

Supporting Employees through bereavement

A guide for Managers

Death is a very difficult topic for many people to talk about, yet it is something that we will all have to deal with at some point in our lives. Normally a subject hidden in the shadows since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, it has been in the headlines on almost a daily basis. Despite this, there is still a reluctance to have an open conversation about grief and bereavement and a lack of support particularly in the workplace.

In a recent survey, **54% of employees** said they were unaware of their employer having a policy or support for those going through bereavement. This guide is designed to help line managers tackle the subject sensitively, with practical tips on how they can support employees effectively.

Why is talking about bereavement at work important?

Losing a loved one is a profound experience. It affects every aspect of our lives, with work being no exception. It can be extremely difficult for someone going through a bereavement to live up to their usual standards at work. **A poll by Marie Curie** found that over half of those surveyed had experienced performance issues after the death of a loved one.

Everyone deals with grief in different ways, it's a very individual process. For some, returning to work and experiencing a degree of normality will help, for others it will be the last thing that they are able to do.

The only way you know how grief will affect you is when you go through it. Therefore, it is vital that line managers talk to their employees after a bereavement and discuss how best they can support them. Without this communication, employees can feel ignored or isolated and managers are at a loss as to how best to support them.



What bereavement leave are employees entitled to?

Any employee is entitled to time off when a “dependent” dies. The definition of a dependent is far from clear, but the following usually qualify:

- A spouse, partner or civil partner
- A parent
- A child
- Another family member such as a sibling, grandparent, aunt, uncle, niece or nephew
- A person who lives in their household but is not a relative
- A person who relies on them for help or care, such as an elderly neighbour

Under the **Employment Rights Act 1996**, UK employers must give employees a “reasonable” number of days off, but this leave is unpaid, and it is up to the employer to decide how long that “reasonable” time should be. Most employers offer something between a few days and two weeks.

For the death of a dependent, an employee is also entitled to time off for the funeral. There is no legal obligation for this to be paid leave. Under the Act, an employee is not entitled to time off for the funeral of anyone who is not classed as a dependent.

Jack’s Law

The one exception to this is when an employee’s child dies. Jack’s Law, also known as Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay Regulations was introduced in April 2020. It gives an employee, who has worked with the organisation for at least six months, the right to have two weeks paid leave if their child dies under the age of 18 or is stillborn after 24 weeks of pregnancy.

Employees are paid at a rate of £156.66 a week or 90% of their average weeks salary, whichever is the lower. The employee can take this leave all together, or in two separate weeks, any time in the 12 months following the child’s death.



How can employers help?

Following the introduction of Jack's Law and the impact of Covid, there is a growing sense that employers should do more to support bereaved employees. **A CIPD poll** found that 75% of employers support allowing employees experiencing a bereavement of a close family member to take time off. It also found that 80% of employers are already doing this, despite there being no legal obligation to do so. Here are a few simple things that employers can do to provide better support:

- Introduce a bereavement policy – this shows employees that this is an important issue and provides clarity and consistency across the business.
- Talk about bereavement and normalise the topic in the workplace.
- Train line managers on how best to support employees, helping them to feel comfortable dealing with the situation when it arises.
- Investigate if your employees can access specialist support through your EAP or other existing benefit providers.
- Link it to your mental health policy. While grief is not a mental health condition, it can be the cause of stress, depression or anxiety, so make sure your support services are joined up.



Some tips from Nadia Hepburn, Therapist at Wellness Cloud & Parent Cloud

Grief can produce a vast array of emotions, from sadness and depression to anger and confusion. Everyone's experience is different and unique to them and it is vital that employers acknowledge this. Flexibility must be built into any response so each employee is treated as an individual. The help and support that is given should be appropriate to their needs.



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These are a few tips to help managers support those who have been bereaved.

1. First and foremost, show compassion. Bereavement is extremely distressing and can have a large impact on those we work with. Offer your condolences and encourage team members and colleagues to reach out and do the same.

2. Allow the bereaved employee time and space to process their loss. This could mean time off work, flexible hours or remote work whilst they are adjusting to life again. Their capacity to concentrate and tolerate people and situations has changed so allow some room for this.

3. Make yourself available; let your employee know you are there for them if they need help or would like to talk.



4. Ask how they are doing today. Every day brings different emotions so the general question of “how are you?” can feel overwhelming.

5. There is no time frame for grief. Employees may need support months after the event so regularly check in with them. You can also ask them what you can do to help. Don't assume you know what's best. Encourage them to tell you what they need.

6. Sit and listen and don't give advice. There are no words that will “fix” the situation. Resist the temptation to offer words of advice, or phrases like “at least they're not suffering anymore” or “I'm sure you'll get over it” or “I know how you feel”. Someone who is bereaved is in pain and they need the space to be heard not have their situation compared or belittled.

7. Find out what support they can access through work to help them through this difficult time. Companies offer employees access to emotional support for this very reason, so make sure they are aware of any benefits that can help them and how to use it.

8. Listen to them. It can be hard to know what to say following a death but doing nothing is not an option. Them talking and you listening is vital and keeping the conversation going in the subsequent weeks and months can make an enormous difference to the bereaved employee.

9. Learn to get comfortable with the uncomfortable. Talking to someone who is bereaved is not easy for many but avoiding contact with your employee just adds to their pain.

Additional resources

There is lots of information available online to support line managers when helping an employee through a bereavement. Here are just a few:

CIPD – Compassionate guide to bereavement support

Cruise Bereavement Support – HR and line manager guidance

Marie Curie – Supporting a bereaved employee advice

Child Bereavement UK – Bereavement in the workplace

ACAS – Help supporting an employee after a death



Wellness Cloud & Parent Cloud give you easy remote access to experienced bereavement counsellors who can support your employees that have experienced a loss.

For further information, or to book a session online with one of our specialists, visit our website.

www.the-wellness-cloud.com

www.parent-cloud.com

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