

# HOLDING GRIEF WITHOUT LOSING YOURSELF

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# Agenda



Understanding the Unique  
Stressors of Funeral Service



Recognizing When Work is  
Affecting Us



Practical Skills

# The People Who Care for the Grieving

This is often overlooked in the funeral service profession – the mental health and emotional well-being of the people who care for those following death

You play an important role in helping individuals and families navigate some of the most difficult moments of their lives

You meeting people in moments of shock, disbelief, sadness, anger, and sometimes profound distress

And while every family brings their own needs, the expectation on you is often the same:

To be calm

To be compassionate

To be knowledgeable

To solve problems

And to remain professional, even when the circumstances are exceptionally difficult

That is a lot to ask of a person.

The ability to care for others does not make us immune to stress

Some of the qualities that make us do well at the work we do can also make it difficult for us to recognize when we  
Need care ourselves

Today I would like to discuss the particular pressures of funeral service work, how those pressures can affect us psychologically and physically, and most importantly, some practical strategies you can use to protect your well-being.

The skills I am going to offer today are not ones that take up a lot of time or a huge change in your lifestyle. Caring for yourself should not be adding things that overwhelm or stress you.

This skills I will offer today will take between 30 seconds, between appointments, while sitting in your vehicle, or even when you are speaking with a family

# Understanding the Unique Stressors of Funeral Service

When we think about occupations involving repeated exposure to trauma and loss, we often think of paramedics, fire fighters, police, nurses, and mental health professionals

Funeral and Bereavement professionals are repeatedly exposed to death, trauma, and intense human emotion

The nature of that exposure may look different, but it deserves the same attention

One of the most significant challenges is the cumulative exposure to loss

There may be a death of someone who has lived a long and fulfilling life; the family saddened but prepared

It may be a child, a suicide, a sudden accident, or a death surrounded by complicated family circumstances

These experiences are not emotionally equivalent

Some will affect you more deeply than others

Sometimes a particular death will remind you of someone in your own life

A circumstance may connect with a personal experience that you thought you had already worked through

And sometimes, there is no obvious

And sometimes an experience is simply difficult

We use the term **secondary trauma** to describe trauma-related symptoms that can develop through indirect exposure to other people's traumatic experiences

Not everyone exposed to traumatic circumstances develops These symptoms.

However, repeated exposure is something we need to take seriously

We also need to understand **cumulative stress**

One difficult day may be manageable

One difficult day after another, combined with poor sleep, long hours, and little time to decompress, can affect how we function

There's another element of your work that I think deserves recognition

It's what we call **emotional labour**

Emotional labour is the effort involved in managing or expressing emotions as part of your professional responsibilities

Think about what happens when the family arrives visibly distressed

You may be dealing with your own fatigue, frustration, or personal concerns. But those things must take a back seat

You adjust your voice, facial expression, your pace, and body language

You become the calm person in the room

And for many of you this happens repeatedly throughout the day

There is nothing inherently wrong with emotional labour. It is an important professional skill

The challenge comes when we are constantly managing our emotional expression without having opportunities to acknowledge or process our reactions

Appearing calm and feeling calm are not necessarily the same thing

When we spend enough time attending to everyone's emotional needs, we can gradually lose track of our own

Of course, this is not only about emotional exposure. There are practical demands of funeral service

Unpredictable hours, on-call, interrupted sleep, physical work, documentation, attention to detail, tight scheduling, staffing challenges

With little room for error

Your work may be meaningful, but meaningful work can be exhausting

When I was researching a bit for this presentation studies indicated that there are times of elevated anxiety, depression, and occupational stress among funeral service workers during stressful periods (like the pandemic or a large spate of deaths)

The research I found also reported that many funeral directors continue to find satisfaction and purpose in their work

Even when they noted difficult workplace conditions and difficult environments, and stress. BOTH CAN BE TRUE

You can love your work and still find it difficult

You can take pride in caring for families and still need better opportunities for rest and recovery

Finally, I wanted to mention **moral distress**

Moral distress occurs when you believe you know what would be right or helpful in a situation, but circumstances prevent you from acting in a way you believe you should

Perhaps the family needs more than your schedule allows

Perhaps a conflict among family members, and you cannot give everyone what they want

Perhaps financial limitations prevent a family from making the arrangements they hoped for

Or perhaps you're working in conditions where staffing or resources limit your ability to provide the standard of care you value

These situations can leave us feeling helpless, frustrated, or even guilty

**But feeling responsible does not always mean we had control**

And that distinction is important

# Recognizing When Work is Affecting Us

One of the challenges of chronic stress is that it doesn't always announce itself dramatically

Sometimes it develops slowly enough that we begin to see it as normal

We may tell ourselves, "I'm just tired," or "It's been a busy few weeks."

But there are some patterns worth paying attention to

For some people, stress appears physically

You may notice tightness in your shoulders or jaw, headaches, digestive problems, change in appetite, or difficulty sleeping

Others notice emotional changes

Perhaps your patience is shorter than usual

You find yourself becoming irritated by things that normally would not bother you

Or maybe you notice the opposite – you feel increasingly disconnected from your emotions

Things that used to affect you deeply barely register

There can also be cognitive changes

Concentration becomes harder

You may struggle to make decisions

Forget small details, or find yourself mentally replaying a difficult interaction

And then there are changes that show up in our relationships

Perhaps we don't want to talk when we get home, we find ourselves withdrawing from people we care about

Or we notice that you've used up so much patience and emotional energy at work that there seems to be very little left for your family

It is important to know that these experiences can be a sign of stress, but they are not a diagnosis in themselves

And not every reaction means someone is experiencing burnout, compassion fatigue, or a mental health condition

However, when these changes persist, intensify, or begin interfering with daily life, they are worth taking seriously

I invite you to consider **3 questions**

1. When I finish a difficult workday, how do I know I am stressed? (thoughts, body sensations, behavior, emotions)
2. What are the first signs my capacity is becoming stretched? (not the signs once you are completely overwhelmed, but the smaller signs that come earlier)
3. What do I normally do with those signs? (do I respond and how, or do I simply push through)
4. There is no need to share your answers. They are for you

The purpose is to be able to recognize your own stress and your own patterns

When we recognize or stress earlier, we have more opportunities to respond to it before it becomes overwhelming

And that brings us to the practical skills

# Practical Skills: Caring for yourself while caring for others

I would like to introduce a few skills you can use throughout your workday

Some are probably familiar to you and others may be new

My goal is not to suggest a few skills can solve workplace stress, inadequate staffing, or exposure to traumatic events. But there are things we can do to help ourselves manage the physiological and emotional impact of stress as it occurs

## Regulating the Nervous System

When we experience stress, our nervous system responds automatically (this happens before conscious awareness)

Our heart rate may increase, our muscles become tense, our breathing changes, and our attention narrows. This is a part of the natural threat-response system

It is useful when facing danger, but it can also become activated when we are dealing with conflict, emotional demands, or overwhelming work loads

One of the simplest ways to support regulation is through our breath

## **Let me guide you through a 30 second demonstration:**

Place both feet comfortably on the floor

Notice the chair beneath you and your feet touching the floor

Allow yourself to stack your body from the top of your head to your tail bone nice and straight. Now let it sink into that position, Letting go of shoulders, letting them drop away from your ears

Now, notice your breath. Let it happen naturally. Breathe in  
And out following your breath for a few cycles  
Allowing yourself to notice the sensation of your feet on the floor.

Now, notice if anything has changed. Shoulders? Breathing, emotions, thoughts?

Maybe nothing has changed at all

That is okay too

The purpose is not to force yourself to relax. It is to give your nervous system an opportunity to settle and to practice directing your attention

For someone in the funeral services, this can be especially useful before meeting a distressed family, following a challenging call, or between appointments

And the advantage is no one will know you are doing it

## Emotional boundaries without losing compassion

We may mistakenly associate boundaries with distancing ourselves or becoming less compassionate

Healthy emotional boundaries are not about caring less

They are about recognizing the difference between being present with someone else's suffering and feeling responsible for taking that suffering away

You cannot remove people's loss or take suffering away

You cannot be responsible for an outcome that no one can change

## Let's walk through another exercise

I would like you to imagine a difficult interaction you experienced at work

Pick something in the range of 5-6 out of 10 for your first try. Do not pick the most distressing experience to start

This event requires a considerable amount of emotional energy

Once you have it pictured in your mind I would like you to consider this statement:

**“I can be present with someone’s pain without making it my own.”**

Think about what was actually within your responsibility during the interaction

Your professionalism, compassion, actions, communication

Now consider what was outside your control

The circumstances of the death, the family's history, their emotions, their relationships with one another

Sometimes taking a moment to separate the 2 categories helps

Ask, "am I supporting this person or trying to fix something that can't be fixed"

## Creating a transition between home and work

One of the difficulties of emotionally demanding work is that we don't necessarily stop thinking when our shift ends

We may spend a lot of time in our head reliving the day or the week or worry about what is on the agenda for tomorrow

Our thoughts, feelings, and behavior needs to transition to the next activity. We let go of work and set our intentions on the next part of our day, so we arrive there in the right state

## Transition Rituals

These rituals can be simple

Perhaps you sit in your car for 2 minutes before you drive away from work (letting go) and 2 minutes when you arrive home (engaging with what is next)

Or you listen to a certain type of music on public transit while you are on your way home

Perhaps, changing out of your work clothes at work and washing your hands and face before heading out

If time permits, have a tea or take the route that passes a park you can sit/walk in for a few minutes to let go of work and look forward to what you would like to do when you arrive home

What is important is that it becomes a deliberate signal that you are moving from one role and into another

So, for a moment consider what kind of ritual might work for you in your circumstance. The easiest is most likely going to be the one that sticks

“I have done what I can for today. I can return to the rest tomorrow”

Practicing this separation can help us become more intentional about when we're working and when we are recovering

# Connection and support

One last skill for today

This one can be really challenging for many of us in the helping professions

ALLOW OURSELVES TO BE SUPPORTED

Many funeral professionals spend their workdays being the person others lean on

But who can you lean on?

One of the most useful forms of workplace support is having colleagues with whom you can share that something has been difficult

That doesn't necessarily mean sharing every detail or reliving an experience

It can be as simple as, "That was a hard day. How are you doing?"

Or recognizing that a colleague has had several difficult assignments and offering some practical assistance

Supportive conversations should always respect confidentiality, personal boundaries, and the individual's choice about what they want to share

And we need to recognize when someone requires more than informal support

Seeking that support is no different from addressing any other occupational health concern (pro sports – physical, mental, emotional conditioning)

It is about taking care of your ability to function safely and effectively

As we wrap up, I would like to leave you with a few final thought

Your work matters

You also matter

Important work should not diminish the importance of your own wellbeing

Resilience includes recognizing our limits, knowing when we need support, and having opportunities to rest and recover

It includes supportive colleagues, manageable expectations, appropriate resources, and workplaces where mental health can be discussed without judgement

And it includes those small, everyday moments when we pause long enough to notice how we are doing.

As you return to your work, I encourage you to remember one simple idea:

**You can care deeply about the people you serve without neglecting the person doing the caring**

Thank you for the work you do, and thank you for spending this time with me



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41