

Returning to Work

Routine Can Help the Healing Process

Rachel Kodanaz



Returning to work may be daunting to someone who has just suffered the death of a family member or close loved one. Mustering the courage to re-engage in normal daily activities feels so distant, yet it has been proven that returning to work, school or worship plays a significant role in well-being.

When returning to work after my husband, Rod, suddenly passed away, I worried:

- How would I interact with my co-workers?
- How would I control my emotions?
- Would I be able to concentrate?
- Would I be able to perform as I once did?
- Would I be able to care for my daughter and myself?

As the sole provider for my 2-year-old, I really didn't have a choice. After my extended bereavement leave, I dreaded the thought of returning to a place where I once found immense satisfaction. Unbeknownst to me, returning to work was one of the most influential and powerful aspects of finding my way through the tornado in my personal life. I experienced several avoidable hiccups with my colleagues, manager and clients, but returning to work was the greatest gift I gave myself.

Following Rod's death, my world had become so confusing and chaotic. The workplace provided me a daily routine, allowing me to expend energy on something other than my messy life. I felt a sense of accomplishment checking off tasks each day, knowing there was some normalcy in

my routine. The return was overwhelming at first; however, the days that followed created a cadence once I relaxed and believed in me. My management position was exhausting, so I found the long-lost sleep I desperately needed, allowing my physical self to help my emotional self through a very difficult time.

DIFFERENT PEOPLE, DIFFERENT NEEDS

As grievers, returning to work satisfies different needs for each of us. Many return to a job they held prior to the death, while others find themselves rejoining the workforce for financial reasons or to manage a family business. Still others enter the workforce as a tool to assist in their grief journey, by embarking on a new endeavor to

challenge them emotionally and physically. Whatever the reason, returning to work can be a positive experience if approached with care, knowledge and managed expectations for yourself and your employer.

After someone has experienced a life-changing loss, we often forget that the griever is not the only one having a first-time experience. It's a new encounter for co-workers and management as well. Our expectations of each other far exceed our knowledge or coping skills, requiring everyone involved to communicate essential needs and to revisit those necessities as time goes by.

When returning to a job that was held prior to the loss, the anticipation of the return is often more daunting than the reality experienced on the first day. To ease the transition, I recommend the manager spend time with the employee prior to the actual return. This can be a short meeting to help set expectations for all parties, building a plan for the return that may include a lighter workload, shorter days, or reduced interaction with clients. Co-workers can similarly be proactive and reach out to their grieving team member by acknowledging the loss with a card, an email, donation to a cause honoring the loved one, attending the service, or sending food. This allows the griever to return having already re-connected with their co-workers.

TELL COLLEAGUES WHAT YOU NEED

The relationships we develop in the workplace vary based on personalities, length of employment and interaction with each other. Different co-workers will play different roles in supporting the returning team member. As the griever, finding the courage to communicate your needs is challenging. One suggestion is to embrace those co-workers you feel most comfortable with, creating a circle of support to assist with the transition. I suggest asking for what you need rather than risk disappointment. I learned firsthand that an employer needs to maintain business as usual and they cannot predict your needs as they may have never walked in similar shoes. They can listen to your requests and help you be as successful as

possible in your return. It is also helpful to maintain open lines of communication and managing your own expectations.

If you are returning to work out of financial necessity, the need for healthcare benefits or to manage a family business as the sole survivor, the newfound obligation to work may send a shockwave through your already impaired body and soul. The fear of not being qualified for a particular job, the reckoning of juggling family needs and the instability of your own emotions can wreak havoc. All those feelings are real and need to be addressed one by one, breaking them down into reasonable pieces while asking for help from friends and family. Embrace the offers of food, carpooling, cleaning, errands and other generousities. Accepting support is a form of empowerment, not weakness. Your life as you once knew it is transitioning, so try not to fight the transition. Be patient, reward yourself for accomplishments and know the days in the future will get better.

Many grievers return to the workplace for interaction and to achieve the feeling of accomplishment. My advice is to proceed slowly as the workplace is a tool, not a solution, to help you through your grief. Often, surviving family members embrace an organization in line with the cause of their loved one's death, including a particular illness, suicide or the prevention of future accidents or illnesses. They bring with them a sense of urgency and knowledge that an organization may value or a skillset they may need. Other grievers may search for opportunities that satisfy

their creative aspirations or their craving to learn something new. If you have the luxury of time, be patient as you search for the right fit that allows you to grieve and work at the same time.

Regardless of the reason for returning to work after a significant loss, be sure to take the time to establish your boundaries. As you travel through your grief journey, rebuilding your strength and re-aligning your priorities, continue to revisit your needs but most importantly communicate them to your employer and co-workers. The greatest rewards I experienced following my return to work was establishing a balance of self and family and the feeling of empowerment that I would find my way through the tornado of my loss.

Rachel Kodanaz is a frequent contributor to TAPS programs and has been addressing national audiences for over 20 years on the change, growth, and acceptance that comes with embracing life challenges. Her experience in management at Fortune 100 companies and the death of her young husband provides insight into challenges and solutions supporting grief in the workplace. Rachel is the author of "Grief in the Workplace: A Comprehensive Guide for Being Prepared", and other books on grief and loss. RachelKodanaz.com.

