

How HR And Managers Can Together Support Employees Through Grief

This guidance is for HR and managers supporting an employee through bereavement. During each phase, it is recommended that managers take responsibility for the action points in this guidance with overarching support from HR if needed.



Phase 1 – Immediately After The Bereavement

- HR (in conjunction with the manager) to send a condolence card and flowers to acknowledge the bereavement.
- Reach out to the employee by email/text/phone call and offer a follow-up call or meeting if they feel up to it. Offer personal condolences and assure them their health and wellbeing are the priority.
- Ask how they'd like to keep in touch, for example by phone or email.
- Ask if there's any important work they need someone else to cover. Be empathetic and let them know you will activate their out-of-office if this hasn't been actioned.
- Offer appropriate paid time off for bereavement if possible. If you're unable to offer sufficient paid leave under your bereavement policy, discuss sick leave, holiday or unpaid leave. Always refer to your policies and seek advice from HR if unsure.
- Offer and signpost internal support available to the employee and ensure they understand how to access this support.



Phase 2 – Prior To Returning To Work

- Check-in on how the employee is doing and how they feel about returning to work. Ask if they want the team to be made aware of their bereavement ahead of returning or whether they would rather keep this confidential/ share it themselves when they are ready.
- Discuss adjustments that might help with their return work. For example, a phased return or a temporary change in the working environment. Give them adequate time to consider how an appropriate return to work may look for them.
- If you are discussing changing working arrangements, temporarily, following a bereavement, it is important to make a file note of this for HR records to accurately reflect the circumstances.



Phase 2 - Upon Return To Work

- Arrange a return-to-work meeting to identify any reasonable adjustments. This could be in the form of simply meeting up for a coffee.
- Put into place any discussed adjustments such as changes to workload and flexible start/finish times.
- Ask how they wish to be supported going forward, and what might help in case there is something that hasn't been considered.
- Discuss any changes at work such as new team members or new ways of working.
- Re-iterate the support available and whether additional flexibility is required.



Phase 3 – Long Term Support

- It's important to recognise that grief affects everyone differently. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, nor is there a timeframe for grieving.
- Be mindful that grief can impact an employee's ability to sleep, think and concentrate, which can affect performance. Be supportive and empathetic to these potential drivers of reduced performance.
- Be mindful of anniversaries, and celebratory events such as Christmas as these may trigger memories which cause upset.
- Remember that grief is a natural response people have to a loss and it is not a mental health illness. However, if someone's grief becomes complex this may cause them to experience mental ill health such as anxiety or depression.
- Keep a lookout for signs that the employee might be having a difficult time. This should be addressed in a supportive way to reduce the risk of long-term sickness absence. Occupational Health might be needed to support the employee further and provide clinical advice if necessary.



Things To Remember....

Providing personalised support to an employee after a bereavement can help:

- Make them feel valued.
- Reduce their stress or anxiety (particularly relating to workloads).
- Avoid or reduce sick leave (particularly longer-term sickness).
- Keep a good working relationship.
- Keep the workplace productive, alongside supportive colleagues.

Communication with your employee is key to understanding what support they need from you and letting them know what support you can offer.

Try not to 'lead with the policy', instead use sensible discretion wherever possible to offer the best personal and tailored support.

Don't be afraid to look creatively at solutions, as this can sometimes be difficult when following a policy, clause by clause – keep an empathetic outlook wherever possible.

Focus on their needs and tailor support accordingly, as everyone's grief will be different and will ebb and flow over time.

Be mindful of the language used. For example, if a loved one died by suicide, avoid using language such as 'committed suicide' as this may not be well received.

Most importantly show empathy and patience in supporting them as this will alleviate some of the pressures around grieving, particularly in the workplace.