

*Bereavement
in the workplace*



We are here for you

*You have supported us,
now let Heart of Kent Hospice
support you and your colleagues.*

As everyone who has experienced it will know, bereavement may be one of the most devastating things any of us will ever go through. It impacts all aspect of an individual's life - including their work life, and it is important that businesses support their colleagues and put some considerations in place should a team member or a family member become bereaved.

We hope that this document will provide some useful guidance to enable your business to fully support your colleagues and teams through a bereavement in a compassionate and sensitive way.

What is grief?

When someone is coming to terms with the loss of a loved one, it is important that they know they are not alone. Bereavement brings with it a complex range of feelings, all of which are normal. They may experience shock, numbness, overwhelming sadness, tiredness or exhaustion, anger, guilt, fear, or loneliness. These are likely to change over the weeks, months and even years after the death of a loved one and that is totally normal.

At times, they may feel like no one truly understands what they are going through, but there are people who can identify with their experience and can help. They do not have to cope alone.



The grieving process

Everyone copes with bereavement differently. There is no right or wrong way to cope. People have described grief as juggling emotions; never quite sure which one they will feel on any given day at any time.

There are significant stages within the grieving process. Some may not experience all the stages, but it can be helpful to know the emotions that are part of the natural process.

Typical emotions can include the following:

- Finding it hard to accept the loss - even if the death is expected it can still bring a shock of disbelief.
- Experiencing pain and incredible sadness – everyone deals with pain differently. Some cry, others lash out in anger whilst others withdraw and go quiet.
- Adjusting to life without a loved one – do not rush the process or make decisions too quickly. A person needs time to manage shifting emotions and accept that the journey will take time and energy.
- Moving on – people often feel guilty about this but moving on helps a person to channel their emotions into new things which is very healthy.

Some colleagues will be able to cope well and fully function at work whilst others will really struggle to manage their loss.

For employers, it can be difficult to manage. Employees may need some time off unexpectedly, find their performance is impacted or be temporarily unable to perform certain tasks. Knowing that a colleague is fully supported by their employer can help reduce stress, anxiety, and periods of sick leave.



Coping with grief

People often describe grief as coming in waves, sometimes gentle and calm and sometimes strong and fierce. It can be difficult to anticipate how a person will feel, so it is important they are given time and space.

To support a colleague further, it is important to understand that they need to:

- **Express themselves** – talking, writing, or drawing can help a person understand feelings. They could also speak to an external resource as discussed later.
- **Understand that it is ok to be sad** – it is a healthy part of the grieving process.
- **Sleep** – however hard this may be.
- **Eat healthy** – to boost energy levels.
- **Seek counselling** – if it feels right to them.

What to do if a colleague dies

If a colleague dies, it can deeply affect other employees and the workplace. Later in this document you will find further guidance on how to support your colleagues through this difficult time.

As a compassionate employer you should:

- Contact the person's family or next of kin to offer condolences.
- Acknowledge the passing by telling colleagues that a person has died, in a sensitive and personal way. Every company will do this differently, but here are some guidelines to help with that difficult conversation:
 - Decide how much news you should share. To protect the deceased employee's privacy, the family might prefer that you not disclose certain information to their colleagues.
 - Call a meeting with your employees and express that you have some sad news to disclose. Be direct and concise but also tactful and sympathetic.
 - Explain that the employee has regretfully passed away.



- Express how the news has affected you personally and recall a fond memory or two about the employee.
- Notify staff members outside of your direct supervision as soon as possible. In this case, you could send a brief email to managers, supervisors, and employees in other departments. You could also include external contacts that the deceased employee worked with, such as suppliers and clients. But the company must decide if this is appropriate and may want to seek approval from the family first.
- Call employees who are on short-term leave or are temporarily out of the office and inform them accordingly. Do this for employees who were in the deceased employee's immediate work group. This prevents them from feeling left out upon their return. You can notify other employees who are on leave via email.
- Offer support to all staff affected by the death.
- Signpost colleagues to support services that may be available. If you are unsure where to start, you can call our Family Services Team at Heart of Kent Hospice who will help to signpost you to the best services to support your colleague.
- Ensure colleagues know how they can give their condolences.
- If appropriate and if staff are invited, share details of the funeral or ceremony.

Offering support

It is important for managers to talk to their teams regularly to see how they are coping and if appropriate, signpost staff to any support that is available to them.

The Leadership Team may feel it is appropriate to honour the person who died with others at work. For example, you might consider:

- Organising a book of condolence for staff to share their memories of the person who died.
- Holding an event or service to honour the person who died, inviting the family or next of kin as well, if appropriate.



Finalising your colleague's affairs

The manager of the person who died should put their family or next of kin in touch with your HR department or a senior manager so they can answer any questions about pay, pension and other benefits as well as returning any personal items.

What to do when a staff member tells you they have a bereavement

There will be key information a manager will need to ask their colleague, but it is important to recognise the distressed state of this conversation. A calm empathic approach in all communications from managers ensures your colleague feels supported and minimises any anxiety associated with work. One of the most helpful things you can do for a bereaved colleague is to just listen, give them space and time to grieve.

Here is some advice that you may want to consider:

- Consider who is the best person to respond to the colleague. They may also be bereaved or have emotional demands that they are struggling with.
- Offer condolences. Just by offering your time and providing a listening ear can be helpful.
- If appropriate, discuss the organisation's policy on leave during this period.
- Stay in regular contact and agree how they would like to be communicated with i.e. telephone, email, or face to face.
- Ask how much information they want colleagues to know, and if they wish to be contacted by colleagues.
- Ask about the wider family and how they are.
- Also consider that the bereaved colleague could now be the sole carer for an elderly loved one or child(red) so this could impact their emotional wellbeing and working patterns in the future.
- Be conscious of diversity. Accommodate religious beliefs and customs where it is reasonable and practical.
- Consider any issues that may arise in the media.



- Sometimes deaths are reported in the media with or without the family's consent – their grief is made public (this often happens in suicide that has gone to the coroners' court which will be very hard for families). If appropriate, consider how you will support the bereaved colleagues through this.
- Discuss with the colleague when it is appropriate to return to work, in accordance with your organisation's bereavement policy.

Understandably, the bereaved person will experience many ups and downs as they adjust to life without their loved one. On their return to work we would advise that the manager holds regular reviews with the bereaved employee, somewhere the employee will feel safe and calm. You may also want to consider adjustments that may be needed to support their return to work, such as a phased return to work or temporary change of duties. Managers should also consider referral or signposting their colleague to a specialist organisation for bereavement counselling. The bereaved person needs to know there is support available should they need it. Managers also need to be sensitive around special dates for the individual which may be practically difficult for them such as anniversaries.

Ongoing support

When a colleague feels ready to return to work, they may still need extra support or time off. This could be because of the bereavement for example they are not able to sleep or concentrate as they usually would. They may become depressed or suffer from another mental health condition. There could be extra responsibilities placed on them such as helping or supporting a dependant.

Every company will deal with requests for extra support or time off differently, but it should all be laid out in the bereavement or absence policies.



Bereavement and loss policy

It is highly recommended that your workplace has a sensitive bereavement and loss policy. A policy will have clear guidelines about matters such as how much time off and pay staff are entitled to and guidance on how managers can support their colleagues after a death.

There are many examples of bereavement policies available online such as www.acas.org.uk/example-bereavement-policy

We hope you found this resource helpful. We have provided suggestions on how you can support your colleagues during a bereavement as well as providing details on the following page of other organisations who can also help. Heart of Kent Hospice offers a range of bereavement support for the families, friends, and carers of our patients as well as signposting services. Should you have any further questions, call our Family Support Services Team on 01622 792200.





Practical information

Heart of Kent Hospice

Family Support Team 01622 792200 ext 260 | www.hokh.org/caring-for-you/bereavement-support/

National Association of Funeral Directors

www.nafd.org.uk/funeral-advice

ACAS

www.acas.org.uk/time-off-for-bereavement

Good Funeral Guide

www.goodfuneralguide.co.uk/about/about-the-good-funeral-guide/#

Citizens Advice Bureau

Tel: 03444 111444 (Mon – Fri 9am – 5pm) | www.citizensadvice.org.uk/

Mental Health Matters

www.mhm.org.uk/kent-safe-havens

National bereavement organisations for support:

Cruse Bereavement Care

Tel: 0808 808 1677 | www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief

Marie Curie support

www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/coronavirus

MIND Maidstone & Mid-Kent

Tel: 07534 044513 | www.mindhhelp@mmkmind.org.uk

Moodcafe - Coping with Bereavement

www.moodcafe.co.uk/mental-health-info/bereavement.aspx

HOLDING ON LETTING GO (for bereaved children in Kent)

Tel: 03445 611 511 | www.holdingonlettinggo.org.uk/

SLIDEAWAY Slide Away (for bereaved children and young people in West Kent)

Tel: 07970597715 | www.slideaway.org/

Childhood Bereavement Network

www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/help-around-a-death/covid-19.aspx

Winston's Wish | www.winstonswish.org/telling-a-child-someone-died-from-coronavirus

