

Grief and the Echo Mental Health Pandemic

by | **Judy Plotkin**

COVID-19 has caused countless losses for Canadians. The average workplace has had to deal with many changes and the accompanying anxiety, conflict and grief as a result of the pandemic. To help employees move forward, employers can provide support through the process of returning to work with policies and programs that address mental health.

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.

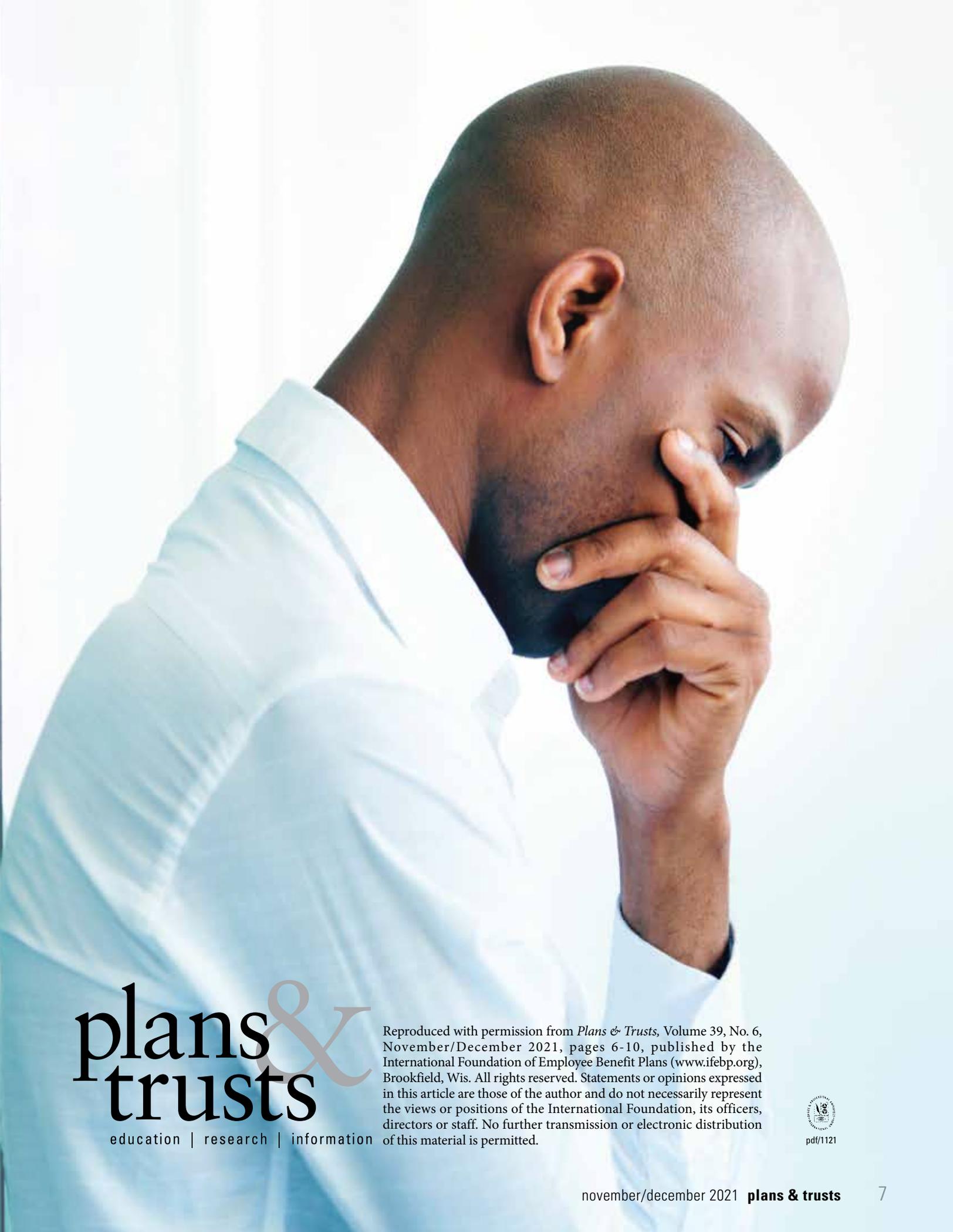
Grief is triggered by many other losses not limited to the death of a loved one. As the world nears the two-year anniversary of COVID-19 and all that accompanied it, the average workplace has experienced many losses. Some employees are grieving the loss or illness of loved ones while missing friends and family, dear colleagues and 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 as well as the loss of financial security and their old daily norms. When this is coupled with anxiety about health and returning to normal activities, it 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 and how employers can support employees as they return to work.

The Difference Between Grief and Mourning

Grief is the mental suffering or distress that people experience due to loss and regret. *Mourning* is how people outwardly express grief; it manifests in their thoughts and behaviours. Everyone experiences grief in a personal way, and



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their reactions result from 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 very difficult to notice now 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.

Anger and impatience can be partially understood by the uncertainty and lack of predictability that Canadians have experienced as workplaces have lurched from one COVID wave to the next. Many employees are missing the security, safety and certainty they had. It can be hard to move past loss when we don't know what is coming next.

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. Accepting the reality of the situation
2. Experiencing and processing their feelings
3. Adjusting to the world and the new reality
4. Finding a way to maintain a connection to how things were while moving on.

Types of COVID-19 Grief

During lockdowns, many standard mourning practices—such as funerals and memorial services—were 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 a bigger loss of a loved one.

While funerals and other important rituals such as weddings can still occur, their scope continues to be very limited depending on the varying provincial regulations in place across the country.

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 18 months 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.

As communities have begun to reopen, many Canadians have expressed feeling unsure about leaving the house and are worried about or reluctant to resume activities.

Together and separately, everyone has been through 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 depression, creating an echo mental health pandemic.

The Echo Mental Health Pandemic

The *echo mental health pandemic* refers to the increase in mental health issues that people are experiencing as they deal with the emotional aspects of COVID-19. The long-term impacts are expected to include a rising incidence of addiction, depression, divorce and suicide.

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A June 2021 Mental Health Research Canada poll found that the COVID-19 outbreak and restrictions were associated with an increase in both anxiety and depression among Canadians.² As vaccination levels increase and restrictions start to lift, the percentage of Canadians feeling high levels of anxiety is falling, but there is still cause for concern. For example, two-fifths of Canadians who report high levels of anxiety and/or depression are likely to be classified as moderate to severe.

Poll results also showed that almost one in three Canadians have said mental health struggles have affected their ability to work. One-quarter have increased their alcohol consumption, and one-third have increased their cannabis use. In addition, one-fifth of Canadians have accessed mental health support since the pandemic.

The echo pandemic is unlikely to quickly subside. Post-trauma side effects can show up for years after the event. People continued to experience grief and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for many months following events such as the 2003 SARS breakout and the 2016 wildfires in Fort McMurray. The wildfire example shows that the grief after the event was mostly about loss, not death. Although 80,000 people were evacuated, there were only two deaths during the fires, and they were attributed to a car crash during the evacuation rather than the wildfires themselves.

It can be difficult for managers and policy makers to imagine how to adequately address individual and collective COVID-19 grief and the echo mental health pandemic while simultaneously preparing for a return to the workplace. But employees will need

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, Culture and Policies to Support Mental Health

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, provide resources and are supported by leaders
- An employee assistance program (EAP). Traditional EAPs are typically skilled at providing bereavement support.
- Digital and/or virtual options for seeing a mental health profes-

sional, nurse or a medical doctor online.

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.

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 that people experience due to loss and regret. *Mourning* is how people outwardly express grief; it shows up through their thoughts and behaviours.
- This grief and other mental health struggles are expected to lead to an “echo pandemic” of mental health issues following the 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.

- **Adoption of the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace.** The standard provides a framework for organizations to support psychological health and safety and generate a positive return on investment (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 robust benefits plan, organizations show employees that they are committed to supporting and championing mental health and wellness.

Workplace Culture

The following practices can help create a workplace culture that supports mental health.

- **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 and normalizing the conversation.
- **Open communication about operations.** Employees are anxious to know what will be expected of them, whether they will return to the office and whether vaccines will be required. The unknown is often the biggest driver of anxiety.

Conclusion

Research by the Conference Board of Canada states, “Depression and anxiety cost the Canadian economy at least \$32.3 billion a year and \$17.3 billion a year, respectively.”³ While it’s not yet known how much COVID-19 grief has cost

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businesses in lost productivity, it’s clear that anxiety and depression have escalated in the past year. 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 are, without judgment. As Canadians move through grief and loss associated with COVID-19 and into the echo mental health pandemic, leaders, plan sponsors and managers need to consider mental health impacts when contemplating major business decisions. 🌐

Endnotes

1. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200508/dq200508a-eng.htm.
2. www.mhrc.ca/findings-of-poll-7.
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