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Ref: GD:07:01	Guidance for Healthcare Workers Affected by Death in Service of a Colleague due to COVID-19			
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Purpose of Guidance

The death of a healthcare worker due to COVID-19 is a very sad occurrence. Such an event can have a significant impact on their immediate colleagues and the wider healthcare workforce. In most instances, such deaths will be unexpected. Healthcare workers deaths from COVID-19 may elicit attention from a variety of sources. This has the potential to intensify the feeling of loss experienced by the work friends and colleagues of the deceased healthcare worker.

This guidance provides practical advice and information to support healthcare workers in coping with the death in service of a colleague due to COVID-19. It highlights some of the practical concerns and issues that can arise for teams, managers and individual healthcare workers following the loss of a colleague.

The HSE acknowledges that each person's experience of grief is individual. Different people grieve and manage death in different ways. Some people are very private and do not wish to share their feelings with others, while some prefer to share openly about their experience and feeling of loss. The different reactions are both normal and appropriate. People's individual grief reaction should be respected. The changes in funeral rituals due to COVID-19 may also impact their grief reaction.

Broadly speaking, individuals tend to negotiate the following main issues in the grieving process:

- Shock
- Accepting the loss
- Experiencing and processing the associated emotional pain or discomfort
- Adjusting to the workplace without the deceased colleague



The individual impact of loss is unique and may bring a different combination of grief factors for each person. It can impact healthcare workers across the following domains:

Physical symptoms:

- Insomnia, nausea, aches & pains, fatigue, sleep disturbances, crying, reduced enthusiasm, appetite disturbances

Emotional symptoms:

- Sadness, shock & disbelief, numbness, fear, anger, guilt, loneliness, emotional exhaustion

Psychological symptoms:

- Concentration difficulties, disbelief, confusion, thinking a lot about the person who has died, disturbed dreams

Spiritual symptoms:

- Trying to make sense of what has happened, searching for meaning, questioning

The above reactions are normal under the circumstances. There is no 'right' pathway for managing and coping with grief. The single most important factor in coming to terms with grief is social support. While the grieving process is individual, the support of friends, family, colleagues and others both in the workplace and outside of it is very important. How to provide and facilitate support is outlined below.

Practical workplace tasks may need to be taken care of, sometimes sooner than colleagues may feel ready for. The HSE will contact the colleague's next of kin prior to informing external communications media. Codes of confidentiality should be adhered to and guide decision making in terms of distributing any related information.

The HSE acknowledges this is a very difficult time for you and provides support through a range of staff services, like the Employee Assistance Programme and Occupational Health. Each healthcare worker can choose whether they want to avail of these confidential supports.

For Line Managers:

These unique circumstances could be challenging and sensitive to manage. There may be colleagues who need to be informed of the healthcare worker's death – some colleagues may be out of work for different reasons. Other team members and workplace friends of the deceased colleague may need to be advised of the death. Clarify roles and responsibilities with your HR manager and agree the correct point of contact for questions staff and/ or next of kin may have.



What to Say

Following the death in service of a healthcare worker, managers and colleagues may ask themselves, “What should I say?”. You may want to discuss with your team how to manage what has happened. For managers or team leaders, you may find this easier if you write down what you are going to say. Be aware of cultural and religious sensitivities when checking in with staff. Have a plan of what you want to say with key phrases and words may be helpful as it will inevitably be an emotive situation for you and the person you are informing.

[Providing supports to mind staff mental health is critical during COVID-19](#) (World Health Organization). There are a range of support services to assist staff at this time, including EAP and Occupational Health services (see hyperlinks below). The Workplace Health & Wellbeing Unit acknowledges and respects the contribution of all services involved in providing different types of support to healthcare workers affected by the death in service of a colleague due to COVID-19.

Helping a Colleague Return to Work / Continue to Work after the Death of a Team Member

Returning to the workplace, or continuing to work, following the death in service of a colleague is one of the immediate challenges facing you and your team. Offering support which is both practical and sensitive to the needs of the healthcare workers, managers and colleagues can help with the process of re-adjustment to the workplace following the loss of a colleague due to COVID-19. You may be a friend of someone who has lost a close colleague, on a different team, or know that another colleague was a close friend of the deceased. What can you do to help?

The following steps may be helpful to line managers and team members in supporting those returning to work / continuing to work after the death in service of a colleague:

Immediately / Short Term

- **Support each other and connect** with each other. Don't withdraw from others. It's harder than ever to stay connected at a time of self-isolation, quarantining and cocooning. As well as speaking to colleagues in work, make use of the technology that's available and reach out. Remember, you are not alone.
- **Be kind to others** - remember, we can all grieve differently. Just because someone isn't grieving in the same way as you, it doesn't mean that it isn't equally difficult for them.
- **Be kind to self** - recognise the significant emotional burden that grief takes, and in particular grief associated with the loss of a colleague at a time like this. You may notice a change in your normal energy levels – accept offers of help to share the workload.



- **Exercise** – getting exercise can help to shift and process the difficult emotions we experience in relation to loss.
- **Reflect** – make time to check in with yourself. It can be very helpful to take a few minutes at the end of the day to reflect on how you're doing. What has been challenging? What are you still experiencing / thinking / feeling?

Medium Term

- **Be considerate** of colleagues who will be taking on the duties of the person who has passed away. It will probably be difficult for them to take on this role. What are the practicalities involved? How can you and your team support this colleague?
- **Personal belongings** may need to be returned to the family of the person who has passed away. The line manager should designate responsibility for this and how it is done.
- **Continue to check in with your colleagues** – ask them how they are and let them know how you're doing. Other staff may not fully understand what your team are going through. Support each other as much as you can.
- **Allow time to adjust** - challenging in current work climate but time does create a sense of space to adjust.

Long Term

- **Honour the memory** – find out what your team wishes to do to remember the colleague who has died. This may be challenging in the current work climate but allow opportunities for the team to plan this in time to come, or see what is deemed acceptable by the team at this current time.
- **Actively include** colleagues affected by the loss in work tasks and group breaks and, after the restrictions have ceased, in social activities and planning of memorial activities. Even where they turn down an invitation, still continue to invite and include them.

Finally

This can be a very difficult time for healthcare workers. Along with getting support from family, friends and colleagues, staff can also reach out to other supports available to them. The HSE staff support services are available and can help staff to get through this experience. The HSE will continue to work with you and your team members to help you through the loss of your colleague.

The [HSE Employee Assistance Programme](#) is here to support you at this difficult time. You can contact our Counsellor/Therapists directly for support. [HSE Occupational Health services](#) are also available.