GRIEF: AN INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE
(and nonetheless, some guidelines for your consideration)

Whenever we anticipate or experience serious loss, we may experience grief. Our reactions are likely to be similar to those experienced by others, but none of us experience grief in exactly the same way. Not only are we different, but our losses are different. Some may grieve a spouse, others a child, parent, brother, sister, friend, or co-worker. Each of these relationships is unique. Some relationships have been close and relatively easy to navigate, while others may have had more tension, conflict, or ambivalence. As we experience loss, we may need to remind ourselves of the common elements of grief and the common differences in experiences of grief, in order to be most compassionate with ourselves and others.

Feelings of sadness, longing for the person’s presence, resentment of others who have not experienced a loss, or even a sense of relief that a prolonged illness has ended, may trouble us, but they are normal and natural responses to grief. Often, grief has strong physical components: we may lose appetite, feel aches and pains, and have difficulty sleeping. Cognitively, we may be distracted, or find that we are obsessing about a moment or event in our relationship with the deceased person. Our emotions may be blunted (i.e., feeling numb) or, in some cases, sharpened, with heightened irritability and reactivity added to our sadness. We may feel spiritually bereft, struggling to find meaning in our loss and to make sense of our lives in the absence of the lost person and within the context of our faith (if pertinent) or our life philosophy. We may find that our understanding of the world changes in ways that may be temporary or enduring. Additionally, we are all dealing with multiple challenges at every point in life, and a loss may come at a time that is already particularly stressful, thus compounding the grief process. We may have a particular abundance or a relative lack of support available, depending on the people and resources available in our lives at the time of bereavement.

There may be times when someone has died and our relationship to that person was that of acquaintance or colleague, but not friend or family. In those circumstances, the death may not be a source of grief (and no one can tell you that you ‘should’ or ‘shouldn’t’ feel grief in any particular circumstance). But an acquaintance’s death may nonetheless be a source of distress or anxiety as it provokes concern in us for the survivors, and may also stimulate thoughts and feelings related to other losses (past or anticipated) in our lives, or about the reality of our own mortality.

There are things we can do to help ourselves as we experience grief or death-related distress. First, it is important to accept the reality that we are grieving, and that the pain of the process cannot be eliminated on a specific time schedule. We need to be gentle, patient, and tolerant with ourselves and others. We can take lessons from how we have handled losses in the past, or how we observe others to be handling this loss or other losses in their lives. We can draw on our resources: the people, the coping- and self-care skills that have proven nurturing and valuable in other circumstances. For most people, it is centrally important to include the solace
of others, friends or family, in our healing from grief. We can also seek professionals who can provide objective support and guidance.

Anyone within the State of Colorado work force who is experiencing grief (or any personal or professional concern), whether the loss is related to the workplace or to personal life, is always welcomed to utilize individual counseling services through the State Employee Assistance Program (C-SEAP). C-SEAP services are free and confidential for state employees. To access C-SEAP, simply call 303-866-4314.