

Meghan Riordan Jarvis

At a very basic level, a grief-informed workplace is a place that has a population of people who have been given an opportunity to have a conversation, mostly with themselves, about what it is that is needed in order to safely feel a loss.

Ellen Kelsay

That's Meghan Riordan Jarvis, a clinical psychotherapist, TEDx speaker, and author of the best-selling memoir, *The End of the Hour*, published in 2023. With over 20 years of experience in trauma, grief and loss, Meghan is on a mission to create grief-informed communities through increasing emotional fluency and shifting culture, including in the workplace.

I'm Ellen Kelsay, and this is the Business Group on Health podcast, conversations with experts on the most relevant health and well-being issues facing employers.

Today, we tap into Meghan's expertise to understand how grief is defined. The answer may surprise you. The ways grief impacts us and the workplace, and how companies can acknowledge and respond to grief at work.

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Meghan, welcome to the podcast. I'm so delighted to have you with us today.

Meghan Riordan Jarvis

It is a joy. Thank you so much for having me.

Ellen Kelsay

Well, we're going to talk about something that a lot of people don't often talk about very openly, but we feel, and we certainly know you feel, it is important to be talking about more openly, and that's about grief. Again, just thank you so much for joining us on what is a really critically important topic. In particular, I want to start with maybe asking you a question about grief, and in particular, grief in the workplace. How does grief relate to the workplace?

Meghan Riordan Jarvis

I'm really so grateful to be asked to talk about this subject. You know that grief is sort of the most important topic that I talk to people about in general, and I am getting more and more opportunity to do that in the workplace, and I love the idea of being able to be helpful in that way. By that what I mean is I think the workplace is struggling in a very specific way since the onset of Covid, and I know that we're sort of saying we're post-Covid, but the workplace is really struggling to find its feet. The way that we're seeing grief impact the workplace is almost invisible still, meaning managers and the C-suite folks are watching the struggles of the people. They are hearing from them. They're still seeing the great resignation, quiet quitting, whatever the new hip words are to describe how folks are still leaving their jobs, maybe not in the same numbers, but struggling in the workplace to be motivated and to sort of feel like they want to be connected and engaged. We're still seeing folks struggling with that and the management kind of beyond Taco Tuesday, how are we supposed to motivate these people? I think the most simple piece is to simply get curious about whether or not there is unresolved, unidentified loss in the workplace. The reason that I use the word loss is that grief is the energetic response to loss that we experience in our bodies and our minds. We know there was a tremendous amount of loss during the pandemic and we know that workplaces are different because teams are different and leadership is different and where you physically go to work is different.

Ellen Kelsay

It's so interesting because you talked about a lot of things and maybe you use the word invisible and surface-level manifestations that are often talked about today, whether it be employee engagement, motivation, connection, performance, things that are often talked about within leadership ranks by managers, some sense of frustration or maybe apathy within the workforce, generally speaking. But you're

saying a lot of those are manifestations of underlying, unresolved, unaddressed loss for grief. Is that correct?

Meghan Riordan Jarvis

Yes, I think about this a lot and this might just be sort of a plain example. One of the things that happens when a teenager graduates from high school is the adults in their life come to them and say, aren't you so excited about college? Where are you going to college? What comes next? Aren't you really excited? And they are excited, but they're not only excited, because they're also leaving behind a community. If they're excited about what they're moving on to, they're probably leaving behind a community that they were quite successful in or teachers who knew them well. What's happening in the workplace is more like what we call non-death loss, so it's not as obvious. Because in general, as a culture, we are not very well educated in understanding the impact of loss, you know, and you can see this, you can see this in the things that people say, many companies would be able to see it in their bereavement policy. The average bereavement time off inside a company, I don't say this with criticism, this is just the data, is five days and if you pause to think about that, anyone who's already been through an actual loss of a person, of a human, their mother died or their father died, the idea that you would really be ready to go back to work after five days, it doesn't seem logical. But in the best-case scenario, imagine if your workplace was a grief-informed workplace and actually they were inviting you back because you were part of a warm and connected community of people who wanted to support you and had some idea of what you might be experiencing. Western culture doesn't do a great job of saying, hey, these are the things that are typical in grief and loss. This is typical. When you have experienced a loss and you are grieving something, it's normal to have memory loss. It's normal to be more irritable. If you went back to a workplace where you knew that people had been trained in those things, that idea that your bereavement leave was only five days might not feel so inhumane. It's not just beneficial when someone in your organization loses a loved one, it's also really important when your parent organization lays off the entire San Francisco division or when a really well-loved leader leaves under any circumstances, positive or negative, or when there has to be a shift in teams because everyone knows the things that really matter are the people that you work with every day and we're not always in control of that. You know, somebody decides that they're moving with their family to Arizona and that's your favorite person in the office. What we do now in workplaces is we throw a party, sort of back to that example of when we're talking to a high schooler and we're only saying, aren't you so excited? We throw a party for someone who's leaving. Yet if they were truly, really well-loved in a work environment, some of the people in that room are nervous that their jobs are going to be worse, that they're not going to like working here as much. They're not really sure what's going to happen with the job and the position and their bonuses. There's a lot more going on in the room than just we're so happy for them that they're finally retiring.

Ellen Kelsay

You've talked a lot about a grief-informed workplace and you're starting to talk about what that might look like. We'll get to that in a lot more detail in just a bit, but maybe can we just go back a little bit and just define when we talk about grief, what is grief? And it's not just death, as you've just been describing. So if you could kind of expand upon grief and what that might look like in a workplace, I think that would be helpful just to level set for the audience.

Meghan Riordan Jarvis

Yes, it's interesting because that's one of the things that I ask people is like, what do you think the word grief is and how do you grieve? What is it that you see as the act, sort of the verb of grieving? But the definition that we use is that grief is the energetic response that's created in the system, in the body. In the body, we also mean the mind, and so it's the energetic response that's created in the body on account of loss and it can be any loss. So one of the things that is the most heartbreaking to me is when people say, I'm not sure if this counts. What they mean is they have grief, but they're not sure it's going to be able to be validated. I'll tell you a story. I have worked as a therapist for the past 20 years and worked with folks who are struggling for lots of different reasons in their workplaces, not necessarily because of grief. After the pandemic as offices were opening back up and people were really trying to be intentional and thinking about whether we were coming back into office spaces, I worked with a company that I adore and a CEO I've known for a really long time. I was asking his immediate sort of C-suite team, can we just identify grief in the workplace? Can we identify where we may be experiencing a sense of loss? I gave them pens and paper and just no pens moving, no paper. So I had to sort of prompt a little bit more. Immediately, they

were identifying their HR director had lost her mother during Covid, so that was an easy identifier. But I said, no, I'm talking about more like people that are no longer working at the company or contracts that you had for a really long time that don't exist anymore, maybe because that company doesn't even exist anymore. And now they started to get it and they were writing things down. Then I wanted them to share because, you know, I'm the touchy feely type, but I really wanted to get a sense of do we have a shared understanding of what's difficult inside the workplace. The CEO, because he's such a good guy, he said, well, I don't know if this counts and then he told this incredible story that he was based in Atlanta and his wife is a very well-known, like on the cover of magazines, interior designer. They had to let go of their office space or maybe they were lucky to get out of their lease for their very large office space, but it had been a new office space that they had moved into about four months before Covid. His wife, who was this sort of famous designer, had offered to do the interior design for the office, but the building had said, no, we can't afford you. So she didn't do it. And the office manager let the CEO for the first time in his life, he and his wife had a house and a beach house, and he had never picked out a fork or a pillow or a paint color. So for the very first time, the office manager said, hey, do you want to pick something out? So he picked out the carpet, which by everyone's description in this room, I mean everybody burst into laughter when he was telling this story because the carpet must have been pretty ugly, it was like blue waves or something, but he loved this carpet. They had been in this office, I think, four months and then Covid shut it down and they had to let go of the lease. And he said, you know, I think about that carpet every day, just every day, just like once a day, think about how much I loved that I had picked this out, that it really was like a signature thing, how much fun it was for me. It was actually fun for me that other people didn't like it. And he was like, you know, I don't know if that's grief, but of course it is grief. Is it the equivalent of grief if your wife dies? Of course not. But he mentioned that he thought about it every day. Those are the kinds of things, like once he said it, it became this whole conversation amongst this team and kind of everybody had an example of the carpet. For other people, it was like they used to go to lunch with one colleague every Wednesday at this burger place around the corner. They don't do that anymore. It's not that those things aren't things that we can't recover from, but we can't recover from them if we don't even name them or notice them. What we will do instead is carry the irritability inside, the tension of it inside our system.

Ellen Kelsay

I'm speaking with Meghan Riordan Jarvis, a clinical psychotherapist about recognizing and addressing grief and loss in the workplace. We'll be right back.

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Ellen Kelsay

Can we talk about you and how you came to this work. You've been doing this for a long, long time. What brought you to this work and what brought you to this work relative to grief in the workplace?

Meghan Riordan Jarvis

Yes, so I've been always kind of in a helping field. I'm one of 6 kids and we had the experience in my family of someone who we considered kind of like a cousin drown when I was nine and my family was on the beach. It was 1983 and in 1983, sort of the way that we understood that you handled hard things around children is you didn't talk about them. Much later in my life, I came to sort of understand that things that had become sort of a hallmark of my personality were actually probably related to unresolved grief, so grief that was never, never spoken about. You know, you hold an emotion inside of you until you figure out a way to process that out. I had a lot of unprocessed energy that, you know, made me maybe a little bit defensive and maybe not as risk taking as I would like to be. I didn't really discover that until I was in my 20s and then in my 20s, I became a therapist. I specialized in grief and loss because I found it so fascinating to learn about from my own personal perspective. I had a big pivot in 2017. My dad died of small cell cancer. It was about a year-long battle with cancer that we knew he was going to lose. Then in 2019, my mom died suddenly when I was on vacation with her. My experience with my dad's death, because we knew he was dying, was gentle. It was like I participated in it. My mom's death was sudden and really

shocking and the way it impacted my physical system was a bit more like being in a car accident or like, I don't know, a piano dropping on my head. The body has 12 systems, your digestive tract and your urinary tract, you know, all the systems, your vascular, the things that keep us alive. When my mom died, all 12 of those systems took a really significant hit for me. I had to spend some real time kind of getting my feet back underneath myself. As I was doing that, I felt as though there were things that I had read and been told that I now understood very differently, having embodied the experience of really profound loss. I felt this commitment. First, what I did because I come from academia is like I read 188 books on grief and loss to just check that nobody else had written extensively about this. But as I came back into wanting to go back into a helping role, I was less interested and maybe effective in working just one on one with folks and was much more interested in talking to people about sort of the systems that we leave griever to feel unsupported with. I didn't know Covid was coming, right. A million Americans died and that left 9 million people grieving when Covid was at its height. That sort of gave us this opportunity where people were really interested in talking about grief from a death perspective. The way I really thought about it was where are the adults most of the time where we would be able to teach them almost like in a class setting, the way you teach fifth graders about puberty or the way that a woman might learn about her body from the gynecologist. That's how we came up with the idea of talking to people in their workplaces. The thing about Covid is that most of what was happening was not inside the workplace, but it was deeply impacting the workplace. Managers were really at a loss as to how to navigate it. The early conversations that we had about grief and loss were so rewarding, because what we were saying was, have you considered just that people are walking into the workplace grieving? At first it was really stunning that most people were like, what do you mean? And my attitude was, what do you mean, what do I mean? A million Americans have died. Nine million are grieving. It's just logical. But again, when you think of the workplace as a place that we are building things and creating commerce, we're not usually thinking about what's going on too heavily outside of those office doors.

Ellen Kelsay

Megan, thank you for sharing your personal story. Unbelievable. This is your life's work and you realized it in a very profound way on a personal level. As you were speaking, you talked about the 12 systems of the body. You felt like a piano had been dropped on you. So talk about how that did impact you physically, mentally. What was going on for you? What might other people be experiencing?

Meghan Riordan Jarvis

I have to say, this is the part that's really humbling. I think there are lots of different things in your life where you're like, oh, well I knew about it, but you don't know about it until you know about it. I think grief is the most brutal of that. I had sat with griever for decades and sort of felt like I had done a good job and shown up with them with compassion. The part that I really didn't understand, and it did remind me of being pregnant, was just the impact on the body. As I was getting well, my grief really showed up as trauma, meaning that it left like a tattoo in my system that needed treatment. As I was getting well and healthy, I did have this little like kind of fury of, I know that I probably didn't do enough for clients in the beginning because I didn't understand this that well. Part of that is because I hadn't lived through it, but part of it is because we don't tell the truth about what really happens in the brain when you go through something terrible. In a nutshell, it's just these two little almond shaped parts of the brain that are back at the base of the neck, activate. When they activate, they swell. That swelling almost acts like a bouncer at the front of a club, deciding which of the energetic messages get into the brain from there and are sent up to, you know, your prefrontal cortex where we do our critical thinking is behind our forehead, so when the amygdala, those two little parts of the brain, enlarge because something bad is happening, they're doing that to send you into a fight, flight or freeze response so that you can essentially save yourself. The difficulty is when that threat is a death or that threat is something like your manager that you used to love isn't in the office anymore, there isn't anything to fight or flee from. So you kind of go straight to freeze. If you go back to the amygdala enlarges, the bouncer is not letting the messages into the brain the way that it should, so the brain already is suffering. These are the very typical symptoms of grief and loss. It's suffering from memory loss, brain fog, the inability to sort of do multi-stepped instructions, and there's usually a high level of either irritability, like reactivity inside the brain and the body because the sympathetic nervous system is really activated, or the opposite, there's low energy and the person looks really kind of sluggish and depressed. That, to me, is the real heartbreak of the education that we haven't provided to people, because it's such a joy to bring that conversation about the brain and the body to the workplace, because whether or not you are going to immediately use that in your workplace, you will

remember what we talk about and you will share that information with other people. Just as humans, we should know. These are things that we should know about our body and our reactivity so that we can attend to them, because the beauty is when you know what's going on, there are some things that we can do to help ourselves.

Ellen Kelsay

It's almost overwhelming hearing you talk about it, you know, just how pervasive the impacts are and prolonged the impacts are. Especially when you think about somebody who is stuck in freeze mode and how that is just, like you said, it's a cycle, a vicious cycle that's just stuck on repeat over and over again.

Meghan Riordan Jarvis

It is. When I'm talking to people in work environments, like one of the things that we also know is that if you had trauma in your childhood like I did, and there's something called the ACEs study that people can look up to sort of get a sense of what the trauma in childhood might look like. But if you lived in poverty or there was violence or death or abuse, you're more likely to go to freeze than, let's say, the average bear who lived in a home where those disturbances didn't exist. Vivek Murthy, the Surgeon General, his study came out and the big takeaway from his study in 2023 was that we are really lonely and we're deeply isolated. Well, the word that grievers use the most is isolated because that is the word that they will describe themselves as because they're in an office and it feels like a bus ran through the building and hit them and all their limbs are broken. And their office, it's like people are still walking around like it didn't happen. They didn't get hit by a bus, so they're just going to keep walking and functioning. Again, when Vivek Murthy wrote this report, he wasn't saying this problem needs to be solved in the office space, but it is something that is present in the office space. If we think about loneliness and isolation are an epidemic that are so serious, have become so serious, particularly on account of Covid, that it's in our workplace and it's everywhere. If we think about the workplaces at their best have the ability to drive innovation and creativity and really shift culture for the better, you would be able with not a ton of effort to teach people not just, oh, well, we are more isolated, but what does it take to become less isolated. Because here's the thing, what it takes to become less isolated is the courage to feel loss. Because when people are isolated or when they're feeling lonely, part of the story that they're telling themselves is there is no connection here for me. I can't make a connection. But in order to have the hope of connection, you have to drop that belief and then take some risk. That is how we help people feel less isolated. It's not just that they're living in the 12th floor apartment and they don't get out very often, that that epidemic is in our office space. But in order for people to be able to reconnect, they are actually going to have to let themselves feel the experience of the grief around the loss of what they didn't have.

Ellen Kelsay

You're already, I think, teeing up my next question very nicely by talking about a grief informed workplace. What does that look like?

Meghan Riordan Jarvis

At a very basic level, a grief informed workplace is a place that has a population of people who have been given an opportunity to have a conversation mostly with themselves about what it is that is needed in order to safely feel a loss. Part of it is just basic education. It just means having some training. We bring in experts who come in and say, here are the issues, here's how we address them, here's how you think about them, here's how we look at them, and here are the ongoing problems. Then part of it is conversation about how do you want to support people. So being grief informed does not mean you turn your office space into a mental health center. I've had many conversations with big companies and small companies who want to be very clear that once we get to this point, we want to be referring folks to treatment facilities. We want to be referring folks to the EAP so that the next part of the support that they need is very concrete and is not part of the workplace. But a grief-informed workplace is we have looked at our policy around how much time is taken off. We have employees here who have had a conversation about how do I want to approach someone when they come back to work. They've given some thought to that so that when that person comes back to work whose daughter died, she gets to walk back into the office knowing my office has had a conversation about how to approach someone when there has been tremendous loss and they have a sense of what it is that they want to provide in the workplace. There has been some intentional conversation about what is it that they want to do. So what is it that is helpful to you? Is listening to music helpful? One piece that's true in kind of all traumas is that we need to be able to

move our bodies. A grief informed workplace often has a plan for that. So people take 15 minute breaks, they take them with colleagues, and they take walks. That's just something that we expect in the culture. There are lots of people that do that anyway, but we talk about that as part of our intention at work that we want people to come to work. We want them to come as whole humans. We know that that might include grief. Grief really responds to being moved, so we're going to make sure that there's some space for people in their workday to take a walk. Often if we're talking about that isolation, we want that to be with someone so that we're moving the grief through the body in connection to another person. That's what it looks like.

Ellen Kelsay

What are your tips or words of advice for employers who have not even begun to think about this? Where should they start? What would be some first steps for them to consider taking?

Meghan Riordan Jarvis

One of the things that's really like I think brutal is a lot of times I will give a lecture and people say, gosh, I love this lecture, and where are all the resources and who should I call. The problem is because we're not an incredibly well grief-educated culture, even let's say a therapist, they may not have had the grief kind of training that I'm describing. What I will tell you is there are some easy ways to get involved. The thing that I suggest that employers do from the beginning is to have a conversation amongst their management team about how do we want to approach this. And I would take simple steps. The simplest is to create a grief-informed library that all of your team has access to. I've had a couple of companies during the holidays, which again, another one of those periods of time where everyone's like, are you excited, it's the holidays, but grownups know the holidays are fraught with a lot of other things, not just joy. I had a company last year that like bought Rebecca Soffer's *Modern Loss* handbook, which comes in a workbook and just sent it through Amazon to all their employees, it's like an \$11 book, with a note that just said, in case the holidays are more complicated. Just think about the impact of that if you got that from your employer, just like what that would say about what they understood about what you might be going through. There are also so many podcasts that are grief related. You can search and find simple ones that talk about grief and loss in the workplace. I have a podcast which is called "Grief is My Side Hustle." We have a whole series on grief and loss in the workplace that you can come in and listen to. But I've been really impressed by podcasters out there talking about this subject. I think that's really important. Then I think having a conversation with, it's usually HR, about what is it that we do to support the families? So not just, you know, let's say Doug works for us. Doug's sister died. Not just what are we going to do for Doug in the workplace, but what are we doing for Doug and his family? Because often the people who do the travel for your execs at your company reach out to Doug's family and say, can we help you plan to get to the funeral? Like that almost chokes me up because that's a real example of something that a company did. Again, if you think about the state of mind that people are in when they're grieving, to have somebody say, we're going to help you get your five plane tickets, let us plan that for you. That kind of concrete help is the kind of stuff people remember and it makes you love your company for it. Those are really simple ways that you can start the conversation and really maybe signal to the people that you work with.

Ellen Kelsay

Those are all excellent, excellent practical examples. Thank you. Speaking of books, Meghan, you too have a new book coming out. I want to give you a chance to plug it and tell the audience what is it all about?

Meghan Riordan Jarvis

Thank you so much, Ellen. Yes, I have a new book coming out, which is called, *Can Anyone Tell Me?* It's essential questions about grief and loss. It's coming out with Sounds True in October. It's really intended to be the thing that I wish had existed for myself, but probably also for everyone that I have ever tried to help. It's a guidebook. The questions in the book are like, can anyone tell me why I can't remember anything? But then we touch sort of some of the harder, like one of the chapters is, can anyone tell me why I think that butterfly is my mom? Spiritual crises are a big thing that happen. Then one of my favorite chapters is, can anyone tell me why smart people say such stupid things? Because every griever has been on the receiving end of someone saying something that was accidentally really hurtful. The book is built so that it has support for people and suggestions and examples, clinical examples from my practice for people who are grieving, but also for the people who are supporting the grievers. That'll be out in October. I also have a memoir that's out now, which is called *End of the Hour*, about my experience with my father's death

and my mother's death. I think the world might have thought that someone with my pedigree maybe would have skipped straight to the end of moving through in just five days all the complicated elements of grief and loss, but my personal story actually is much more complicated than that. I was lucky enough to write about that for Zippy Books and that you can get everywhere.

Ellen Kelsay

All right, Meghan, my last question is about what gives you hope for the future when you think about our conversation and your field of work and where we've evolved as a society, as you think about the next many months or the next many years, what gives you hope?

Meghan Riordan Jarvis

Hope is probably the most important thing to me. I really believe so deeply in the idea that we can shift the way in which we think about grief and loss, that actually grief and loss are just a developmental part of our lives. I think if people understood that this is really good caretaking of each other and probably that grief is underlying a lot of the political divisiveness and probably at the roots of racism and misogyny, that if we were able to do it better, that it would be such a gift to all of us. And that I do get to have conversations where people say, wow, that really matters and I haven't thought about that. That keeps me going, keeps me working hard for days and days.

Ellen Kelsay

Well, we can't thank you enough for joining us today, bringing this to our audience and the good work you and your team are doing. We are delighted to be able to share it and to maybe create some awareness that didn't exist in the broader employer world and certainly society at large relative to the issue of grief and how it manifests itself at work as well as in life. So, Meghan, once again, thanks so much.

Meghan Riordan Jarvis

Thank you. It's such an honor. It's such an honor to know you and I really appreciate this conversation.

Ellen Kelsay

I've been speaking with Meghan Riordan Jarvis, a leading voice and advocate for creating grief-informed workplaces. Her new book, *Can Anyone Tell Me Why: Essential Questions About Grief and Loss*, will be out in October 2024.

I'm Ellen Kelsay, and this podcast is produced by Business Group on Health with Connected Social Media. Whether you're a regular or first-time listener, if you like the show, please consider rating us and leaving a review. Thanks for listening.