9. The deeper side of sadness at work: why being sad is not always bad

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INTRODUCTION

In the movie “Inside Out,” an 11-year old girl’s emotions are portrayed as animated characters living in a control room in her brain. Happiness is the leader, and keeping this young girl experiencing happiness and forming happy memories the goal. But as the parent of any budding adolescent knows, moodiness becomes the norm and the negative emotions of sadness and anger start to play a larger role in her life. Sad memories form more and more often and her personality starts to change. As time goes on, the characters of happiness and sadness must work together as new aspects of her personality develop. In the end, sadness plays a vital role in forming the core of who she is. The message of the movie is that all emotions, both negative and positive, play important roles in the growth and development of people in childhood through adulthood.

Experiencing and expressing sadness – defined as a negative emotional response to loss – is an essential part of life (Barrett, 2017). Because people spend so much time at work, sadness is an essential part of work life as well. The question of whether or not sadness has solely a negative impact at work is an important one. In this chapter, I argue that a deeper understanding of the emotion of sadness can help to facilitate more positive outcomes from experiences of sadness, and other negative emotions as well. In discussing sadness, however, the complexity of emotional experience must be acknowledged. Emotional complexity means it is rare for one emotion to be experienced, expressed or observed in isolation. Sadness is often highly interrelated with anger, as will be explained in more depth later. It is not uncommon for people experiencing sadness to oscillate between sadness and other emotions, including anger, fear, anxiety, and happiness (Bonanno, 2009). In addition, personal power is often associated with stronger negative emotions like
anger as opposed to sadness. How people respond to expression of a negative emotion can vary based on interpretation of the emotion’s power. Sadness is often associated with weakness, while anger indicates strength (Lewis, 2000). In this chapter, I address the complexity of how expression of sadness is interpreted and responded to by others.

While there is much research on the basic emotions, including sadness, and extensive research into the role of emotion in the workplace, the majority of existing research focuses on happiness (consistent with rising interest in positive psychology) and anger, with little research on sadness in organizations. Indeed, this situation led Porath and Pearson to state that “The organizational literature is nearly devoid of studies of sadness” (2012, p. E330). Gooty et al. (2009) urge emotion scholars in organizational behavior to, among other things, focus on discrete emotions in context, and further research on sadness at work would do just that. Ashkanasy and Humphrey (2011) argue there is “untapped potential” in emotion research in organizational behavior, and I agree that in the case of sadness there is great potential for expanding our understanding of how sadness affects organizations.

This chapter seeks to address both the lack of organizational literature on sadness and the need to focus on discrete emotions in context by integrating the literature on sadness with what we know about emotion in organizations. From this integration, I seek to summarize conclusions we can draw about the antecedents and consequences of both the experience of sadness and the expression of sadness in the workplace and connect what people talk about and experience of sadness at work with theoretical models related to sadness and other negative emotions. The chapter starts with a discussion of what we currently know from the research about sadness in general, and sadness at work more specifically. Then, I outline the specific antecedents and consequences of sadness as studied by organizational researchers. I also talk about how better understanding sadness at work can help managers be more effective. Finally, I discuss future research opportunities relating to the topic of sadness at work.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT SADNESS

Sadness is considered one of the basic emotions (Johnston and Olson, 2015; Lord et al., 2002). These basic emotions are considered “universal” in part because they are identified easily across human cultures and because they are thought to have evolved “as a specific adaptive response to an environmentally salient stimulus” (Johnston and Olson, 2015, p. 48). Scholars differ in how they categorize basic and universal
emotions, but overall there is consensus that the four basic emotions include fear, anger, happiness, and sadness, with the two additional emotions of disgust and surprise sometimes added to this list (Johnston and Olson, 2015).

There are clear physiological differentiators for these basic emotions, including sadness. Sadness is considered to be one of the most easily recognized emotions (Johnston and Olson, 2015). The facial expression of sadness is difficult to mask. A sad person’s face sags, the eyebrows pinch together and rise up toward the hairline, while the jaw goes slack and the lower lip goes down (Bonanno, 2009). Often sadness is associated with tears welling in the eyes accompanying the general facial expression.

A key signal of sadness can be crying. Crying appears to elicit supportive behavior, but how the helping person judges the crying person is dependent on how they interpret the situation and appropriateness of crying. When a person cries, it may be a sign of sadness or anger (or joy). Recent research indicates that crying signals a need for empathy and support from others (and a need for attackers to back off), however, crying is not always interpreted as a sign of sadness (Hendriks et al., 2008). The actual situation is critical in how adult crying is interpreted. Interestingly, people judge a crying person less positively than a non-crying person, and feel more negative emotions in the presence of a crying person, but still want to engage in efforts to support the crying person (Hendriks, et al., 2008).

Sadness results from a perception that a loss has occurred without the possibility of recovery given the current situation and the person’s current abilities (Carver, 2004; Lench et al., 2016). The loss is generally defined in one of two ways: a relationship loss, in the context of social situations, or perception of failure, often defined as goal loss, in a non-social context (Lench et al., 2011; Lench, et al., 2016). A key to differentiating sadness from other negative emotions is the sense of irrevocability of the loss. When a person sees the loss as not reversible and acknowledges that any action on their part will not be effective, a sense of hopelessness regarding the specific event that caused the sadness sets in, such as when someone perceives an important project will never be completed.

When individuals perceive that a loss has occurred, the analysis of such a loss can result in a multitude of emotional responses related to grieving the loss. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1973) proposed a stage model of grief that was quite popular for a time. Recently, however, this model has been questioned as an oversimplification of a very complex – and individual – experience (Bonanno, 2009). Sadness can often be accompanied by anger, joy, disgust, frustration, and fear. An individual may
experience these emotions in sequence, or sometimes all at once, and thus each individual’s experience of grief is unique, frequently not fitting the linear stage model proposed by Kübler-Ross. This is an example of how the complexity of actual emotional experience of a specific emotion – such as sadness – often contradicts theoretical and popular models.

It is important to differentiate the emotion of sadness from other negative experiences often associated with sadness such as grief, depression, and melancholy. The emotional granularity of the experience leads individuals to describe their own emotion based on the intensity of feeling, thus melancholy is similar to sadness but less intense, while depression is often used to describe deep sadness that lasts a long time (Barrett, 2017). How people characterize and differentiate their own emotional experiences can vary widely, but scientifically, we know that while depression may be associated with emotional experiences of sadness, depression is a psychiatric diagnosis that is associated with not only behavior, but physiological issues that can be treated chemically and with individual therapy (Bonanno, 2009). Thus, we often talk about being or feeling “depressed” in an inaccurate way, while we are truly only experiencing the emotion of sadness due to an experience of loss.

Research shows that experiencing and expressing sadness is useful in individual growth and progress (Bonanno, 2009; Keltner and Gross, 1999; Lord et al., 2002). Sadness can be both positive and negative in terms of outcomes depending on how one copes with the loss itself. Individuals who experience sadness may lose hope and become despondent, at least temporarily, as in grieving the loss of a loved one (Bonanno, 2009). The expression of sadness causes others to respond to the sad individual. How others respond to individuals who express sadness depends on a number of factors, including the social congruency of the expression of sadness, or the “match” between the sadness expressed and others’ perception of the social context (Celik et al., 2016). There has been a great deal of research recently into the consequences of both the experience and expression of sadness in life that can be extrapolated to the organizational context. Later in this chapter, I explore this research in more depth.

As suggested earlier, sadness, as one of the basic negative emotions, is experienced in all cultures by all people. In the organizational context, understanding the causes of experiencing sadness is helpful in further exploring the role of sadness at work. Because this has been relatively neglected in organizational research, and the experience of sadness so common, expanding this understanding is a clear contribution to the study of emotion in organizations. In the following sections I explore the role of sadness in organizations both from the perspective of the
individual and the manager to expand our understanding of the implications of sadness in the workplace.

WHY DO PEOPLE FEEL SAD AT WORK?

There are two broad categories of organizational situations that can cause sadness: (a) personal loss, such as that experienced after a tragedy (Miller, 2002), and (b) personal failure, such as failing to achieve a goal, getting fired or demoted, or failing to get a promotion or some other desired recognition for one's work (Celik et al., 2016; Kreamer, 2011).

In terms of personal loss, the workplace is rife with events and situations that can cause sadness, and experiencing sadness at work is more common than may be generally thought. Workplace relationships can change and become negative, such as when a person perceives incivility from coworkers (Porath and Pearson, 2012). For example, in response to incivility, a person might feel hurt, angry, fearful, or sad, all at once or in succession (Porath and Pearson, 2012). Similarly when grieving (for example in the face of change), a person may oscillate between sadness, anger, frustration, and happiness as they react to the stress of extreme personal loss (Bonnano, 2009). At a group level, events that are experienced simultaneously by everyone in an organization – or subgroup in an organization – can cause sadness. Examples of such events include workplace violence or mass layoffs (Miller, 2002; Lanctôt and Guay, 2014).

In terms of personal failure, a person’s perception of why a goal is not met is critical in differentiating the emotional response to personal failure. If a person perceives that the goal was not met due to something (or someone) blocking their ability to succeed, then anger is often the response because goal attainment is thought possible only if the person could remove the obstacle to success (Carver, 2004; Lench, et al., 2016). However, if a person perceives that the failure is irrevocable and beyond their ability to repair, no matter the cause, then sadness is felt in response to this failure (Keltner et al., 1993).

Goal failure can occur when a project does not end successfully or some career goal is not achieved and one perceives that they have no control over addressing this failure. Negative performance evaluations can cause sadness if a person perceives that the cause (e.g., poor economic conditions impacting on sales) cannot be addressed successfully given their current situation (Celik et al., 2016). Perceptions of failure in general can cause an individual to feel sad about their job, depending on their individual personality and whether they see the failure
as a step toward success (which can be motivating) or evidence of permanent failure.

Because emotions are complex and often interrelated, sometimes people have multiple reactions to failure, and feel both angry and sad, or often may oscillate between the two emotions as they cognitively process the event surrounding the emotional experience (Bonanno, 2009). Emotions are defined as temporary mood states, and as discussed previously, sadness itself must be differentiated from long-term depression or depressed mood (Bonanno, 2009). As such, the experience of sadness may be brief and interconnected with other emotions. The complexity of when and how sadness is experienced is further understood when exploring the importance of past personal history and how this affects a person’s perception of loss in both the social and non-social context.

SADNESS AND PERSONAL HISTORY

The perception of a specific case of failure as irrevocable and unchangeable leads to the experience of sadness, and as such this perception may be associated with individual characteristics such as previous life and work experiences. Very little research has been done on predispositions toward sadness, anger, or other emotions in response to events. The limited research that has been done has explored the causes of sadness as they relate to racism and sexism. This research found that non-white and female employees sometimes experience and express sadness in response to situations where white men may not. For example, in response to disrespect from others, men were more likely to respond with anger, while women were more likely to respond with sadness (Blincoe and Harris, 2011). These differences may be related to previous experiences with disrespect at work, such that previous experiences may be perceived as specific to an individual or related to a person’s identity.

The differences between men and women in terms of emotion – and specifically sadness – are due to both biology and socialization (McRae et al., 2008). Across cultures, women report feeling more powerless emotions – including sadness – while men report feeling more powerful emotions such as anger (Fischer et al., 2004). However, experiences at work may sometimes vary between men and women due to sexism in the workplace. When men and women experience conscious or unconscious bias at work, this can cause an emotional reaction of anger or sadness, depending on how they perceive the extent to which the cause of bias is personal, institutional, or changeable. This interpretation and perception
is likely to be heavily influenced by prior experience with racism or sexism (Johnson et al., 2011).

In addition to how sadness is experienced, we perceive sadness in other people based on context and assumptions related to gender, race, age, and other stereotypes. For example, women are often judged to be sad when they express other emotions based on gender stereotyping of emotional display (Johnson et al., 2011). In other words, if a woman cries when angry, she is often not seen as angry, but instead, is viewed as sad. Perceptions of men and women who express emotion at work are often based on gender role expectations and work role expectations, or a combination of the two (Eagly and Karau, 2002). For example, there is evidence that women who express anger are perceived to be less effective leaders than men who express anger, but both men and women who express sadness are perceived to be less effective (Lewis, 2000). Crying is often perceived as an expression of sadness, despite the fact that tears may result from other emotions as well, including joy, anger, and frustration (Ellsbach and Bechky, 2017). However, when men cry in the workplace, they are often perceived as compassionate, while tears in women are seen as a sign of weakness (Kreamer, 2012). Ellsbach and Bechky (2017) found that men are perceived more positively than women when they cry, and the consequences for women who cry are almost always negative (Ellsbach and Bechky, 2017).

Culture can also impact on when sadness is felt and how it is perceived. Researchers have found that cultural dimensions are related to emotional experience and expression (Fernández et al., 2008). Yan, Ashkanasy, and Mehmood (2017) found that experiences of sadness (and anger) differed across cultures, depending on gender. Culture also impacts our response to situational cues that may cause sadness. For example, Kimel and others (2017) found that in response to social rejection, Westerners respond with more anger than sadness, possibly seeing the rejection as something they may be able to address and thus not irrevocable. In contrast, they found that Easterners report feeling anger and sadness in equal measure, and depending on the situation they may see the rejection as irrevocable and inevitable, leading to sadness (Kimel, et al., 2017). These findings demonstrate that past experience – whether associated with culture, gender, or race – impact how we experience sadness and how we perceive it in others.

One positive aspect of the experience of sadness is that it may reduce the reliance on heuristics as expressed in stereotypes when compared with happiness (Park and Banaji, 2000). Sadness may lead to more objective moral reasoning that relies less on stereotypes and more on the analysis of the situation as it is (Bodenhausen et al., 1994). Sadness
appears to cause people to slow down, be more reflective, and see things from multiple perspectives, all good things when objective observation and judgment is needed. More research on this phenomenon in organizational settings is needed to provide managers with a better understanding of how sadness and stereotypes are related in the workplace.

WHEN SADNESS IS EXPERIENCED COLLECTIVELY AT WORK

Collective experience of emotion occurs when an event is perceived by all involved in a consistent manner. As with other emotions, it is possible for sadness to be experienced collectively in organizations (Collins et al., 2013). For example, collective feelings of sadness can be caused by any type of crisis that is perceived as irrevocable – such as the death of a cherished colleague, a natural disaster, a man-made tragedy such as a mass shooting, large-scale layoffs, or an organizational level failure (Doré et al., 2015). Some people work in jobs where they are more likely to experience events that cause sadness, such as nurses in an Oncology unit or Emergency Medical Technicians (Kendall, 2007). Man-made tragedies that have affected organizations include the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001, when many organizations in New York City and Washington, D.C. had wide-scale losses of life and property. An example of organizational failure that generated sadness occurred when Lehman Brothers abruptly closed and ended business during the global financial crisis in the late 2000s.

In terms of positive emotions, collective experiences of sadness can lead to more cohesion and solidarity after a tragedy, as people are drawn to each other for comfort and a chance to process the experience (Miller, 2002). Anecdotally, we know that as people experience crisis, they draw together in collective response. For example, in World War II, after the invasion of France by Nazi Germany, the Resistance was a powerful collective force that ultimately contributed to and supported the invasion and ultimate defeat of the Nazi forces there. This collective optimism and defiance are, in part, a response to the collective sadness experienced by those who suffer under such a tragedy.

There are many examples of tragedies experienced collectively in organizations and the widespread shared sadness they caused and the positive outcomes that sadness generated. Miller (2002) writes about a tragedy experienced when she was teaching at Texas A&M – the collapse of a traditional bonfire where several students died. In this situation, caring was important, but many professors felt a need to engage in
“emotional labor” to help others heal from the collective sadness experienced at the university as an organization (Hochschild, 1983). Engaging in healing efforts in the aftermath of workplace violence can be very important in promoting positive outcomes, in part because collective sadness can occur in combination with other emotions as part of generalized emotional distress (Lanctôt and Guay, 2014). In the case of collective sadness, relationships are frequently strengthened, leading to persistence and resilience in the face of tragedy (Graham et al., 2008). As a result, sadness may lead to positive change after the tragedy, leading to more cohesion, commitment, and higher general morale among employees.

Over time, sadness can change as a tragic event is processed. Doré and his colleagues (2015) found that people’s emotional response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting evolved from sadness to anxiety over time as details of the event faded. How the sadness is processed collectively varies, depending on perceptions of the event and how it impacts the organization. A leader can greatly influence how collective sadness is processed in an organization through her or his actions in supporting positive healing and bonding. In a crisis where sadness is experienced collectively, leaders can empathize and express sadness themselves. By recognizing others’ sadness and providing support to them as whole people, followers are more likely to feel valued and important. This has the potential to increase cohesion among those experiencing the sadness and increase engagement in the healing after the tragedy is over (Baggett et al., 2016). Later in this chapter, I provide recommendations for how managers can respond to sadness – both individually and collectively – so that the chances for positive outcomes are maximized.

CONSEQUENCES OF SADNESS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Because the research shows that experiencing emotions is useful in life and also at work, we want to know: What is useful about sadness? There are many social benefits of experiencing and expressing negative emotions, including sadness (Lindebaum and Jordan, 2014). Other people often respond to sadness by providing comfort when the loss is irrevocable or assistance in strategizing goal achievement after a personal failure to achieve a goal (Burgoon et al., 2011; Lench and Levine, 2008). In the workplace, this means that coworkers are inclined to want to help someone who is experiencing sadness. Most people respond to someone expressing sadness with empathy and approaching that person in a
helpful way, especially if that person is a friend (Clark and Taraban, 1991). If the sad person is a stranger, the response is more likely to be avoidance and dislike (Clark and Taraban, 1991). Really, a key to determining the response is perception of the appropriateness of the emotional expression of sadness (Graham et al., 2008). If sadness is viewed as appropriate to the situation, then others move toward helping, nurturing, and supporting the sad person. If the sadness seems inappropriate, sad people may be judged as less likeable and may be avoided (Sommers, 1984).

There are many other social benefits to experiencing and expressing sadness. For example, sad people may distribute resources using criteria of fairness more than non-sad people (Tan and Forgas, 2010). People respond to expressions of sadness by assisting the sad person in reflecting on and attempting new efforts towards goal achievement (Graham et al., 2008). People experiencing sadness may be more generous in negotiation (Polman and Kim, 2013). In addition, expressing sadness can have positive relationship outcomes. Others respond to sadness with comfort, and this can result in the building of new close relationships and heightened closeness in existing close relationships (Graham et al., 2008).

Sadness motivates individuals to act differently depending on whether a person perceives the cause of sadness to be social or non-social. If the cause is a non-social one, such as personal failure, a person may withdraw and become reflective. If the cause is more social, such as a loss through death or tragedy, then a person is more likely to be motivated to engage in social behaviors to share their feelings and gain support (Gray et al., 2011). In organizations, this may lead to better processing of the loss and more cohesion in the organization. For example, as discussed previously, Miller (2002) found that professors who empathized and helped students process their sadness after the tragic bonfire collapse at Texas A&M were able to support others in their experience of sadness toward a positive social outcome.

There are many individual benefits to experiencing sadness that can also lead to organizational benefits. Experiencing sadness can increase judgmental accuracy, reduce gullibility, and increase skepticism, in part because it causes individuals to slow down physiologically and pay attention to details by using a more adaptive processing approach (Forgas, 2007). This is beneficial for organizations when a more analytical approach leads to better decisions and outcomes. In addition, people who are sad are better at detecting deception (Forgas and East, 2008), have better eyewitness memory (Forgas et al., 2009), and are less likely
to commit the fundamental attribution error when explaining the behavior of others (Forgas, 1998).

Because of this increased attention to detail and more analytical approach, sadness has the potential to have positive impacts on teamwork and creativity. As previously mentioned, sadness in one individual, or even in the team as a whole, can lead to closer relationships and higher cohesion, leading to more effective teams. Recent research on creativity in organizations demonstrates that negative emotions in general can either enhance or inhibit creativity in individuals (To et al., 2015). While the few research studies on negative emotions and creativity do not focus specifically on sadness, there is some indication that sadness, by slowing down the process of analyzing a situation, may increase creative thought and idea generation (To et al., 2012). For example, the company Pixar routinely engages in “post-mortems” after various stages in developing a new movie (Catmull and Wallace, 2014). These post-mortem discussions involve deeply and critically analyzing a project’s failures and successes in hopes of learning new ways of enhancing creative collaboration. A sad individual may contribute more to that analysis through their efforts to slow down the process and help avoid groupthink.

Another benefit of experiencing sadness is that it can signal that change is needed (Celik et al., 2016). People who are sad are sometimes guided by “emotivations” related to wanting to change one’s situation (Polman and Kim, 2013). Such change has the potential to be positive for organizations. Sometimes it can lead to a desire to change that is not actualized in a positive way, perhaps due to a sense of hopelessness (Polman and Kim, 2013). However, because expressing sadness may lead to others offering social support in goal achievement, positive change is more likely when sad people rely on others for help and support. For example, if someone is sad because they have failed to succeed in a work project, such as a new product launch, others may be motivated to provide support in analyzing the failure, why it happened, and how another new product launch may be redesigned so as to succeed in the future.

There are potential negative consequences to sadness as well. Sadness can lead to lethargy, a lack of focus and/or attention, and decreased motivation (Johnston and Olson, 2015). Experiencing sadness can cause people to be judged as less likable, less social, and less popular (Sommers, 1984). Sad individuals may be more evasive in a negotiation context (Forgas and Cromer, 2004). Emotional contagion means that sadness in one person may lead to others “catching” another person’s sadness. When tragedy is experienced and sadness is more collective, this may also involve emotionally complex responses that include and/or
oscillate between fear, anxiety, anger, and happiness (Lanctôt and Guay, 2014). As discussed previously, sadness is not the same as depression, although expression of sadness can often be mistaken for depression.

Among other individual negative consequences, sad individuals tend to be impatient for financial gain (Lerner et al., 2013) and spend more for a commodity than non-sad individuals (Cryder et al., 2008; Lerner et al., 2004). Sadness increases self-focus and reflection, which may result in a desire to have immediate gratification rather than defer gratification for a greater financial gain. This can have negative consequences for organizations when individuals make poor financial decisions in their organizational roles. For example, a sad person may decide to invest in a long-term project that has higher failure risk for the organization, perhaps because they perceive there will be significant personal gain for themselves in the short-run, perhaps through notoriety or promotion potential. However, if the sad person experiences support from coworkers, and sharing occurs, it can lead to increased motivation and patience, counteracting this desire for immediate gratification.

Often, in response to a negative experience of hurt feelings in the workplace, people may struggle when deciding whether to express sadness or anger. In reality, they may feel both as they vacillate between interpreting the hurt feelings as something either within or outside of their own control. When the goal of wanting to be treated with respect is not attained, the response of anger acknowledges that the disrespect comes from outside of the self. However, individuals may perceive that the disrespect is due to who they are inside, and if they are unwilling to change themselves (particularly if the incivility is seen as unwarranted), they may feel sad as they acknowledge that the person who is the source of the incivility is not likely to change their behavior or experience any negative consequence for their actions (Porath and Pearson, 2012). For example, in a performance appraisal, a person may experience sadness at their inability to achieve high performance (if self-esteem is low), or anger at others for not recognizing their excellence (if self-esteem is high). This may also be the case in incidents of sexual harassment, when a person may perceive that complaining about the harassment will only result in negative consequences to the victim, with no consequences at all for the perpetrator.

In a study of personnel evaluations, the expression of sadness was seen as a positive response to a negative evaluation of someone’s “warmth” in the workplace (Celik et al., 2016). This was because sadness indicated an attempt to change their lack of warmth in a positive way. This is consistent with other research that indicates a person’s response to or interpretation of a person’s expression of sadness is dependent on their
perception of the social congruency of the sadness to the event – it is difficult to “fake” sadness to elicit responses of social sympathy if the situation does not warrant it (Celik et al., 2016). For instance, as individuals decide how to respond to negative performance evaluations, it is important they understand how their response will be interpreted in light of what they hope to achieve post-evaluation (i.e., continued employment, positive reference for the future, maintenance of positive work relationships). As the research discussed in this section indicates, the expression of sadness or anger has potential positive or negative consequences, and deciding how or when to express these emotions has important implications for their work situation.

Given these potential positive and negative consequences of sadness in the workplace, managers are urged to increase their awareness and understanding of how to best support sad individuals they work with. Having a workplace environment where employees feel cared for has many positive benefits beyond just addressing employees who feel sad (Baggett et al., 2016). While there is little research on leadership and sadness, in the next section, advice is given to managers based on the research available.

ADVICE FOR MANAGERS

Managers have much to gain from both expressing genuine sadness and responding appropriately to others who are experiencing sadness. When individual employees are experiencing and expressing sadness, managers can use talk to support them through empathy and providing resources that can promote healing and hope. Especially when employees are experiencing sadness due to a failure at work, managers can help employees reflect on the cause of their failure and find ideas in their reflection for positive change in their lives. In cases when sadness is experienced collectively, managers have a vital role in facilitating healing and renewal following trauma. When tragedy occurs and sadness is experienced collectively, a leader’s expression of emotion as it is perceived to be consistent with the situation matters (Kim and Cameron, 2011).

Managers themselves should not avoid expressing emotion, especially multiple emotions demonstrating the complexity of emotions in response to organizational events. Rothman and Melwani (2017) argue that expression of emotion by leaders can increase cognitive flexibility, helping followers be more accepting and understanding of changes the leader proposes. In addition, expressing sadness may produce higher quality
persuasive messages that are more effective in influencing others (Forgas, 2007). If a leader truly wants to influence others to buy into and engage in successful organizational change, acknowledging the sadness in response to the loss involved in the change may be an effective persuasive technique. Visser et al. (2013) found that leader displays of happiness enhanced follower creative performance, while a leader’s expression of sadness increased analytical performance. As mentioned earlier, however, the expression of sadness must be authentic and consistent with the situation as perceived by others.

As discussed earlier, managers need to be aware of how gender impacts the ways in which expressions of sadness are perceived. A woman’s status, her work role, and others’ gender bias may influence the perceptions of her emotional expression (Brescoll and Uhlmann, 2008). Men who express sadness may or may not be viewed more negatively as leaders. However, given that emotional complexity means that emotions are rarely expressed in isolation, the context of the sadness is important in understanding how expressing sadness will be interpreted by others. When leaders express sadness they are demonstrating a willingness to express negative emotions, and this may lead to more positive relationship outcomes (Graham et al., 2008).

Demonstrating that managers care for others is a key component of authentic leadership, and has been shown to lead to positive outcomes in the health-care setting (Baggett et al., 2016). When employees express sadness, managers can show they care by providing support and empathy. Particularly when an employee is sad after a personal failure, managers can listen with empathy and engage in dialogue regarding future plans and changes that the employee can make to take a positive post-failure direction. When managers have established a caring attitude in the past, employees are more likely to feel cared for when a tragedy occurs and collective sadness is experienced. Caring expressed toward sad colleagues provides needed support, but also models behaviors for others in the organization. By responding to workplace incivility with compassion and actions to reduce negative interactions, managers demonstrate that they care about their employees’ experience and corresponding emotional response of sadness (Porath and Pearson, 2012).

Managers can be more effective in managing change by increasing their awareness of the implications of sadness experienced and expressed in the workplace. Responding to both individual and collective perceptions of loss, and providing a caring and nurturing environment in their workplace can lead to more successful change. They can also provide a platform for better performance through increased use of the adaptive processing approach to problem solving, leading to a more analytical and
unbiased approach in decision making as well. All in all, there are
tremendous benefits to managers of understanding the causes and conse-
quences of sadness in the workplace.

FUTURE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES RELATED TO
SADNESS AT WORK

There is a great deal of research on negative emotions – and to some
degree, sadness in life – but more needs to be done to connect this
research to the organizational setting. In this chapter, there is an implicit
assumption that the causes and consequences of experiencing and
expressing emotion generalize to the organizational setting. More work is
needed to see if this is the case. Even the research that has been
conducted in an organizational setting to date has limited generalizability
to organizations. Much more needs to be done, and here I propose some
specific opportunities that have emerged from my chapter for future
research:

- Understanding the consequences of specific managerial behaviors,
  actions, and comments in response to expression of sadness by
  employees.
- Increased focus on sadness as a discrete emotion in specific
  contexts within organizations. For example, sadness in response to
  layoffs or tragedy (Gooty et al., 2009; Ashkanasy et al., 2017).
- Research on the impact of sadness oscillating with other emotions
  on social relationships and individual performance in organizations.
- A better understanding of how experiencing and expressing sadness
  impacts individual performance on specific types of tasks at work.
- More understanding of how incivility and other negative treatment
  (such as sexual harassment or bias due to stereotyping) impacts the
  experience of sadness in the workplace.
- Understanding how social functional theoretical views of sadness
  relate to actual work behavior.
- Research on how sadness resulting from non-work experiences
  (such as grieving the loss of a loved one) impacts work-related
  behaviors.
- Research on impacts of personal characteristics and past personal
  experience – including culture, race, and gender – on the experi-
  ence and expression of sadness in the workplace.
There are many other avenues for research into workplace experiences of sadness. The research on sadness in life in psychology and sociology provides a broad and solid platform for exploring the role of sadness in the organizational context.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, I have presented evidence showing that the experience and expression of sadness in the workplace involves dynamic and complex processes. We know that sadness, while classified as a negative emotion, is not always negative in practice or experience. There are often positive consequences from the experience and expression of sadness, particularly in how feeling sad can motivate more social support, better and closer relationships, more analytical exploration of situations, and less use of stereotypes. Managers and leaders in particular can benefit from understanding how to respond to sadness experienced and expressed by their employees. However, future research is needed to clarify exactly how sadness at work may influence organizations. In particular, understanding sadness in the context of overall emotional complexity will improve our general understanding of the impact of emotion in organizations.

Organizations are expected to deal with the causes and consequences of sadness on both an individual and collective level every day. In addition, sadness generated by individual experiences outside of the workplace can still have significant consequences for organizations, both positive and negative. As with many negative emotions, many employees avoid acknowledging or thinking about sadness and considering the implications for individuals and the organization in terms of organizational outcomes, like performance, engagement and individual well-being. Based on the evidence in this chapter, organizational and individual sadness have implications for organizations. A greater understanding of sadness can assist in creating a workplace where the organizational experience of emotion as a whole more will be more positive. As managers respond to individual and collective sadness appropriately, with empathy and support, the organizational environment overall can become more supportive. As a result, employees’ attention to emotional experiences in general increase, resulting in more emotional intelligence expressed throughout the organization. This can only have positive outcomes for organizations, regardless of the extent to which sadness is observed in the workplace.
REFERENCES


Social functions of emotion and talking about emotion at work


The deeper side of sadness at work


