

## Supporting someone after a death

As an employer, you should take into account that everyone experiences grief differently. Each employee's needs will be different.

Some employees might need support soon after the death and also after they return to work. For example, on the anniversary of the death or if there's an inquest into the death. You should tailor your support to each individual person's needs.

Supporting an employee after a death can help:

- them feel valued
- reduce their stress or anxiety
- avoid or reduce sick leave
- keep a good working relationship
- keep the workplace productive

It's important to communicate with your employee to ask what support they need from you, and also to let them know what support you can offer.

For example, some employees will have a network of family and friends supporting them through the death. You should keep this in mind when considering the support you give them.

## When an employee tells you about the death

When an employee tells you about the death, it's good practice to:

- 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, for example by phone or email
- ask if there's any important work they need someone else to cover, if appropriate

If someone is upset they might not be able to talk for long, or someone else might contact you on their behalf. If this happens, it can help to follow up with an email, or call them a few days later.

Communicating in a calm, empathetic way can help employees feel supported, and help ease their anxiety about work.

### Example of good communication

Cam's partner dies suddenly of a heart attack on the day Cam is due to chair a meeting at work.

Cam contacts their manager, Ashley, who quickly assures Cam they do not need to worry about work. Ashley checks if it is okay to tell other people at work about the death, and how Cam would like to keep in touch.

Over the next few days, Cam and Ashley speak again over the phone. Ashley reassures Cam that their workload will be handled by other members of staff. Ashley and the team send Cam a sympathy card. Cam and Ashley agree to speak again after the funeral.

When they next speak, Ashley confirms how much paid bereavement leave Cam can take, and that there are other options if they need more time off. Ashley also shares the details of counselling and other support available through work.

This helps reassure Cam, and helps Ashley check if Cam needs any support.

## If they need time off

Check your organisation's bereavement policy to see how much leave your organisation can provide. Your bereavement policy should take into account that some staff may need to travel abroad at short notice and may need more time off.

If your organisation does not have a policy, it's good practice to talk to your employee and:

- check their [legal right to time off](#) during bereavement, for example parental bereavement leave
- consider their personal circumstances, including different religious and cultural practices
- look at what you've offered other bereaved employees, to make sure you're treating everyone fairly
- offer some paid time off for bereavement if possible (you might call this 'compassionate', 'bereavement' or 'special' leave)
- talk about using sick leave, holiday or unpaid leave to cover their time off, if you're unable to offer other paid leave for bereavement
- ask if they need other support

It's a good idea to have a bereavement policy if you do not have one.

[Find out more about the benefits of a bereavement policy](#)

## Keeping in touch while an employee is off

In the first few days after a death it's important to communicate with the employee.

When you get in touch, it's 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

Be careful not to pressure them into making any decisions before they're ready.

It can also help to train managers in how to have good, empathetic conversations with employees so they build confidence when dealing with a bereavement.

[Find out more about keeping in touch with an employee during absence](#)

## Returning to work

It's usually not appropriate to talk about returning to work in the first days of bereavement.

Keeping in touch can allow you to have an open discussion about:

- how the employee is coping

- when they might be ready to return to work
- your organisation's policy on bereavement
- any adjustments that might help with their return, for example a phased return or a temporary change in duties
- what support would be most helpful to them, for example access to an employee assistance programme (EAP) or workplace counselling if available
- any changes at work they might want to know about, for example a bereaved parent might want to know in advance if someone else at work has become pregnant while they've been off

How quickly someone returns to work will be different for everyone. Someone might be unsure or not be able to judge how they'll feel when they return.

Keeping in touch and talking about adjustments can help plan their return. For example, discussing whether the employee would prefer a phased return. They might feel anxious about seeing people on their first day back. To help with this, you could talk with them about how the first day will be managed.

It's important to make sure everyone at work respects the employee's wishes on whether they want to discuss what has happened or not.

If they want, when they return to work it could help to have a catch-up with them to offer support and to check in on how they're doing.

[Find out more about returning to work after absence](#)

### Example of supporting an employee's return to work

Nat's twin brother died 6 months ago. Nat took several weeks off work. Their manager, Stef, agreed a phased return to help Nat get back to work. Everything seemed to be going well.

Stef then notices that Nat seems withdrawn and unhappy. A customer complains about Nat. In an informal meeting, Stef asks if Nat is okay.

Nat explains the twins had planned a birthday celebration for the following week. This has made Nat's grief worse but Nat still wants to be at work.

Stef and Nat discuss how to help Nat get through this difficult time. They agree that Nat will temporarily swap to admin duties, rather than working with customers. This helps and Nat feels confident to talk to Stef about any problems in the future.

## Ongoing support

Once an employee returns to work, you should continue to tailor your support to meet their needs. It's important for employers to recognise that grief affects everyone differently. There is no right or wrong way to grieve and it is not a linear process – it can affect people at different times following a death.

An employee might need extra support or time off following a death. For example, because of:

- grief symptoms affecting their performance, for example not being able to sleep, think or concentrate
- depression or other mental health problems
- extra responsibilities, for example helping a dependant

How your organisation deals with requests for extra support or time off depends on its bereavement or absence policies.

Even if you do not have a policy, you must follow the law by:

- not discriminating, for example if the employee's mental health problem is classed as a disability
- making [reasonable adjustments](#) to support a disabled employee

You should talk to the employee and discuss what's best for your employee's physical and mental health in the long term.

Doing things proactively can help prevent problems. For example:

- encouraging an open and supportive working environment for everyone
- signposting staff to your organisation's employee assistance programme (EAP), if there's one available
- sharing other support that's available outside your organisation, for example [Cruse Bereavement Support](#)

It's also likely the employee will be more productive if they feel they're getting the right support.

## Mental health

Grief is a natural response people have to death and is not a mental health problem. However if someone's grief becomes complex, or they are unable to grieve, this may cause them to experience mental health problems. This can include anxiety and depression.

If someone has mental health problems after a bereavement, it's a good idea to talk to them to find out what support they might need at work.

[Find out more about supporting mental health at work](#)

## Mental health and disability

Some people with mental health problems might be classed as having a disability under the law. You should make sure you:

- [do not discriminate against someone with a disability](#)
- make [reasonable adjustments](#) for a disabled employee

In most situations, it's best to look at how someone's condition or impairment affects them, rather than what the condition or impairment is.

[Find out more about supporting disabled people at work](#)

## More advice and support

You can get more advice and support from:

- [Bliss](#) for support and information for parents with a baby in neonatal care
- [Cruse Bereavement Support](#) on handling bereavement, including training for employers
- [Hospice UK](#) on talking about dying, death and bereavement
- [Mind](#) on supporting someone's mental health
- [Miscarriage Association](#) for miscarriage support and advice
- [Sands](#) for support following the death of a baby before, during or shortly after birth
- [Sue Ryder](#) on supporting staff after a death