

Bereavement in the Workplace



Most people spend a good part of their day at work and, as a result, the people they work with can become like a close extended family. When a colleague dies, or when someone in the workplace is grieving a death, the impact on co-workers can significantly affect the workplace.

Each person's experience of loss is unique; however, there are some common responses to loss. These include sadness, anxiety, fear, mistrust, betrayal, irritability, guilt, anger, tension and loss of confidence. Grieving people may also develop physical symptoms, such as headaches, difficulty sleeping, tiredness, changes in appetite, increased drug or alcohol use, restlessness, difficulty in making decisions and poor concentration. These symptoms of grief can significantly impact a person's ability to function in the workplace and, in some work settings, may also impact on their safety.

Workers who feel cared for and supported are more likely to experience an improved recovery. Colleagues and employers don't need to be experts in bereavement; however, it is good practice, especially at a management level, to have some understanding of the impact of grief and how to respond appropriately.

How can I help?

Listed below are a range of helpful ideas and suggestions for employers, management and colleagues to consider around grief and bereavement in the workplace.

Establish a supportive work environment

- Arrange some basic professional development on bereavement for management teams.
- Have an understanding about things that may be appropriate to do and say.
- Compile resources and useful links for staff to review and access when needed.
- Develop a Bereavement Policy to guide staff and management behaviour.
- Set up an Employee Assistance Program for employees to access professional counselling.

Immediately after a bereavement

- Send a clear, simple message to staff, sharing whatever information is appropriate to share.
- Arrange for a safe space for staff to ask questions and to share their feelings.
- Send flowers to the bereaved and a card on behalf of the organisation.
- Call the bereaved, express your sadness for their loss and reassure them that there is no pressure to return to work until they are ready.
- Attend the funeral if appropriate. If you are unsure, ask the bereaved person.
- Assure them that their workload will be taken care of in their absence.
- Call them every couple of days to check in and offer support.
- If other employees or external colleagues are affected by the bereavement, ensure that support is also extended to them.
- Remember to contact staff that are away on leave and let them know about the bereavement.

Providing ongoing support to staff who have experienced a bereavement

- Take the initiative to acknowledge the person's grief and express your sympathy.
- Acknowledge that people respond differently to loss. Be prepared for tears and sadness, they are a normal part of the grieving process.
- Expect to listen to the story from the grieving person again and again.
- Respect the grieving person's desire for privacy.
- Remember to include the person in social plans. Let them decide whether or not to accept.
- Accept that their performance in the workplace may be less than their best for awhile.

When a staff member has died

- If a death has occurred within the workplace, consult with staff and make arrangements for the provision of support.
- Those who were particularly close to the deceased may need additional support. Note that employees who didn't know or get on well with the deceased may still feel the impact of the death.
- If appropriate, choose someone to act as a liaison with the family to organise the company's expression of sympathy, cards, flowers, food or financial support.

Workplace issues to consider

- Desk and personal belongings – family members or a close work friend may want to handle the task of packing up any personal belongings.
- Change and retrieve voice mail messages – assign this task to one person and prepare a brief statement to assist with enquiries intended for the deceased employee.
- Staff coverage for unfinished or future work – consider a short-term plan until more permanent decisions can be made. Make it clear what is required and who is responsible.
- Try not to make any abrupt moves in regard to office space changes. People need time to grieve the loss of their co-worker and may react badly to sudden changes.

Returning to work

The difficulties

For others, returning to work after they have experienced a bereavement could be an overwhelming burden in addition to their grief and they may need to take more leave. Once back at work, some workers may experience reduced performance caused by lack of concentration or memory loss, tiredness from emotion or sleepless nights and feelings of depression or anxiety.

The benefits

For some people, returning to work can be beneficial. Resuming regular daily routines within a safe work environment surrounded by friendly colleagues can take the person's mind off their loss and feel normal for awhile. It can also provide a sense of contribution, increasing self-esteem and confidence.

When to seek further help

Although grief can be very painful, most people gradually find ways to learn to live with their loss, and do not need to seek professional help. Sometimes the circumstances of the death may have been particularly distressing, such as a traumatic or sudden death, or there may be circumstances which may make the grief particularly prolonged or complicated. You could consider suggesting that your staff member or colleague seeks professional help if, over time, they seem to be finding it difficult to cope in the workplace.