors can help employees who are grieving or experiencing a mental illness through benefits programs and policies.
- Elements of a supportive mental health policy include providing coverage for mental health services, offering an employee assistance program (EAP) and engaging in efforts to reduce the stigma of mental illness.
- Supportive policies include those that provide bereavement leave and time off for reasons other than physical illness.

Humans are habitual, and most don't like change—especially change imposed on them from outside sources. With every change comes loss, and COVID-19 suddenly changed how people live. In many jurisdictions, people spent more than a year avoiding in-person entertainment, sports events and communal dining. They have been encouraged to avoid large and small gatherings. Their regular guardrails and supports—including friends, family, church and gyms—disappeared overnight, leaving them unsettled. On top of this everyday loss is fear; the news and social media have been full of reports on financial and health uncertainty. Many people have felt more alone, more afraid and more unclear about the future than ever before.

In 2020, people in the United States were binge drinking more than usual, making more calls to emergency mental health or substance abuse hotlines, and experiencing unprecedented declines in employment. To put the job loss in perspective, the U.S. unemployment rate rose to 14.4% in April 2020, compared with a peak of 10.6% in 2010, just after the Great Recession.<sup>1</sup>

A February 2021 report showed that four in ten adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, 36% reported difficulty sleeping and 12% reported increases in alcohol consumption or substance use due to worry and stress over the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

Together and separately, everyone has lost a lot. For the collective culture, people have not mourned what they've lost during the pandemic, and it's resulted in confusion, anger and denial.

Unfortunately, there is an echo coming.

## The Echo Pandemic

The *echo pandemic* refers to the expected increase in mental health issues as people deal with the emotional aspects of COVID-19, which include the trauma of being ill and/or losing loved ones, jobs, housing, financial security, etc. The long-term impacts are expected to include a rising incidence of addictions, depression, divorce and suicide.

The likelihood of an echo pandemic of mental illness following COVID-19 is real, and posttrauma side effects can show up for years after a traumatic event. This has occurred following events including devastating wildfires in California or mass shootings. In many examples, grief after an event may be more about loss than death. For example, grief was

## learn more

### Education

#### Workforce Mental Health 2021

##### August 17-18, Virtual Conference

Visit [www.ifebp.org/WorkMentalHealth](http://www.ifebp.org/WorkMentalHealth) for more details.

#### Leave Program Design and Administration

##### E-Learning Course

Visit [www.ifebp.org/elearning](http://www.ifebp.org/elearning) for more information.

### From the Bookstore

#### Employee Benefits in a COVID-19 World— One Year Update

International Foundation. 2021.

Visit [www.ifebp.org/covidoneyear](http://www.ifebp.org/covidoneyear) for more information.

a phenomenon following the 2016 wildfires in Fort McMurray, Alberta, in which there were only two deaths, and they were attributed to a car crash during the evacuation of 80,000 people. However, the fires destroyed 2,400 homes and buildings and displaced thousands.

For managers and policy makers, it can be difficult to imagine how to adequately address individual and collective COVID-19 grief and the coming echo mental health pandemic. But employees will need their help, and employers and benefit plan sponsors can start by making sure they have the right programs and policies in place to support mental health.

## Benefits and Policies to Support Employees Experiencing Grief and Loss

Employers and benefit plan sponsors should think about their benefits programs and policies as the foundation that supports employee mental health in the workplace.

### Benefits Plan Design

A benefits plan designed for mental health includes the following:

- Coverage for mental health services such as seeing a therapist, social worker or psychologist
- Health and wellness programs that promote health and provide resources
- An employee assistance program (EAP). Traditional EAPs are typically skilled at providing bereavement support.

- Digital and/or virtual options for seeing a mental health professional, nurse or medical doctor online
- Frequent and regular communications about the benefits plan. To raise awareness that grief is about more than death and the negative effects of loneliness, communications should address these subjects.
- A focus on removing stigma and reminding people that they are not alone. There's no shame in getting help, and it's been a tough time for everyone. Employers can help destigmatize mental health concerns by talking about these real issues.

### **Workplace Mental Health Policies**

Employers should consider implementing the following three policies to support employee mental health.

- **Bereavement policy:** Are employees able to take time away after the loss of a loved one? How much flexibility comes with this policy in terms of defining bereavement and time off? For example, some employers have begun increasing the number of days of bereavement leave employees can take and are allowing employees to take the leave intermittently rather than only during the time period surrounding a death.
- **Personal day or mental health day policy:** Can employees take a personal day without feeling the need to explain? Personal days can support a sick day policy and show employees that taking a break is not just about recovering from a physical illness.
- **Adoption of a mental health standard.** For example, the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace provides a framework for organizations to support psychological health and safety and generate a positive ROI. The Mental Health Commission of Canada says that “adopting the Standard can help organizations with productivity, financial performance, risk management, organization recruitment [and] employee retention.” By implementing the standard alongside policies for bereavement and personal days and having a

bio



**Judy Plotkin** is the vice president of health solutions at People Corporation. She is a workplace health professional who works with organizations across Canada to implement health and wellness programs. Connect with Plotkin on LinkedIn.

robust benefits plan, organizations show employees that they are committed to supporting and championing mental health and wellness.

### **Conclusion**

Research shows that the total economic burden of major depression is estimated to be \$210 billion annually in the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

While we don't know yet how much COVID-19 grief has cost businesses in lost productivity, we do know that anxiety and depression have escalated in the past 17 months. It's safe to say that implementing policies to support employee mental health is a sound business decision for individual businesses and the economy as a whole.

It's important for organizations to recognize that grief comes in all shapes and sizes and to make sure their policies and people are flexible enough to meet employees where they're at, without judgment. As U.S. workers move through grief and loss associated with COVID-19 and shift into the echo mental health pandemic, leaders, plan sponsors and managers need to consider mental health impacts when contemplating major business decisions. 🗣️

### **Endnotes**

1. [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/11/unemployment-rose-higher-in-three-months-of-covid-19-than-it-did-in-two-years-of-the-great-recession/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/11/unemployment-rose-higher-in-three-months-of-covid-19-than-it-did-in-two-years-of-the-great-recession/).
2. [www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/#:~:text=During%20the%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic,largely%20stable%20since%20spring%202020.](http://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/#:~:text=During%20the%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic,largely%20stable%20since%20spring%202020.)
3. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/mind-guest-blog/the-growing-economic-burden-of-depression-in-the-u-s/>.