

Bereavement top tips for employers and line managers

1

Bereavement leave policy

A bereavement leave policy provides both line managers and employees with guidance and reassurance of what to expect if they experience a bereavement. If managers do not have a bereavement policy to refer to and have complete discretion over leave, workload and flexible working, there may be inconsistencies in the way colleagues are treated across the organisation when they experience a bereavement.

A bereavement leave policy can empower a line manager on how and what to communicate with a bereaved employee. It also gives an employee reassurance and certainty about their situation.

2

Invite open conversations

It is important that employers invite and encourage an employee who has experienced a bereavement to have open discussions and share how they are feeling. These conversations can help both the line manager and the employee, as it allows them to better plan and manage their employee's workload whilst they are off. This could mean that deadlines are pushed back or that another member of the team takes on a project in the short-term, so that the bereaved employee is not stressed about work whilst they are on bereavement leave.

3

Be empathetic

It is important that a line manager is empathetic towards an employee who has been bereaved. This helps build an open conversation and helps the employee feel comfortable speaking to their line manager.

Often empathy can manifest itself into smaller acts – including ensuring a recently bereaved employee is not faced with situations that may be difficult for them. It could also mean allowing them to leave early when they are upset or simply making time to have an open conversation.

Empathy cannot be prescribed and some people may be better at it than others. If you find it difficult to empathise with emotional pain, it can help to imagine a bereaved employee's pain as being something physical, which would temporarily prevent them from achieving their normal tasks.



4

Offer time away from the workplace

Grief affects everybody in different ways and no two experiences of grief are the same.

Some colleagues may feel able to return to work very swiftly, whilst others may need more time. The relationship with the person who died, and the circumstances of the death will all have an impact on your colleague, particularly if the death was sudden or traumatic. It is often difficult for a bereaved colleague to judge how they will feel in the workplace, and a swift return to work does not necessarily mean that a colleague will not need support in the future.

A conversation about when the colleague anticipates returning to work may not be appropriate in the first days of bereavement. However, it is important to start a dialogue which will allow an open discussion around how they are coping and the organisation's procedure on bereavement leave, when they might be ready to return to work, and any adjustments that might help with this (e.g. a phased return).



5

Manage expectations when the bereaved employee returns to work

Bereavement can have a significant effect on a person and their work. Managers should not assume that because a colleague has returned to work that they are no longer experiencing grief or are 'over it'.

On average, the productivity of a person experiencing intense grief is assumed to be 70% of their normal capacity in the first six months.

Special or significant days, such as an anniversary of the death, or the birthday of the person who died, can be particularly difficult times for bereaved people. Sensitivity around these times, particularly when considering requests for specific days off, will help colleagues to manage their grief.

Line managers should hold regular reviews with the colleague to ensure communication remains open and the colleague feels able to share any issues as they arise. Managers should be aware that bereavement can have an impact on performance and this should be taken into account.

6

Offer flexibility around work patterns

Employees who have recently experienced a bereavement may need to work different hours or shifts or undertake a slightly different role in order to help reduce stress or deal with practical matters related to the loss.

A bereavement will frequently lead to changes in the personal and financial circumstances of the bereaved colleague. A colleague who loses their partner, for example, may become responsible for raising their children as a single parent. A colleague whose sibling dies may take on caring responsibilities for an elderly parent.

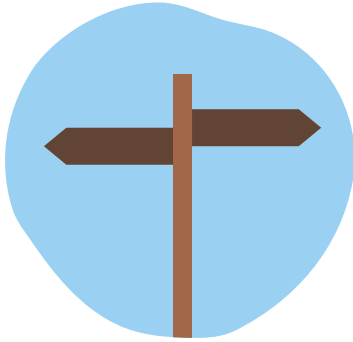
Be mindful of the family unit of the bereaved colleague, and appreciate that in many cases, if possible a flexible approach for example, offering part-time hours, or flexible working is most likely to support and retain the employee, and minimise sick days, as they negotiate new or increased caring responsibilities.

7

Signpost to external resources

Workplaces can offer information about bereavement support available in the wider community, including written material, physical and virtual support groups, counselling, and group therapies. Employers should not push employees towards a particular source of help, but provide them with information about what's available.

Many charities, including Sue Ryder have bereavement support – including its Online Community and Sue Ryder's Online Video Counselling.



8

Create safe spaces to discuss grief

Organisations have an important role to play in encouraging conversations about grief in the workplace. Having the courage to talk openly about personal experiences of death and grief or providing time and space for employees to discuss it can help normalise conversations and raise awareness among staff about resources available to them internally and externally.

Sue Ryder provide a range of online bereavement support, including:

- free video counselling delivered through trained bereavement counsellors
- an online community offering 24-hour peer to peer support
- a wide range of advice and resources for people who are grieving or supporting someone through bereavement – sue Ryder.org/support

If you already offer employees two weeks bereavement leave, or believe that all employees should receive this, you can support Sue Ryder by joining our call on the Government to make this a statutory right – sue Ryder.org/bereavementleave