

Supporting bereaved staff in the workplace

This leaflet outlines some key points to consider when supporting a staff member who has experienced a bereavement.

Health and safety

Grief can affect concentration and energy levels. If the bereaved person's job involves activities where safety is an issue, they will need support to carry out their job.

Supporting a bereaved colleague

You can play an important role, along with family, friends and your employer, in helping a bereaved colleague find their way through the grieving process. Support from colleagues and the workplace can make a difficult situation less painful.

Each person's grief is unique and people deal with their losses in different ways. Some want to talk to their colleagues about what has happened while others are more private. It is important to respect this and be sensitive to the person's needs. If you are not sure, ask the person how you could support them.

What helps ...

Acknowledge the person's loss – even though you feel uncomfortable and might not know exactly what to say, it is much better to acknowledge your colleague's loss than to say nothing.

Let the bereaved person be your guide – even though you may think you know what they are going through, it is better to check first and allow them to tell you.

Listen – very often it's hard to know what you can do for a colleague who is grieving, but one thing that really makes a difference is making time to listen to them.

Practical help – ask your colleague if there are things you can do that would help, such as sharing their workload, picking up their children after school or going with them for a coffee.

What doesn't help ...

Avoiding the bereaved person and acting as if nothing has happened – something has happened and it is better to be open about this.

Minimising the loss – phrases such as 'he had a good innings' or 'it's a happy release' do not help the person who is grieving. You don't know the significance of the loss for the person and it is better not to assume.

Making a fuss – most bereaved people want to be treated as normally as possible at work and do not want to stand out. Be sensitive and respect their wishes.

Expecting the person to be back to normal quickly – people never go 'back to normal' because normal included the person who has died. In time they adapt to a 'new normal'.

Where to find more information

Grief at Work – Developing a bereavement policy,
Mc Guinness, B., 2007, Dublin: Irish Hospice Foundation
www.bbc.co.uk/relationships/coping_with_grief
www.hospice-foundation.ie



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Grief at work

Returning to work
after a bereavement

Returning to work

Going back to work after someone you love has died can be stressful. You may find it helps to go part-time for a while or start back on a half day towards the end of the week. If you have a good relationship with your manager, talk through your options with them before you go back.

How grief affects you

Grief is a natural reaction when someone close to you dies. Although it is normal, you may be surprised at the different ways it can affect you outlined below and the impact this may have on your work.

Physically – you feel tired, lack energy, find it hard to eat or sleep, pains and aches.

Emotionally – you feel sad, self-reproach and guilt, angry, anxious, relieved, lonely, empty, happy, numbness and shock.

Spiritually – you try to find meaning in what happened, ‘Why me?’, ‘What did I do to deserve this?’, angry with God.

Mentally – you find it hard to concentrate or make decisions, pre-occupied with thoughts of the person who has died.

What helps ...

Find out what support is available – does your work have a bereavement policy? What leave are you entitled to? What other supports (such as employee assistance, counselling service) are there and how can you access them? Having this information can help to make a difficult situation less painful for you and avoid misunderstandings.

Communication – if you have a good relationship with your manager, talk to them about your concerns and needs, such as what to say to colleagues, your workload, flexibility of work hours and so on.

Take care of yourself – grieving can be tough and demanding. There will be times at work when you feel upset or down over your loss. If this happens, take a short break, step out of the office or talk to someone you trust.

What doesn't help ...

Ignoring grief – it is hard to leave your grief at the door when you go to work. It can affect your concentration, workload, energy levels and relationships with co-workers.

Taking on extra work – keeping busy can help some people with their grief, but don't take on extra work as a way of coping. You need to be able to spend time on your loss as well as time away from it.

Putting a time limit on your grief – grief is a slow process and may take longer than you expect. It normally takes at least two years to come to terms with a major loss.

Getting support at work

Support from colleagues and your employer can make a difficult situation less painful for you. You are the best judge of what you need from others and this can change over time.

Colleagues – take the initiative to ask for the support that you need at a given time. This can help you to regain some control of your situation. It can also open up channels of support from colleagues. People generally want to help but may not know how to go about it.

Your manager is in a good position to give you support. They will know what support the organisation provides and what options are available to you.

Staff support – many workplaces have some form of staff support or employee assistance programmes. These can be useful contacts for you to find out what services your employer provides.

Counselling – can help some bereaved people though not everyone needs it. Some workplaces offer a counselling service to staff.