



NTSAD FAMILY CONNECTIONS

NTSAD For Newly Bereaved Families | Month Seven

Returning to Work and Coping with Lifestyle Changes

BY SARA SCAPAROTTI, JOEY'S MOM

Six months after Joey died, although determined it would never define me, I could feel how grief was molding me, transforming my identity into something new, not yet fully known. No longer a caregiver and with my oldest son in full-day kindergarten, I was tossed back-and-forth between the endless opportunities brought on by a new, albeit unwanted, beginning and the strong pull towards the comfort of a familiar, less challenging and uncertain career path. I wanted to change the world and hide in a protective cocoon all at the same time.

Regardless of our education, where we are in our careers, or if we chose to give up a job or keep working after our child's/children's diagnosis, the transition back to work -- be it 5 days, or 5+ years after our child's passing -- can be deeply rewarding, an immense challenge, or a combination of both.

In the companion article below, Mary Rose Tichar, career coach, licensed professional counselor and founder of InsideOut Career Direction shares some of her insights around the "Top Five Struggles of Parents Returning to Work After Death of Child."

As always, our circumstances will be different and no one's journey is the same, yet knowing what to expect can help normalize some of the challenges, and as a result help us better prepare and feel less lonely as we embark on a new chapter and work towards healing.

Remember, grieving takes time. Whatever your experience, it's important to be patient with yourself and allow the process to naturally unfold.



You may also find the following link, [How to Cope at Work When You're Grieving a Loved One's Death](#) from [verymindful.com](#) helpful in coping with the emotional triggers one may face at their place of employment.

"When someone is going through a storm, your silent presence is more powerful than a million empty words." Thelma Davis

Resources:

Secondary Losses

The following article from Vitas Healthcare explains the secondary losses you may be feeling after the primary loss of your loved one.

[You're Not Suffering One Loss, Your'e Suffering Many.](#)



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Top Five Struggles of Parents Returning to Work After Death of Child

MARY ROSE TICHAR, M.ED, LPC, CCC

A child's death is the ultimate tragedy and will affect every aspect of a parent's life. Regarding the parent's career and life's work, the following are some of the challenges faced after their child's death upon returning to work, whether after a leave of absence or just a few weeks after the funeral.

1. Career Identity

The parent may have had to take a position with less responsibility during the illness to care for their child and possibly other children. The parent may have missed important events and opportunities for their career development, perhaps a promotion or the launch of a new product or system that created a reorg in the organization. The parent can feel left behind and distressed about their role and place in the organization and their ability to provide for their family.

"Being out of the office for two years as a full-time mom and caregiver, then having my work title stripped from me without consent, and then having to return to work in the deepest pain of my life is not easy. I have to discover my purpose all over again. Not to mention the corporate world is not a friend of grief. My husband had a week off to process and grieve the loss of his daughter. Let that sink in for a minute. A heart-shattering loss and he's expected back to work as usual." (Quote from a grieving parent)

"So often, parents put their career on the back burner so they can deal with what is in front of them, but over time this makes career mobility very difficult. Even the most empathic employers will come to a place where they struggle to accommodate their employees. It is a very stressful juggle, and it's hard to put yourself and your career off continuously. There are financial and emotional tolls taken. (Quote from a grieving parent)

2. Re-assimilation into the Workplace

After a life-altering experience, the parent may find it challenging to engage in casual office conversation about the crummy weather, the inconvenience of a car repair, or having to care for a family member with a short term illness. The parent can feel disconnected from everyday life concerns; thus, feelings of loneliness, isolation, and a lack of being "seen and understood" can set in.

"I fought against feelings of being judged for being back at work. Maybe I should still be at home weeping. Maybe people won't think that my child's death affected me that much. There is the awkwardness of people not knowing if they should talk about him, so it just becomes the elephant in the room. I appreciated the people who would bring him up and would be okay with the discomfort. I also remember running into a coworker who did not know
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my child had died and asked how my kids were. Often this scenario then turns into me informing and then comforting THEM because they feel bad." (Quote from a grieving parent)

3. The Shift of Personal and Career Goals, Values, and Energy

I don't even know who I am anymore. Parents can be exhausted beyond the capacity of the average balance of life's rhythm. This fatigue often brings a parent to ask life's most gripping questions such as "what is the meaning and purpose of my life," "how can I make a difference in the world around me," or "I need a job that offers more than financial stability." This life-altering experience can also bring to attention unrealized interests and passions and a desire to incorporate them into their life's work. The grieving parent might face an existential dilemma regarding their career and occupation. This turmoil can add to the distress of the family's well-being.

4. Self Identity and Confidence

Grief and fatigue create an **allostatic load* on the parent's mind, body, and confidence. It can cause feeling distracted, unable to focus, and a challenge to one's ability to return to previous performance standards, job responsibilities, and employer expectations. Parents also experience brain fog, memory regarding their work tasks, and feeling unmotivated towards their work.

In contrast, work can provide relief and a healthy distraction from one's grief and suffering. This might cause a parent to immerse oneself into their work and career as a means for pushing down, or pushing away, their grief and feeling overwhelmed with life.

**Allostatic load is "the wear and tear on the body which accumulates as an individual is exposed to repeated or chronic stress.*

"My coworkers and supervisors tolerated my frequent absences for medical emergencies and appointments, but they didn't understand what my life was like at all. They thought of me as lazy, undependable, and flaky. That had a huge impact on my self-worth. I felt bad about myself all of the time. I was continually guilty that I wasn't doing a good job at work or home."

(Quote from a grieving parent)

5. Marriage, Health, and Financial Strain

This ultimate tragedy will impact every aspect of the parent's life. While the notion of "leave it at the door" has been conventional wisdom for entering the workplace each morning, we know this is asking the impossible of a parent as they learn to live without the presence of their child. The fatigue of grief allows little energy for life outside of the workplace; people grieve differently, and a long illness can ruin financial wellness and stability. Grief is physical and can be cause for the onset of disease or exacerbate an existing condition. These stressors combined can cause a decrease in interest, energy, and performance in the workplace.

"We never truly get over a loss, but we can move forward and evolve from it." - Elizabeth Berrien



Laughter is the Best Medicine

TAKEN FROM LIVING WITH LOSS FOR SAN DIEGO HOSPICE SURVIVORS, ISS. 9

As you already know, loss can be hazardous to your health. Studies have shown that the immune systems of bereaved individuals are depressed and therefore less able to protect them from illness. Humor and laughter can help both physically and emotionally. It helps keep the immune system in balance and is a healthy strategy for coping with emotional pain.

Laboratory studies have demonstrated that genuine laughter has positive effects on most of the major systems of the body. For example, your cardiovascular system is exercised as your heart rate and blood pressure rise and fall. Your heavy breathing creates a vigorous air exchange in your lungs and muscle tension is relieved. Laughter also releases endorphins, the body's natural pain killers, and may foster euphoric feelings. Hearty laughter is very much like aerobic, however it is more accessible and convenient, as well as inexpensive.

"Remember that there is nothing disloyal about laughter and fun. It represents your ability to rejoin life and live fully. If you had been the one to die, wouldn't you have wished your loved one love and laughter in their lives? Wouldn't they want the same for you?"

Major university studies have shown that individuals with the capacity to enjoy humor under a variety of circumstances were the most capable of coping with tension and severe personal problems. Subsequent studies indicated that the ability to produce humor "on demand" could counteract the negative emotional effects of stress. Therefore, remaining open to levity, even in the midst of your most solemn situations, can help you stay both physically and mentally healthy.

Humor can place your situation in perspective and expand your vision. It instills hope and helps us look forward rather than backward. Furthermore, the capacity to find humor in the midst of pain is a sign that healing is taking place. It also indicates that you are beginning to embrace life once again.

"Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh" - George Bernard Shaw

"I believe...that laughter is the only cure for grief and I believe that love is stronger than death." -Robert Fulghum.