

HR Factsheet: Manager's Guide to supporting staff during bereavement

1. Introduction

Facing bereavement at any time is difficult both personally and professionally. It is even more difficult in our current environment of incredibly high demands, with little to no down time, social distancing and a steady stream of anxiety-provoking media. Members of our teams will have family, friends and colleagues in critical care, with some recovering and others not.

These situations can have an impact on our mental health and it's important that we put the appropriate support in place to ensure that staff are supported in the sad instance that they are affected by a death, including from COVID-19 or by suicide

Losing someone close to us, be that a colleague or a family member or friend, can be devastating. The emotions relating to grief can also emerge without bereavement, in periods of significant change as we are in now. We know we will see many colleagues suffering the aftermath of traumatic experiences over the coming months.

It's important line managers and leaders receive support as well. Remember, it's ok to ask for help!

2. Guidance on good leadership during bereavement and complex grief

Good leadership is at the heart of how you support people in the face of bereavement. In particular, the advent of COVID-19 has brought ideas of compassionate leadership to the fore. Compassionate leadership is one of the most potent ways in which people can deal with what feel frightening and overwhelming.

This means paying attention to staff, truly listening to them and hearing the anxieties, stresses, and grief associated with bereavement. This is also about modelling good adaptive leadership when you're working with uncertainty and complexity, and where you need to support and enable other people, facilitating actions and modelling leadership as something that can be practised by anyone, whatever their role or grade. Exceptional leadership for exceptional times summarises what this leadership can look like in practice.

It's important to remember that everyone deals with death and grief differently, and each member of staff's needs will be different. Supporting a member of staff can help them feel valued and reduce their stress or anxiety. Research also shows being a supportive line manager can avoid or reduce sick leave, keep a good working relationship and keep the workplace productive.

Below are some practical tips for holding conversations with colleagues:

2.1. When a member of staff tells you about a death of someone close to them

- Offer your condolences.
- Assure them they do not need to come to work if they do not want to, and make it clear that work should come second.
- Ask how they'd like to keep in touch.
- If appropriate, ask if there's any important work they need someone else to cover.
- If someone is upset, they might not be able to talk for long or they might ask someone else to contact you on their behalf. Communicating in a calm, empathetic way can help employees feel

supported, and help ease their anxiety about returning to work. Speak to the HR team to ensure that any compassionate leave or time off is in accordance with policy and recorded correctly on Workforce.

2.2. When you get in touch with a bereaved member of staff

It is good practice to ask:

- How they are
- How they'd like to be in contact while they're off, for example by phone or email, and how often
- If they want you to let others know about the death
- If they want to be contacted by others from work, for example to offer their support or condolences
- If they need any information or support from you, and signpost to any support that's available to them
- If they've thought about returning to work, if appropriate

2.3. When you are concerned about a colleague

There is a tragic reality that some of us will have concerns about colleagues at risk of harming themselves or taking their life by suicide. Flags to be aware of include communicating that they are feeling much worse, saying they would 'rather not be here'. You might be aware that they have considered suicide previously or have ideas about how they would kill themselves. It can also be more subtle including appearing restless and agitated, not wanting to talk to people, or not coping with everyday tasks.

- It is important to remain calm and not panic.
- If you are worried someone may be in immediate danger, call the emergency services
- If you are worried about the person but do not think they are in immediate danger encourage them to talk about their feelings and to seek help
- Asking simple, direct questions can help. This includes asking someone whether they are having suicidal thoughts. Ask open questions, give them time to respond and try not to judge
- Suggest they call the confidential staff helpline: 0300 131 7000. You can also call on their behalf
- Make sure you get support as well. Caring for someone else who is suicidal can be very emotionally draining.

Remember, it's ok to ask for help!

3. Do's and don'ts for leading and managing a team member following a bereavement

Below are some suggested 'do's and don'ts for leading and managing your teams after a bereavement...

DO...

- **Take your time:** when calling on a vulnerable person or the bereaved give the time needed to demonstrate care.
- **Listen to the story:** talking is important for the distressed, use active listening to show you understand.
- **Provide information:** make sure you have relevant written information and guidance to share.
- **Be creative:** although there are strict rules on not spreading infection, be personal and innovate.
- **Show respect:** people may have strong religious or other beliefs. Be respectful of what matters to them.

- **Accept the depth of their sorrow:** grief for some is worse than physical pain, acknowledge the pain they experience.
- **Have patience:** distress makes it difficult for people to think straight, be patient and allow time for answers.
- **Do speak to your Director and HR if there is a death in service of a colleague**

DON'T...

- **Make assumptions:** everyone behaves differently when distressed, there is no normal response to grief or COVID-19.
- **Blame you or others for failing:** hear them out and accept what is true and recognise this response as frustration.
- **Make promises you cannot keep:** be realistic in what you can offer.
- **Dismiss values and beliefs:** people may express harmful thoughts or behaviours, check if they are at risk of suicide.
- **Don't forget the children:** make sure that children are involved and their needs to understand are met. (if this is appropriate)
- **Put yourself or your colleagues at risk:** make sure you balance compassionate leadership with maintaining safety standards and procedures.
- **Expect to make things better:** recognise you cannot stop the pain, but you can help reduce it a little.

4. Further Resources

We know that managing everyday life in the midst of bereavement, both as an individual and as a line manager or team leader, can be complex and unexpected. The below extra resources will help you navigate through this difficult time. Everyone grieves differently, especially given the diverse cultural backgrounds of our staff, therefore this range of resources comes in a variety of formats to best support you in your individual situation.

- Understanding bereavement
- Additional support during bereavement
- Suicide and self-harm awareness and support

To access these resources, click [here](#)