



How to support a workplace
where there is grief or loss.

For managers leading a workplace when someone has experienced grief and loss.

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INTRODUCTION

Lost.

The word can come up in so many places.

“I lost my parents to cancer.”

“I lost my relationship when my partner and I broke up.”

“I lost my house in the floods.”

“I lost my job.”

We all face loss at some point in our lives. **This booklet is to help you as an employer or manager prepare to support an employee who may experience loss and grief.**

This booklet is written with a number of goals in mind:

- To give you **information about the experience** of loss and grief, and how it can affect someone’s life;

- To **address some of the big questions** that managers have about supporting someone through loss;
- To give you **practical goals and tasks** about managing a workplace where loss and grief are present; and,

Above all, it is written with a deep respect of what you are trying to do. To reach out to support an employee is a sign of true leadership, therefore this booklet is written with a genuine honour for the role you are playing in your employee’s life.

SECTION 1

The Five Things You Need to Know About Loss.



1. We all have a story of loss.

Loss is normal and grief is natural.

Consider the following questions: What is your first memory of loss? What was your most intense experience of grief? What have been some recent losses in your life? What loss has most made you the person you are today?

Some of these questions may take a bit of thinking to answer, but all adult human beings on the planet have answers to these questions. Why? Because **we all have a story of loss in our lives.** Yours may be about the death of a loved one. Mine may be about the loss of a job. His may be about the breakdown of a relationship and hers may be about a life-changing illness. Our stories will be unique but the fact remains: we all have a story of loss.

Loss is not a disease. Loss does not mean something is wrong with you. Loss does not mean you have failed in some way.

Loss is a normal, natural event, and **grief is a normal, natural response.** Whenever we experience loss, we also experience grief even though grief can be uncomfortable and painful, it is one of the most natural healing processes we know, similar to the pain felt as a broken

bone heals.

As you think about loss and grief sure to remember that grief is not like chicken pox, where once you have had it you are immune for life. In fact, even if you have experienced a number of losses before, grief often hits us with the same level of shock as it ever had.

Why do we grieve? For the simple reason that the person or thing that we have lost has been important to us. Grieving means that we have put time, energy, love and care into something in our life that is no longer there. Therefore, grief is actually a sign of how much we valued the person or thing that was lost.

2. Loss has many faces; we need to learn to recognise all of them.

One of the most recognisable experiences of loss and grief is the death of someone who is special to you in some way. The loss involved is of that person and everything they meant to the people around them. Grief involves readjusting to a 'new world' that does not have this person in it. The experience may be filled with intense feelings, strong physical sensations and all sorts of thoughts and actions that are particular to the experience.



People are sometimes surprised to hear that it is not necessary for someone to die to experience loss and grief. In fact, loss is part of many life experiences. Loss may appear to you as the death of a loved one. But it may also appear as the end of a relationship. Or it may appear in unemployment or retirement, in illness or disability, in moving house, in natural disaster, or in changing work demands.

In fact, in almost any life event that involves some change, loss will probably be present. Change, by definition, means moving from something old to something new, and that means leaving some things behind. If leaving these things behind is seen as negative by the person involved, then they are likely to experience some level of loss and grief.

We must learn that **loss has many faces**. The more we can learn to **recognise the faces of loss** in the many life experiences of change, the better we will be able to recognise and respond to our own and other people's experience of grief.

Losses are also like termites: they rarely exist alone. If one thing changes in a person's life, it is likely that other things will change as well. Each of these changes will have their own losses involved. Take, for example, the loss that happens when a marriage or relationship with a long-term partner ends. There will, of course, be the loss of the relationship with that there may also be loss of time with children. There may be the loss of losing the family home, or even town. There may be financial loss of reduced income or cost involved in the separation.

Therefore, if you or someone else is experiencing a loss in their life, it will probably mean that there are other losses present as well.

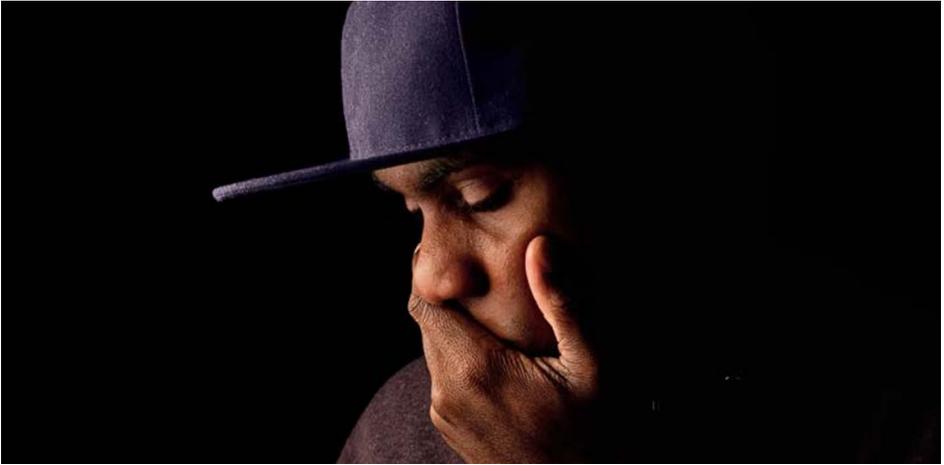
3. Everyone's experience of grief will be as unique as they are.

There is only one thing that is an iron-clad guarantee in loss and grief:

Everyone's experience of grief will be as unique as they are.

Grief is an experience which can saturate every part of our lives. The ingredients for our experience of loss and grief are emotional, physical, mental and social/behavioural.

- Emotionally we can feel sad, angry, guilty, anxious, powerless, lonely, tired, shocked, numb, isolated and yearning.
- Physically we can experience emptiness in the stomach, tightness in the chest, lump in throat, breathlessness, weakness in the muscles, feeling weighed down, nausea, heart palpitations and disturbances in appetite and sleep.
- Mentally we can have an increased awareness of death, sense of disbelief, confusion, preoccupation with the loss, negative self-talk, flashbacks, and difficulty putting experience into words.
- Behaviourally we can experience anything from social withdrawal, restlessness, crying, sighing, treasuring objects, avoiding triggers of memories, and feeling easily startled.



These lists in no way cover the whole range of feelings, thoughts and behaviours that can be involved in loss, but they give an indication of the variety of experiences. The ingredients that are present in any one person will be unique to that person and will mix together in a unique way. Therefore, one of the best things you can do for a person is **to give him or her the time, space and permission to grieve in their own way.**

Some of the things that will affect what ingredients will be present and how they mix together will include:

- **Culture.** The expression of grief and the rituals that surround a loss are often closely tied to one's culture.
- **Gender.** The different genders, both by nature and the way they are nurtured, often have different ways of relating to loss and grief, and these need to be acknowledged when someone is going through these experiences.
- **Other things going on in life.** Loss affects the rest of our lives, but it is also true that the rest of our life will affect the way we experience loss and grief.
- **Past experiences.** What we have experienced so far in life – including our past experiences of loss and grief – will affect the way we grieve.

4. People can and do heal from loss; but, like all healing, it is a journey that takes time.

How can something be healing if it hurts?

While it is difficult to understand as a child, with experience we can learn the healing value of pain. The sting of antiseptic cleaning a cut. The shivers of cold trying to warm your body through movement. The pains in a muscle as you exercise it to make it stronger.

While these examples are from the physical world, the same is true for loss: **people can and do heal** from the pain of loss and grief. Amazingly, many people also come to talk about grief as an experience of growth.

While this is the case, the healing that happens through grief happens over time rather than in an instant. Therefore, **the healing that happens in grief is a journey**. Knowing the destination does not necessarily make the journey easy, but it does give the journey a purpose.

The journey of healing involves:

A process. Healing takes time. There is no set time limit on grief; people must be allowed however long it takes them to have this process.

Ups and downs. Like the body healing, there will be both successes and setbacks. Ups and downs along the journey can be expected.

Integration. Even from our earliest years, our experiences of loss are written in as a key part of our life story. Just like a bone reshapes and adjusts as it heals, loss reshapes our lives. Through grief, our losses become a particular chapter written into our life story.

Sometimes, long term scars. Even when healing occurs in our bodies, we will always be different because of the injury. Loss, too, can leave scars. These scars can both be difficult to live with, as well as being a sign of the journey we have made.

5. Loss often feels like you are powerless and out of control.

Most of us like to sit in the driver's seat of our own lives. We like to have control over the direction we are going. We like to control the speed we are travelling. We like to be able to predict our own journey, to read the signs in our life for ourselves and to respond the way we like to respond.

The experience of loss can feel like being in a car where you suddenly have no control. It is like the steering wheel has been ripped out and the windscreen has been painted over. You might feel like you are speeding up or maybe you feel like you are jerking to a halt suddenly. Things you assumed would always be there are suddenly no longer there. Things you used to be able to predict are now unpredictable.

In this way, **loss threatens our sense of safety and control**, and often leaves us feeling powerless. In fact, it is not uncommon for people to say that this is one of the most difficult parts of an experience of loss.

Different people will react in different ways to this part of the grief experience, just as people would react in different ways if the steering wheel was suddenly pulled from the car they were driving. It is important to remember that you are used to seeing people when they are travelling smoothly and in control. In an experience of loss, people may think or behave differently to how you have seen them before. Remember that they are likely feeling out of control and powerless, and much of this behaviour should be understandable from this point of view.



What loss isn't – Addressing myths.

The experience of loss and grief is also surrounded by a number of myths that can be unhelpful unless they are addressed.

Myth: Grief has a universal structure and timeline.

This myth suggests that grieving follows a set structure and is generally 'finished' after a certain amount of time. While there are often some common tasks and stages that occur during grief, not every person will approach them the same way, and different people will take different amounts of time to heal through their grief.

Myth: It is important to get over grief as soon as possible and move on with your life.

Encouraging people to 'get over' and 'move on' from their grief is a bit like telling someone just to 'walk off' their broken leg. Grief is actually the process of healing and growth. Ignoring the pain won't make it go away. Allowing it is an important part of healing.

Myth: The more you cry, the more you are grieving what you have lost.

Tears are a very natural and healthy response to loss. However, they are only one response, and different people will find different ways of expressing their grief.

Myth: You just need to be strong and you will be fine.

Loss is part of life, but there is no way of predicting how you will react when you encounter it. Even if you have met many loss experiences in your life, each can be quite unique and can feel just as intense. If your reaction is to feel sad, frightened or hurt, that does not mean you are being 'weak'.

SECTION 2

The Big Questions

What will I see in the workplace when someone has experienced a loss?

There are many possibilities for what you may see around the time of a loss. Every loss and every person is unique, so of course their experience of grief will be as unique as they are. Still, there are some common things that you may notice when someone returns to work after an experience of loss and grief.

The effect of grief on the person.

Something that you can be sure of is that grief will have some effect on the person who has experienced the loss.

Grief affects every part of our life, so it is common for people to experience it physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. This can impact the work setting if someone is feeling tired and flat (physical), finding it hard to concentrate (mental), feeling sad, irritable or empty (emotional), and finding it hard to adjust back to a work setting (social). For other common reactions to grief, see the section, 'Your experience of grief will be as unique as you are'.

The effect of grief on the workplace.

While the loss may be in the life of one of your employees, it will probably have an effect on other people in your workplace. Those close to the person grieving may also be experiencing some grief. Others may feel unsure of how to react to the loss and what to say or do for the person grieving. If the loss has affected more than one person, there may be some collective grief, which may affect the morale of the workplace.

While loss and grief can be seen in the workplace in this way, don't forget that **the workplace can also be beneficial** to people who are grieving. Many people often find the routine, the normality, the social connection and the sense of accomplishment that the workplace provides to be an important part of healing.

How do I balance caring for the person with my responsibility of managing a business?

This is perhaps one of the most important questions to ask. Ideally, as a caring person, you would love to give someone who is grieving as much time and space as they need to heal and recover. However, as a manager, you also need to consider your responsibility to your workplace and your other employees.

Obviously, every situation will be unique and you will have to apply your own judgement to each scenario. However, here are some things to keep in mind:

- **Grief costs the workplace. Grief handled compassionately costs the workplace less than grief handled poorly.** There is an inevitable cost to the workplace when an employee experiences loss. There will likely be days of leave that need to be taken, as well as lost productivity at the time. However research shows that if grief is handled in a thorough and compassionate way by the workplace, there is actually reduced leave taken, fewer errors in the job, lower turnover of staff and increased productive teamwork.¹
- **If the job is that urgent and important, get someone else to do it.** Part of your responsibility as a manager is getting the 'job done'. This can be difficult if someone in your team needs special consideration for their experience of loss and grief. Still, if the job is so urgent and so important that it cannot wait for the employee to return to work, then responsible management would say that it would be better to delegate the role elsewhere rather than leave it with someone who is not able to complete the task.
- **People can and do heal from loss.** Remember that healing from loss is a journey. Therefore, while you are making special considerations for a person now, it does not mean that you will have to be making them forever. However, remember that there is no timeline on grief, so it is important not to make demands on when an individual 'should' be better.

Remember that as a manager you can provide further support to your employee and their colleagues by connecting them with services such as counseling or your workplace's EAP provider.

How do I juggle the different roles of being this person's boss but also trying to help them?

This is another very important question to ask. As a manager, you are often required to wear a number of different hats. Depending on what your role demands of you, you can be anything from a supervisor, to a co-worker, to an advocate, to a teacher, to a support person for your employees.

When your employee is experiencing loss and grief, it is right that you want to create a safe and supportive environment for them, but it is important to know what role you play in that. There are many people involved in this

loss: there could be family and friends, funeral directors and ministers, and lawyers and doctors. And then there is you, the manager. **The role for you to play in this person's loss and grief is to be a good manager.**

Good management will involve creating a safe and supportive environment at the workplace, and will balance the various competing demands that need to be taken into consideration.

By doing this you will be providing all the support that this person needs from you.



What do employees need from their workplace as they are going through grief and loss?

This is one of the most understandable questions for managers to ask. Thankfully, there are answers to what many employees want and need from their workplaces in times of loss and grief.

Flexibility. In research done with employees reflecting on their experience of grief in the workplace, the most important thing that they wanted more of from their workplace was flexibility.² While many workplaces allow time off, the study showed that employees generally needed more, even if it was unpaid. What employees valued most was when their workplaces and managers were able to listen and make reasonable concessions to the unique challenges their individual situation raised.

Acknowledgement. Something else that employees have found valuable is having their grief acknowledged by the workplace in some way. Whether it is through a phone call or a card or flowers or just a brief conversation, acknowledgement of this important life event made people feel valued.

While this is often done with bereavement, this is especially important in situations where an experience of grief is present but not generally recognised (e.g. relationship ending, injury or illness).

Permission. A further need of grieving employees is for the workplace to give some sort of verbal or implicit permission to do what they need to do to deal with this loss. This permission carries the message of: "Work is secondary; what is important now is that you deal with this loss." This allows the employee the freedom to do what they need, and will enable them to re-engage with work without it being a burden to them.

Someone to ask what they need. While all these things are important, nothing is a substitute for asking the person in a caring way what they personally need. Therefore, what your employee needs more than anything else is for you to ask them what they need and to talk with them about how you may be able to provide that.

SECTION 3

The Key Leadership Task of Managers

The key task: Creating a safe and supportive environment.

In managing a workplace where one of your employees has experienced a loss, management has a single, unique and utterly vital role:

To create a safe and supportive workplace environment.³

If you can achieve this as a manager, you will have provided a precious resource to your employee to help them in their healing.

Doing this happens at a number of levels:

- Helping people feel safe and supported at a **personal level**. This is about ensuring that your employee's internal thoughts, feelings and experiences are being valued and respected, and acting to provide support for these personal experiences.
- Helping people feel safe and supported at a **relationships level**. This involves ensuring that interactions that occur in the

workplace are respectful and sensitive to their needs.

- Helping people feel safe and supported at an **organisational level**. This requires management to ensure that workplace structures, policies and practices are fair and compassionate in order for employees to feel safe and supported in the workplace.

The following pages contain a number of steps that you can take to develop personal, relational and organisational safety and support for those going through loss and grief.

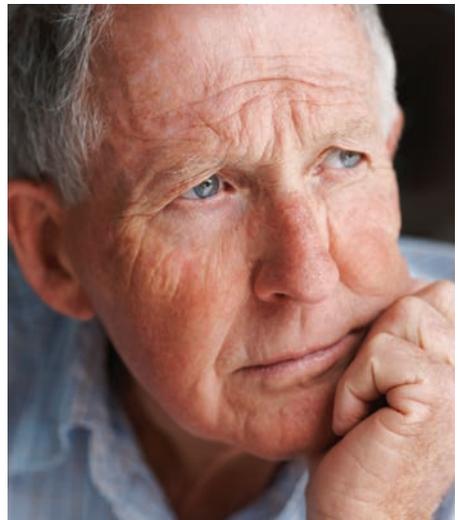
Step 1. Preparation – policies and plans for loss and grief.

The first and most proactive thing that management can do to care for those experiencing loss and grief is to have prepared for this event in advance. Of course, there is no way of knowing when and how loss and grief might become an issue in the workplace, which is why it is important to have such preparation done proactively.

A thorough preparation will include **policies and plans** for events involving loss and grief. In more recent years, it has become more common for organisations to carry an official bereavement policy. Such policies often include, but are not limited to, elements such as:

- Statement of workplace values and ethos,
- Leave entitlements,
- Information about the return to work,
- Support that the workplace can offer employees,
- Health and safety considerations, and
- Allowances for cultural diversity.⁴

While these policies are an essential start, a thorough preparation would also include plans for experiences of loss. This may be as simple as a checklist of things that you would like to do as an organisation when someone experiences a loss. Having proactively planned something like this will help you to act appropriately in reaction to a loss.



Step 2. Communication – listening and informing when possible.

The second thing that you can do to create a safe and supportive environment is to provide effective **communication** for the person experiencing loss and grief. It is generally accepted that good communication is good leadership, which is why this is so critical in helping people feel safe and supported.

The first part of creating a safe and supportive environment through communication is **listening**. It is likely that it would be appropriate for you to make contact with the employee who has experienced loss. If that is the case, your key task is to listen to their experience, the challenges they are facing, and their particular needs at the time. It will also be important that you are listening around the workplace for other people that need support or who may have information.

In short, **you cannot do enough listening**.

Whenever you are communicating, remember that the goal is to enhance the sense of safety for the person grieving. Therefore, make sure you consider talking to your employee at a time, in a place and in a way that protects their privacy.

At times, it will also be appropriate for you to **inform** people of things that are happening, which is the other side of communication. While listening should occur always, informing others should only occur as needed. Things that may restrict your ability to pass on information would be if it interferes with someone's privacy, it is against someone's wishes, or if it is rumour that has not been verified.

Giving open and accurate information both to the grieving employee and to other members of the workplace can aid in people feeling both safe and supported. You may have a key role in keeping the workforce up to date with the employees' experience and wishes (if they agree for this to happen), as well as preparing them for their return. Keeping the employee up to date with any changes in the workplace since they have been on leave makes their integration back into the workplace easier.

Step 3. Mobilisation – moving resources to people and people to resources.

As many managers know, a key task of leadership is co-ordinating resources in order to achieve a purpose. In the same way, managers need to mobilise resources to create a safe and supportive environment for those facing loss and grief.

The first part of this task is **moving resources to people**. This involves reaching out to the employee experiencing grief and loss by providing them with supportive resources. It is important in the early stages that you offer to move resources towards them, rather than waiting for them to come to you. Be sure to ask their permission for any support that you offer, asking helps to keep them empowered. Examples of mobilising resources in this way may be:

- Organising for staff close to the employee to be available for support.
- Co-ordinating some sort of communication or gift from the workplace to the employee.
- Organising leave entitlements for the employee.
- Discussing with the employee a plan for the time and their return to work.

The second part of mobilising resources that occasionally needs to be used is **moving people to resources**. This involves connecting the employee who is grieving or others in the workplace with resources that will help them manage the grief experience. Examples of this may include:

- Organising for the employee to attend counselling through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- Organising for staff to attend relevant training (e.g. dealing with grief and loss, psychological first aid).

Step 4. Reflection – leading your organisation in learning.

The final step in creating a safe and supportive workplace is to lead your workplace in ongoing **reflection** on what can be improved in supporting others through grief and loss. This is an experience of constant learning and improvement.

This may include a number of elements:

- **Being open to feedback.** Learning starts with you as a leader seeking and being open to feedback about how the workplace does and doesn't operate in a safe and supportive manner.
- **Engaging the employee as a 'consultant'.** Sometime after the loss, if it is appropriate, it may be beneficial to speak to the employee about their experience of the workplace during the time of loss. People may be quite willing to do this, especially if it is framed as a way of helping others in the future.
- **Reviewing policies and plans in light of experience.** With every experience of dealing with loss, it is important to review policies and plans to check whether they were appropriate and adequate.
- **Engaging the staff in planning for a supportive work environment.** Engaging the staff in planning how they would like to provide a safe and supportive environment could be a highly beneficial task, and one that promotes reflection and learning from each other.



Don't forget: Care for yourself.

Remember the saying that a good carpenter always takes care of his/her tools?

Reaching out to an employee when they are grieving is a remarkable gift you can give to a person. Still, it is important to recognise that sometimes it can be tough to help others. Helping out practically can leave us feeling tired; listening to people emotionally can leave us feeling sad or low.

This is why it is important to care for yourself while you are caring for other

people. It is just like a carpenter taking care of his tools. In fact, looking after yourself is one of the best things you can do as a leader to care for someone else; it means that you have the ongoing energy and strength to help them.

An important part of this is knowing what your limits are. We all have limits to our time, our energy and our skills. By knowing the limit of what you can do, and by not going beyond that limit, you can avoid doing damage to yourself and the other person.

Don't forget: Respect privacy and confidentiality.

It is important to remember that people have a right to privacy. This needs to be honoured in the workplace in a number of ways.

You may find that some people experiencing a loss might be resistant to the idea of the workplace offering support for their grief. This may be for many reasons: perhaps they like to keep their work and private lives separate, perhaps they are feeling like they are managing, or perhaps they are just someone who keeps things to themselves. Whatever the reason, it is both wise and respectful to allow them their privacy, while maintaining that you are available if they ever need support.

The second thing you need to consider in respecting privacy is the issue of **confidentiality**. Most of us are familiar with workplace gossip and how destructive it can be. When someone has experienced a loss, gossip and rumours are quite common. If your employee who is grieving has trusted you enough to share something personal with you, be sure that you keep that to yourself. Sharing this with others could be seen as a betrayal of that trust. The only exceptions would be if your employee gives you permission to share it with others, or if keeping it to yourself was somehow unsafe to you, your employee or other people.

Who else can help?

Grief is a normal, natural process, but that does not make it easy.

If your employee is feeling like their life is becoming **too difficult to manage** because of their grief, it may be **time to seek some extra support**.

There are many different ways that you or your colleague can get extra support:

- Suggest that they make an appointment with a counsellor or psychologist. Counselling is an excellent way to process and work through your grief, particularly if it is becoming difficult to manage. If you don't know how to find a counsellor or psychologist, speak to your local GP.
- Look for support groups either in your area or online. Connecting with other people who have gone through or are going through a similar experience can be beneficial and strengthening.
- Explore whether your workplace can give you access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). These programs exist to aide employees in emotional adjustment, and can give you access to resources for support.

Often EAP programs offer managers support for dealing with difficult issues in the workplace. Consider making an appointment for yourself if this is available.

OTHER RESOURCES

SuperFriend

SuperFriend is a national mental health promotion foundation that helps “all profit to member” profit superannuation funds to promote and support improved mental health and wellbeing for their members, through the workplace. SuperFriend aims to reduce the incidence of suicide and the impacts of mental illness on individuals, employers, workplaces, family and friends.

SuperFriend works collaboratively with the mental health sector to develop and promote mental health information, resources, programs and research within workplaces. By improving the understanding of mental health and mental illness in the workplace, SuperFriend influences the policies and practices that foster healthy, supportive work environments.

For further information please visit our website: www.superfriend.com.au

Lifeline

13 11 14 – 24/7 crisis support

Online Crisis Support Chat, information resources & service finder www.lifeline.org.au

Lifeline is a national charity providing all Australians experiencing a personal crisis with access to 24 hour crisis support and suicide prevention services. Somewhere in Australia there is a new call to Lifeline every minute. Our volunteers answer around 1800 calls everyday. Sadly up to 50 of these calls are from people at high risk of suicide. Suicide remains the leading cause of death for Australians under the age of 44. We all have a role in preventing suicide. Each dollar you give helps us at www.lifeline.org.au



Employee Assistance Program

Check with your manager or HR representative if you have access to an EAP.

There are many organisations that provide information, support and services for people experiencing grief, including for specific types of loss. These are just a small selection of organisations who can help. For other services visit Lifeline's website and use the Service Finder to locate services in your local area.

Australian Centre for Grief & Bereavement

www.grief.org.au

Australian Psychological Society

www.psychology.org.au/community/

Trauma and Grief Network for Indigenous People

<http://tgn.anu.edu.au/resource/indigenous/>

GriefLink

www.grieflink.org.au

Grief Line

www.griefline.org.au

Grief in the Workplace

www.griefintheworkplace.com



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