

How to Balance Work Demands While Grieving a Sudden Death

Find support and express your emotions, experts advise.

By [Ruben Castaneda](#), Staff Writer | May 3, 2017, at 9:37 a.m.



"How people experience and cope with grief is unique to the individual and the circumstance." (GETTY IMAGES)

Isaiah Thomas, a star guard for the Boston Celtics, chose to play in Game 1 of his team's NBA playoff series against the Chicago Bulls the day after his younger sister, Chyna Thomas, 22, died in a car crash outside Tacoma, Washington. TV footage showed Thomas, in his basketball gear, weeping on the sidelines of a Celtics practice the day he learned of the tragedy.

In 2015, Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook, chose a different approach after her husband, David Goldberg, the chief executive officer of SurveyMonkey, died suddenly of [cardiac arrhythmia](#) while the couple was vacationing in Mexico. Sandberg returned to her high-profile job 10 days after her husband's death.

The starkly different ways Thomas and Sandberg reacted to the [sudden loss of a loved one](#) demonstrates the kinds of issues many people face when trying to balance the [need to](#)

[grieve](#) with workplace responsibilities and demands. While most people aren't pro athletes like Thomas or a well-known corporate official like Sandberg, many of us will experience the sudden, unexpected loss of a loved one. You may not have a playoff game the next day, but what if you have a work deadline or are scheduled to make a presentation that can't be postponed? Suppose you're part of a work crew that's dependent on every member of the team doing his or her job?

The way people respond to a sudden tragedy is highly individualistic, says [Shawn Worthy](#), a clinical psychologist and professor of human services at Metropolitan State University of Denver. "How people experience and cope with grief is unique to the individual and the circumstance," he says. "In Thomas's circumstance, his job at that point was time-specific and other people [his teammates, Celtics management, fans] were relying on him in a very substantial way. For him to take 10 days off to grieve would be different than Sandberg taking days off; she could probably find people to take care of her meetings and other responsibilities."

The circumstances of a loss can affect your decision about how much time you need to grieve and when to return to work. Grieving the sudden, unexpected loss of a loved one to causes like a [heart attack](#), car accident or homicide is different from processing the [grief caused by the death](#) of someone who succumbed to a long illness or old age, says Bruce Cameron, a psychotherapist who treats clients with grief and loss issues in Dallas. "I had a sister die in 2013, and I returned to work two days later," says Cameron, whose sister, Tina, had breast cancer that spread to the brain. "It was the right thing for me. Her death was the end of a long illness. She died in hospice, which ended her suffering. That makes a difference; when the suffering is prolonged, you want the person not to suffer, and you have time to get mentally ready for their loss."

Making decisions about taking time off work while dealing with the waves of emotion following the sudden death of a loved one is challenging. Experts recommend these strategies for getting through such an emotional time the best way possible:

1. Don't isolate. Some people try to grieve alone, because they don't want others to see them when they're [emotional](#) or because that's what they've learned from their families. But we shouldn't go it alone during such a difficult time, says [Dr. Don Mordecai](#), Kaiser Permanente's national leader for mental health and wellness. "You want to check in with your normal support system, whoever is in it," he says. "It could be a circle of friends, a significant other, siblings or a support group that you belong to." Thomas, the Celtics star, chose to surround himself with a strong support system by staying with his teammates, noted [Christiane Manzella](#), a senior psychologist who specializes in grief and bereavement with the Seleni Institute, a nonprofit in New York City that provides treatment and training regarding mental health and wellness issues. "He said it helped him to be with his teammates," she observed.

2. Express your feelings. Some people, particularly men, are reluctant to openly show their emotions and try to project an image of stoicism no matter how they're feeling. But shedding tears in the wake of a tragedy is normal and natural, says [Cole James](#), executive

director of the Grief Recovery Institute in Bend, Oregon. "Please let them flow," he says. "You're releasing emotional energy, being emotionally honest." Stuffing emotions and tears can lead to negative behavior, such as overeating, acting out angrily or over-shopping, he says.

3. Take advantage of available resources. Many large and medium-sized companies have employee assistance programs that typically include several free counseling sessions for employees dealing with difficult issues. Whatever the size of the company you work for, it's worth exploring whether it offers such benefits, Mordecai says. Talking with an EAP counselor would be the appropriate time to bring up issues around returning to the workplace after bereavement leave. "It's a good place to talk about how you're doing at the workplace," he says.

In 2016, 81 percent of employers surveyed by the Society for Human Resource Management provided paid bereavement leave for the death of a close relative, friend or associate. The amount of leave often ranges from three to five days. (This February, Facebook announced its employees could receive up to 20 days of paid bereavement leave to grieve the loss of an immediately family member, double the amount of time the company had been providing). If you have to fly out of state for a funeral, ask the airline you plan on using about a reduced bereavement fare.

4. Keep in mind you may not be at your best for a while. Grieving people may experience an array of symptoms, including feelings of [depression](#), disruptions in sleeping and eating habits, fatigue and difficulty concentrating. "You may be in a kind of fog," James says. "Some people can't eat, some people eat more than they normally do, some people can't sleep, some sleep more to avoid dealing with things." If you're experiencing these kinds of symptoms when you return to work, talk to your EAP counselor or work supervisor, Mordecai says. Many workplaces are supportive of people going through a crisis, and a supervisor might help by devising a temporary revised work schedule, for instance.

5. Be good to yourself. As you return to your work routine, "be gentle with yourself and give yourself a break during times of grief," says [Anita Gadhia-Smith](#), a psychotherapist who practices in the District of Columbia and suburban Maryland. It's important to keep up with the basics of self-care, such as sleeping, [exercising](#), [eating well](#) and, if these are part of your routine, continuing to attend [support group](#) meetings and [meditating](#).