

The hidden perils of unresolved grief

The pandemic is fueling a wave of grief and loss that threatens to derail leaders and hurt organizations. Yet when addressed, grief can be a creative force that turns loss into inspiration.

by Charles Dhanaraj and George Kohlrieser

Chances are, there's a hidden attendee on your team's Zoom meetings right now—a shadowy presence that's holding back one or more of your colleagues, fostering self-doubt, causing them to dwell on failure, barriers, and everything that can go wrong. It's sapping their energy and leadership capacity, and could even be damaging their health, along with the health of your organization.

If it's not happening to a colleague, it might be happening to you.

This force is unresolved grief, and research suggests it costs companies billions of dollars a year in lost productivity and performance. Our own multiyear research effort finds that unresolved grief is a pervasive, overlooked leadership derailer that affects perhaps one-third of senior executives at one time or another.

And these are far from ordinary times. The death, human suffering, and loss stemming from COVID-19 is unprecedented in living memory. For those who have lost loved ones, there may be no ceremonies to say final goodbyes; there is no grieving together. Moreover, the pandemic is fueling loss and grief in ways other than death and illness. Personal losses of all kinds—postponed weddings, missed graduations, painful separations from family and friends, laid off or furloughed colleagues, shuttered offices, even the cancellation of sports seasons or other valued events—can create a lingering sense of grief that harms a leader's effectiveness and may become debilitating if unaddressed. What's more, a host of ordinary work experiences can trigger similar emotional responses. A missed promotion, losing a key customer or client, the end of a project or the disbanding of a team, the retirement of a beloved colleague or boss, even an M&A event—these can all spark feelings of grief that include shock, anger, sadness, and fear.

In this article, we draw upon research in psychology, leadership, and neuroscience—as well as our own longitudinal research—to highlight the challenges caused by unresolved grief and present approaches to help address the problem. Our hope is that more leaders will come to recognize that the painful emotions they and their colleagues may be experiencing—all of which are an inevitable part of being human—need not be debilitating or destructive; indeed, when addressed over time, these emotions can be reframed as constructive, positive, and creative elements of life, thereby helping leaders and organizations turn loss into inspiration.

Understanding grief

At its most basic, our experience of grief stems from our natural resistance to change. That’s why some definitions of grief usefully describe it as “the conflicting emotions brought by the change of a familiar pattern.” In our own work, we frame the discussion in terms of basic human needs—for identity, purpose, attachment, and control, among other things. When people feel the loss of one or more of these deep-seated needs (exhibit), they are experiencing grief. And the fact that these losses can stem from a variety of circumstances helps explain why feelings of grief don’t solely arise from obviously negative life events but can also be spurred by positive ones, such as moving to a new city, starting a new job, or having a baby.

Exhibit

Grief arises from the loss of one or more deep-seated human needs.

Loss of attachment —who am I connected to?	I need to feel connected, bonded, secure, or included.
Loss of territory —where do I belong?	I need to feel a sense of belonging or grounding to a place or a home.
Loss of structure —what is my role?	I need to feel important, involved, and valued.
Loss of identity —who am I?	I need to know who I am as an individual, what I stand for, what my values are.
Loss of future —where am I going?	I need to know my direction and have hope and positive expectations.
Loss of meaning —what is the point?	I need to find meaning and purpose in all situations.
Loss of control —I feel overwhelmed	I need to feel in control of the situation or my destiny.

In our work over two decades with the International Institute for Management Development's (IMD) High Performance Leadership program, we have long been attuned to the disruptive presence of loss and unresolved grief. This stems in part from the fact that one of us (George) saw firsthand the detrimental effects of unresolved grief when working early in his career with police officers as a hostage negotiator, where he saw how unresolved grief was a recurring trigger for hostage-taking behavior.

Nonetheless, we have been continually surprised by how pervasive unresolved grief can be (affecting fully one-third of the 7,000-plus executives we've worked with), how likely it is that the symptoms go unnoticed or undiscussed, and how ill-equipped organizations are to handle it. The negative impact of unresolved grief is considerable. In addition to the well-known ways that stress from grief damages our physical health,¹ the financial cost of grief to organizations appears high: \$75 billion a year for US companies, according to one study.² Yet the loss of leadership capability and potential that results from unresolved grief, as well as the human suffering and pain, can seem beyond measure.

The cost of grief

Meet Bill,³ an executive in his forties who, on paper, should have been a rising star in his organization. Bill wasn't reaching his potential. He felt something was holding him back. Over time, as we became closer through working with him, Bill admitted that he was still grieving the tragic loss of his child, Karen, some 20 years before. Bill's memories of the event remained vivid and painful: seeing her riding her bicycle down the sidewalk as he worked nearby in the garden, recognizing in a flash that she was losing control and swerving into the street, seeing the approaching car. Even two decades on, Bill's sense of loss was gut wrenching, as was the intensity of his self-blame. "I never should have taught her to ride the bicycle," he told us. "I'm responsible for her death."

The effect on Bill's work life was visible in hindsight; grief affects the way leaders see the world. When we are locked in grief, our focus shifts away from possibility and positives and dwells instead on negativity and failures. Bill's sense of helplessness was slow-burning and destructive—a cloud hanging over him. It was also subtle. At work, he was aloof and emotionally disconnected from his team; he was liked and respected, but slow to take initiative. Over the years, he had stopped applying for promotions and roles that people thought he was well-suited for.

This emotional unavailability stemming from unresolved grief often makes executives live below their capacity. They may have difficulty bonding with peers or direct reports. They often prefer to play it safe. This can be true even when the loss involved isn't the death of a loved one.

This was the case for Celeste, a senior executive who had been a highly competitive Olympic-prospect athlete in her teenage years, but who had come up just short in a

¹ Eliana Crosina and Michael G. Pratt, "Understanding how grief weakens the body," *Atlantic*, September 11, 2014, theatlantic.com.

² Research in this area is scarce, and more is needed. The figure we cite is from a 2003 study by the Grief Recovery Institute and is still widely cited today. Our goal in including it is not to encourage false precision but rather to show the sheer scope of the impact. For more, see Darlene Gavron Stevens, "The cost of grief," *Chicago Tribune*, August 20, 2003, chicagotribune.com.

³ The names of all individuals mentioned in this article have been changed to protect their privacy.

regional championship. The shock of this outcome, and the sense of failure, was still vivid for Celeste three decades later. “I felt like a piece of meat,” she said, recalling the moment the judges’ numbers came up. “The worst was when I looked at my coach, and then saw my father in the audience.” The sense of disappointment she saw there was the final straw. She gave up the sport, and years later wouldn’t even allow her daughters to take it up. Eventually, this sense of “playing not to lose” rather than “playing to win” spilled into her professional life as well.

The unhappiness and lack of self-respect a grieving leader feels can lead to a lack of respect for others. In some cases, the aloofness and passivity a grieving leader displays tips into coldness, coerciveness, cynicism, suspicion, and anger. In the case of Ram, a business-unit leader in a large global company, the guilt and pain associated with his father’s untimely death—and the fact that Ram missed his chance to say goodbye—morphed into a dull, generalized anger that he directed against his company and its people. He subconsciously blamed work for stopping his relationship with his father. Ram had been a star, but after his father’s death he was going through the motions, failing to step up even when he was handpicked to lead an initiative by the company’s global leadership. Ram’s own leadership suffered; he was less inspiring and more withdrawn, while under the surface, he burned with resentment.

Leaders often fail to recognize that they carry these burdens. Their organizations, meanwhile, are ill-equipped to manage the challenge. The focus of support for workplace grief has generally been helping colleagues after the death of an employee. Yet many sources of loss and grief don’t involve death but instead losses that feel like it. A recent study of former Lehman Brothers bankers found that after the company collapsed in 2008, many employees went through all the feelings we associate with grief. As one employee described: “I felt I lost one of my beloved . . . even though it might sound [dramatic], still, when I think about those days, I feel I was in a sort of funeral.” A CEO we know revealed the depth of his shock and feelings of loss just hours after the news that his beloved organization had been acquired, when he asked plaintively, “What do I tell my family?” He hadn’t suffered the death of a loved one, but he had lost his sense of attachment, territory, structure, and control—central aspects of his very identity.

Resolving grief: A model

Grief is an inevitable part of life, something that every leader will face sooner or later. But unresolved grief doesn’t have to be. Leaders who want to overcome grief must pass through a three-stage process: becoming consciously aware of the problem; accepting the pain of the loss; and, finally—drawing on the science of neuroplasticity—taking actions that help them let go of the past and find new meaning from the experience. We’ll now highlight these stages, note how the process helped three top executives (Ram and Bill, whom you met earlier, and Karla), and describe ways that organizations can implement this thinking.

As we’ll see, some aspects of the approach are best conducted in the privacy and safety of a therapeutic environment. But developing a better understanding of grief will help every leader. Those who are suffering from unresolved grief can learn how to better

identify and address it in themselves; those who aren't will be better equipped to help their organizations manage this hidden threat.

Become aware

Awareness is the first step to resolving any problem, but our subconscious minds are great at keeping us safely unaware of things that might harm us emotionally. Recent research in cognitive neuroscience sheds light on the concept of “implicit memory”⁴: the influence of past experience on behavior, often without any recollection of the experience or awareness of the negative behavior. We've found that executives with unresolved grief are seldom able to connect the dots between their past trauma and present behavior. In Ram's case, the grief associated with his father's death was fresh and top of mind, as was its negative effect on his emotional state. What Ram hadn't seen was the toll on his behavior and how much it was diminishing his ability—and indeed his willingness—to lead. For Ram, as with many executives we've worked with, it was this combination of *connecting the dots* and *counting the cost* of his unresolved grief that proved a breakthrough. Ram continued to resolve his grief through the stages that follow, and we saw him grow both personally and professionally. “Before,” Ram told us, “I cried every weekend [for my father] and it didn't help. Now, I no longer [need to] cry—I feel great.” As Ram reenergized, he began engaging with people and returning to form as a leader. Eventually, Ram moved on to become the CEO of another global company.

Accept reality

Awareness reflects knowledge of reality, but acceptance requires an act of will. Many executives never get to this stage, because, frankly, it's hard to do. The process of coming to terms with what we've lost means reexamining and even reliving some of the painful emotions that our subconscious minds may have been working overtime to repress.

Denial is powerful. We've been surprised again and again to see how otherwise rational human beings persist in irrational denial. Consider Karla, a senior executive whose unresolved grief stemmed from a miscarriage. Like Ram, she was initially unable to connect the dots between her grief and her leadership—her fear of negative outcomes had made her dictatorial, unemotive, and unwilling to bond with others. She was trying to tough it out, thinking that “time heals all wounds.” But what she had really done is construct a world for herself where the miscarriage never happened. Every dinner at home even included an empty chair at the table, and Karla comforted herself with the belief that the child was present.

Karla would eventually come to see how her loss could be an opportunity for learning, and over time she resolved her grief. But to do so, she had to open the lid on her repressed emotions, relive them in service of accepting reality, and understand and accept that her loss could not be filled by any other person or thing. Confronting such raw emotions can be especially challenging for senior executives. Expressing emotion means making yourself vulnerable, and leaders often resist this. They worry, understandably, that it could undercut the sense of stability they want to project to their teams. In fact, the opposite is true; leaders who demonstrate vulnerability⁵ perform better and have more loyal and engaged teams.

⁴ Daniel L. Schacter, “Implicit memory, constructive memory, and imagining the future: A career perspective,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 2019, Volume 14, Number 2, pp. 256–72, scholar.harvard.edu.

⁵ Nicolai Chen Nielsen, Gemma D'Auria, and Sasha Zolley, “Tuning in, turning outward: Cultivating compassionate leadership in a crisis,” May 1, 2020, McKinsey.com.

Opening up emotionally allows those who have suffered from unresolved grief to restart the process of bonding with other people. As their focus shifts outward, their internal dialogue shifts from defensive to positive. This brings calm, clarity, gratitude, and even playfulness. With a positive focus, a leader can once again prioritize vision, goal setting, and courage; once again, he or she can inspire others to follow. It is almost like emerging from a heavy fog. As one executive put it: “I see something different now. I now recognize that grief is a problem to be solved.”

Reconstruct your memory

Scientific research has shown that acceptance alone doesn't bring an end to grieving. To truly move on, an individual must find a way to create personal meaning from the loss.

When we suffer a deep loss, we don't just lose a person, a thing, a job; we also lose a set of deeply cherished dreams and visions. When Bill lost his daughter, he lost not only his child but also his dreams of seeing her grow up, thriving, having a family. Similarly, an executive who loses her job loses her vision of the future; the plans she worked so hard to design may never be implemented. The reality of a world where such dreams can't be realized can be a frightening drain on one's emotional energy. We may lose our worldview and even our very identity.

Detaching ourselves from these dreams is a mental and emotional choice. Grief expert David Kessler's work in repositioning grief describes this process not as an endpoint but as a prelude to profound discovery.⁶

The therapeutic process by which memories can be reconstructed and reconsolidated draws on research into neuroplasticity. In principle, the process is comparable to the pioneering treatments developed in the 1990s for phantom limb pain, where mirrors are used to project a visible limb in the place of the missing one. This allows the brain to rewire itself and sort out the neurological mismatch between what a patient sees and the pain they feel.⁷

The parallel effort in grief resolution begins by raising the loss—and the narrative embedded in it—to one's conscious emotional experience. We then juxtapose that narrative with a new one that directly confronts the memory with a new possibility (the “mismatch,” in this case), and repeat this multiple times to help the brain reorganize the old memory and experience it in a new way.

This process helped Bill move past the loss of his daughter and the dreams he associated with her. He discovered a new sense of individual purpose by volunteering at an organization that helps children learn about gardening, an activity he'd enjoyed with his daughter. Through helping other children, Bill found new meaning that inspired him, and found a way to honor his daughter and help heal his painful memories. Professionally, Bill's leadership capacity has grown, and he has since been promoted twice; he is widely recognized as an inspiring leader inside his organization.

⁶ See David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, New York, NY: Scribner, 2019.

⁷ See V. S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*, New York, NY: William Morrow, 1998.

What organizations can do

As the previous examples suggest, there is life after grief—even a richer and more fulfilling life, fueled by a strengthened sense of purpose. Organizations have an important role to play in this mostly personal turnaround. Leadership teams can start to embed a spirit of awareness, acceptance, and action in the company by doing the following:

- **Set the right tone.** Leaders who open themselves to those around them inspire openness and signal an availability and warmth that draws others out. Organizations with leaders such as this are no less likely to experience the inevitability of grief, but they are far more likely to react positively and effectively when it arrives.
- **Recognize grief in your organization.** Senior executives should prompt difficult conversations about grief at times when the source of grief is obvious—and even when it's not so obvious, such as during a strategic restructuring or an abrupt leadership transition. One of us experienced this firsthand when his manager was suddenly terminated in a terse email by a more senior executive. The organization grieved deeply; the fired manager had been with the company for two decades and was the only leader many employees there had worked with for their entire careers. After recognizing the negative effects, a senior leader convened a meeting to explain the reasons behind the move. It was a painful gathering, but it also kicked off a meaningful healing process.
- **Create organizational rituals.** Human cultures have rituals and ceremonies so that the society and the community can help grievers and their families. Organizational cultures should have their own rituals, which can send powerful signals of recovery and transformation.⁸ Japanese organizations are known for their rituals when there are senior-leadership transitions,⁹ giving ample space and time for the organization to recognize the past and move into the future. “Failure wakes” and other such rituals help staffers get over failed experiments by celebrating their boldness with food, drinks, and reflections on what was learned. These rituals are anything but superfluous. Instead, they help people move on from grief.

Unresolved grief is a quietly destructive force that derails leaders and hurts organizations during the best of times. And these aren't the best of times. By recognizing the ways the pandemic is fueling grief and loss, leaders and organizations alike can take steps to transform grief into a creative force that turns loss into inspiration. Q

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⁸ Rituals are a fascinating and important area of ongoing research. For more, see Nicholas M. Hobson, Devin Bonk, and Michael Inzlicht, “Rituals decrease the neural response to performance failure,” *PeerJ*, May 30, 2017, ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.

⁹ For example, see Hirochika Nakamaki, “Memorial monuments and memorial services of Japanese companies: Focusing on Mount Koya,” in *Ceremony and Ritual in Japan: Religious Practices in an Industrialized Society*, London, UK: Routledge, 1995, pp. 25–37.