



The importance of exploring Grief in Organisations

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Introduction

Can you identify someone who has never lost anyone or anything? Like a loved one, a friend, a pet, a baby through miscarriage or stillbirth, an expected job, a promotion, faced a layoff situation, some kind of loss during Pandemic?

Considering deaths, globally, in 2021, 69.25 million deaths occurred, and in Portugal around 123,550 occurred (Our World in Data, 2024).

United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the purpose to involve all countries with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and stimulate economic growth. One of these goals - number 3 - focuses on “Good Health and Well-being”, aims to ensure healthy lives for all at all ages. This goal also includes indicators related to loss, such as, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio, reduce neonatal mortality, reduce deaths from road traffic accidents, reduce deaths from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination (United Nations, 2015).

So, it may occur in different moments of life, in different ways, but important people in our lives often die. However, grief is not confined to the loss of a loved one, it can manifest in the death of a pet, in response to various forms of change, such as changes in Organizations too, as: layoffs, restructuring, not being selected for an internal vacancy, a denied promotion; and other losses, like divorce or end of a romantic relationship.

Therefore, addressing grief within the context of SDG 3 underscores the significance of mental health, communities’ education about grief in general, stigma reduction, promotion of a more empathetic society, and social support in achieving the broader objective of ensuring good health and well-being for all.

Grief and its effects on the individual are well studied in psychology. It is also known that in adulthood persistent symptoms of Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) can be developed, which is when bereavement difficulties persist or grow rather than diminish with time, and with symptoms lasting at least 12 months after the death (Jordan and Litz, 2014). The prevalence of PGD of bereaved individuals developing these symptoms could vary between 10% and 20% (Jordan and Litz, 2014).

However, little information is found about how grief affects the workplace (Hazard, 2008). We have seen many organizations, globally, improving their preoccupation with mental health, rethinking their policies and offering wellness programs, flexible work arrangements, increase parental leave policies. However, the leave for grief may not seem to be a priority.

The study of grief in Organizations could be very relevant to psychological science as it may provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between individual and organizational factors, for instance, how it affects job performance, group dynamics within teams, employee engagement. This knowledge, in turn, promotes the development of evidence-based practices aimed at promoting mental health and a supportive workplace culture.

Considering policies about grief, we found in Portugal some legislation for bereavement leave, in which the rights for employees are not lost for example, loss of salary. It has also been found that legislation has undergone some changes, aiming to include more days or types of losses, such as gestational loss in Agenda for Decent Work in 2023. The days attributed to bereavement leave in Portugal are (Decreto Lei n.º 1/2002; Decreto Lei n.º 7/2009; Decreto Lei n.º 13/2023):

- Up to 3 days for fetal loss, for mother (if she doesn't use a sick leave) and father;
- Up to 20 days for spouse not legally separated from common property, or recognized as such, offspring or stepchild;
- Up to 5 days for a first-degree relative (e.g. parents, parents-in-law);
- Up to 2 days for a second-degree relative (e.g. grandparents)-

Similar types of bereavement leave were also found in other countries, such as Spain (2 to 4 days of paid bereavement leave for death of family member up to second-degree relative), Canada (up to 10 days for death of an immediate family member's death). But a grief policy, which includes more types of losses, like a death of a third-degree relative, a pet, a lifelong friend, was not found... Why not consider this?

We may also face a death of a pet, and this relationship, in comparison with human relationships, also provides a safe haven and a secure base as well as, acceptance, love, safety, attachment anxiety (Zilcha-Mano et al, 2012). Also, we may

face grief through different losses in life, without death, but with great impact too, like a job, a disease, a boy/girlfriend, marriage. However, whereas in bereavement we find some policies from the government in different countries, when we consider grief in general, we find a lack of it.

Even if more days are allocated to bereavement, additional support from Companies, such as managers and colleagues, might be needed, and the recognition of the loss, because it's likely that people will return to work still grieving (Hazen, 2008).

Considering the proposed model of grief from J. William Worden (2018), often called “Four Tasks of Mourning” or “Worden Grief Counseling Model”, grief is not considered a linear or strictly sequential process. Individuals may move back and forth between tasks, and the duration and intensity of each task can vary for different people. This model outlines four tasks individuals typically face when coping with loss, such as:

1. *To Accept the Reality of the Loss.* The first task of grieving is to face the reality that the person is dead, the person is gone and will not return. However, some people may deny the facts of the loss or the meaning of the loss and refuse to believe that the death is real.

2. *To Process the Pain of Grief.* Grief is unique, so the intensity of pain and the way individuals experience it may vary, but when you lose someone with whom you had a deep connection, it's exceedingly difficult not to experience some level of pain. Associated with loss is, for instance, sadness, anxiety, anger, guilt, depression, and loneliness.

3. *To Adjust to a World Without the Deceased.* Adjust to a world without what we lost, means the necessity to do adjustments in three areas: external adjustments (referring to everyday functioning), internal adjustments (sense of self) and spiritual adjustments (beliefs, values, and assumptions about the world).

4. *To Find a Way to Remember the Deceased While Embarking on the Rest of One's Journey Through Life.* Means to find ways to remember dead loved ones — keeping them with us but still going on with life.

Bereavement is so universal, but so less explored. Thus, taking into account the impact that grief has on each individual and the few existing studies on this impact in the Organizational context, it is intended to understand the perception of the existing

legislation in Portugal and the need to extend it to other losses - pets, and other losses other than death – because nowadays the Companies are only obligated to support employees in grief for some specific deaths as mentioned before. Additionally, assess what support employees currently feel in their Organizations, and what kind of support they would like to receive more. At the level of Organizations, the study of grief in the area of Psychology can contribute to explore leadership styles, communication practices, and how Organisational policies can influence the way grief is felt and attended to within the workplace. Such insights are crucial for creating a supportive and compassionate work environment. The aim is to contribute to design grief support programs, training for managers and colleagues, and the implementation of policies that prioritize employee well-being during times of loss.

Thus, the main goal of this study is to talk about grief more openly and proactively, not to limit it to losses only due to death, and to include this topic in Organizations, so that all people facing a loss can feel more support, stigma is reduced and a culture of empathy and increased overall well-being is cultivated.

Method

First of all, as the purpose of the study is to understand how people perceive this subject – grief in Organisations - in Portugal, people were asked about the legislation applicable to this specific country (Portugal), about the changes they wanted to achieve and about the support Organisations provide and could offer.

After that, the purpose is to raise more awareness on the topic of grief for the public in general. Starting with psychoeducation about grief, expanding the understanding about different types of losses and not only for death, and enhance the information about the impact of grief in Organisations. With this last understanding, training programs for human resources employees and managers could be designed concerning support and deal with employees in grief; Organisations could build policies about grief; and governments could rethink their bereavement policies in legislation.

Participants

There were 60 participants ($M = 32,25$; $SD = 7,56$), 43 female ($M = 30,47$; $SD = 6,17$) and 17 male ($M = 36,76$; $SD = 8,99$). The age range was 23 – 57 years, with a mean age of 32.25 years ($SD = 7.56$). The majority of participants were from areas like: engineering and manufacturing, human resources, health sector, information and technology and others.

The participants were fully informed about the conditions and the purposes of the experiment.

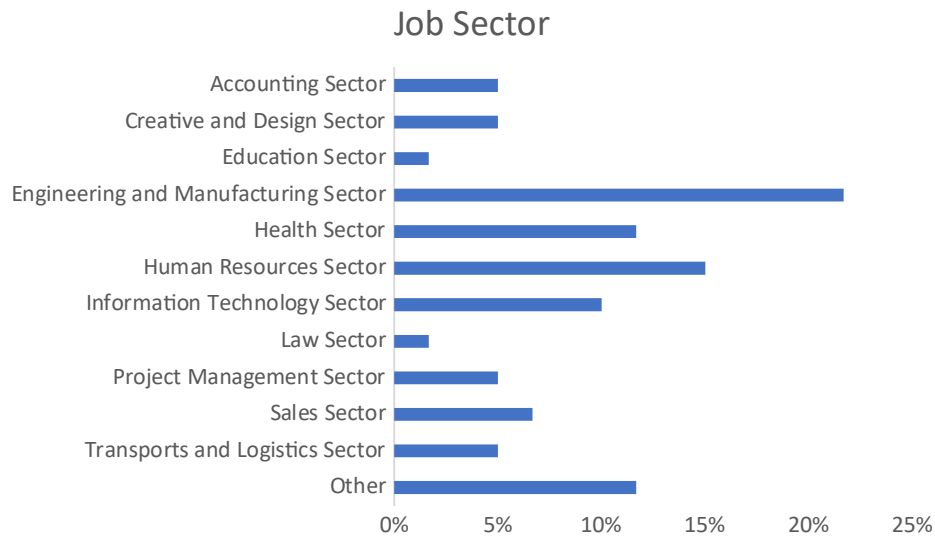
Procedure

The data for this study were collected with an online survey; Google Docs was used. Data were collected through a convenience sampling: from Portugal, all workers. The study was advertised as groups of friends workers and asked to share with their colleagues coworkers.

All participants first filled the demographic questionnaire with simple questions like, gender, age, job role and the time started to work. Then, they filled questions about the knowledge of legislation in Portugal about the bereavement leave; then about the usage of the bereavement leave; then about the need of use some days not contemplated in legislation; and finally about benefits they would like Companies to be able to offer to deal with grief.

Results

There were 60 participants ($M = 32,25$; $SD = 7,56$), 43 female ($M = 30,47$; $SD = 6,17$) and 17 male ($M = 36,76$; $SD = 8,99$). The majority of participants were from engineering and manufacturing (22%), human resources (15%), and health sector areas (12%) (Graphic 1).



Graphic 1. Job Sector

One of the goals of this study was to evaluate the perception that Portuguese workers have about the rights included in the Portuguese legislation regarding bereavement. In this case, the data showed that the majority of the population is aware of the existing rights (77%), they consider that these rights are not adequate (82%) and they should be extended to other types of losses (85%).

We also tried to understand the support they felt from the Organization among the workers who had already used days of mourning (40%). From these participants, 79% felt they received the appropriate support from their manager, and 88% felt they received the appropriate support from their colleagues to cope with the loss. Also, 33% of workers feel that the loss, at some point in the following year/years, had a negative impact on their job performance.

It was also assessed whether workers feel, as mentioned in this study, the need to take additional days of mourning to those that exist in the Portuguese legislation currently. 27% of the participants reported that they had already had some significant loss in which they felt the need not to go to work, and the losses were related to: death of another family member not covered by the legislation (39%), death of a friend (28%), death of a pet (28%), end of a romantic relationship (6%). For these cases, where Organizations are not required by law to provide any support, 13% of participants indicated that they felt support from the Organization.

In addition, the participants were asked if the Companies where they work include additional measures to the days mentioned in the legislation, and 13% said yes. 55% of the participants also reported that they feel the organization where they currently work provides adequate support for grieving employees.

Finally, it was evaluated what kind of additional support the participants would like to have in their work. The benefits mentioned were psychology service (44%), certain days of grief to use per year (27%), hr advise (27%), grief support group (6%), and others (1%).

Considering the days of grief to use annually, participants mostly consider that it would be more appropriate to have 3 days (32%) and 2 days (28%). Participants report that they would use these days to use in the event of death of a friend (25%), death of other family members not included in the legislation in force (24%), death of pet (21%), in case of divorce or romantic relationship separation. 11% of participants still consider using the days when they feel sad because of a death that has already occurred; and, 5% consider that they would not need to use additional days.

Discussion

Our findings lend some support to our expectations. As expected, regarding the Portuguese legislation in this area, it was perceived by the participants the need to change the bereavement policy to grief policy, extending the days for other losses. Either for other losses due to death, or for non-death losses, such as a divorce. To this point, it will be relevant in the future to present to the Portuguese government this suggestion, and to understand the needs so that this shift can occur. This point is extremely important given that losses have different meanings for people. Including in the legislation only the death of some family members removes the significance of other types of losses. We find, for example, in the legislation the right to use 2 days on the death of a grandparent, but for many people they may not even have this relationship developed, and have a more significant relationship with a cousin, for example, and in this case they are no longer entitled to use any days.

It would also be important to approach with the Portuguese government the inclusion of a Psychologist in Organizations, understanding if there could be any

incentive for Organizations to do so, or expanding the number of Psychologists in the public sector with specialization in the area of grief, so that Organizations could redirect their employees.

On the other hand, regarding the objective of understanding the support given by organizations, it was perceived by workers who felt support from both their managers and colleagues.

Regarding the impact on work performance, given that 33% of employees felt that the significant loss had an impact on performance, it would also be important to evaluate this perception by Organizations in the future. How is returning to work perceived after a loss? What is the impact on productivity? What other impacts are felt in the Organizations after a significant loss? To study this subject it would be important to develop a future validation study of a scale, for subsequent application to Organizations in Portugal.

Conclusion

Finally, it is important to highlight some of the limitations of this study, such as the fact that it is a convenience sample that makes it difficult to generalize these results to the general population. Also, the fact that the scale applied in this questionnaire is not validated, since no validated scale has been found so far for the Portuguese population, not even in English, in this context. The reason may be the few existing studies in this area. Therefore, this study demonstrates the importance of further studying the impact of grief on Organizations, in order to develop tools based on Psychological Science to support Organizations, Managers, and contribute to the well-being of all workers with more information and validation about their grief.

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