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SUPPORTING GRIEF IN THE WORKPLACE:

A guide for line managers



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GRIEF IN THE
WORKPLACE

In June 2020 my dad died following a diagnosis of oesophageal cancer, and although we knew dad was going to die, I had no idea the impact his death would have on my working life or the support I would require at work to navigate the months and years to follow.

I was incredibly fortunate to have a compassionate line manager who supported me through the lead up to his death and for the months after, and lucky to work in an organisation which had a bereavement policy that allowed me time off with my family and a gentle return to work when the time was right.

However many workplaces don't have policies, procedures or guidelines for managers on how to navigate grief and bereavement at work. This leaves managers feeling unprepared of how to hold these difficult conversations, and huge disparity in how bereaved employees are supported when returning to work.

This worksheet is designed to be a guide, with tips and advice on how we can all lead teams compassionately through grief.

1

BE PROACTIVE NOT REACTIVE

Line managers often have so much on their plate that they don't know what policies or procedures exist until a scenario occurs. Be proactive and find out what bereavement literature your organisation has.

- Does your organisation have a bereavement policy? If not, what bereavement leave are employees entitled to?
- Is there any internal support or an employee wellbeing programme that offers bereavement support?
- Do you know of a fellow manager who has navigated an employee bereavement before, could they help you with advice and guidance?
- Is there any official bereavement training that your workplace offers to line managers?

GRIEF IN THE WORKPLACE

2

CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Whether your employee was expecting the bereavement or not, it will feel like their world has flipped upside down. Be really clear with your communication with them surrounding the death.

If they have a caring role in the person's life be aware that they may need time off in the lead up to their death, this might be to care for their loved one at home or to visit hospice regularly. Be clear about what is expected of them during this time, and where possible offer them to take this time off work to spend precious time left with their loved one.

Once you are notified of the bereavement be quick, clear and concise about what is expected of your employee, how much time the bereavement policy affords them off work and any discretionary measures around extending this leave.

Ask your employee how they would like this news communicated to their team, if at all. Some people are happy to share bereavements, some wish to keep their loss confidential – reassure them that you are happy to support either conversation.

Make a plan for a 'return to work' conversation before they come back. We have return to work processes when we have extended time off for other situations, but we rarely hold conversations for those bereaved returning. During this conversation you should speak with the employee about their workload and support you can offer to manage their responsibilities at work. However, this conversation should also be an opportunity for you to better understand their 'new normal' and the impact this bereavement has had on their lives. Below you can see some suggestions on questions to ask during this conversation.

GRIEF IN THE WORKPLACE

3

HOLD SPACE FOR VULNERABILITY

We often try to close vulnerability out of the workplace, because we are afraid that it will expose our own vulnerabilities to our teams. One of the best tips I have learnt as a line manager is to be open to vulnerability and hold space for your staff during life's vulnerable moments.

When discussing returning to work think about what your employee might be navigating.

- Do you have any caring responsibilities I should be aware of? Example – they are now caring for the surviving elderly parent.
- Are there ways that grief has impacted you mentally/physically/emotionally that I can support you manage at work? Example – they have developed anxiety which is making returning to the office a big challenge.
- Is there any ongoing administration they may need to manage around work? Example – some deaths are unexpected, this can lead to inquests which can take weeks or months in some cases.
- Are there any important dates they would like to share? Example – anniversaries, birthdays, mothers day/fathers day. Its worth being aware of these as they may be more vulnerable times of the year where your employee will need extra support at work. **Remember grief is not linear, these dates will be important to remember for as long as you are managing this employee.**

Don't be afraid to open a space for vulnerability with employees, often sharing your own experiences of vulnerability can give permission for your employees to share theirs. Remember that we will all experience loss and grief in our lifetimes, and grieving is a process we will all navigate differently but knowing there is somewhere safe at work to bring that vulnerability will allow your employees to feel more confident to return to work and bring their full selves.

GRIEF IN THE
WORKPLACE

4

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Often the people I speak to with the best experience of returning to work following a bereavement have been afforded kindness and compassion because their manager had experienced a loss too. It should not be the case that we learn only through lived experience.

- Read about grief, understand how returning to work might feel for an employee - <https://www.cruse.org.uk/about/blog/returning-to-work/>
- Be prepared to signpost to bereavement support outside of your organisation - <https://www.cruse.org.uk/organisations/signposting/>
- If your organisation doesn't have a bereavement policy, advocate for introducing one - <https://www.cruse.org.uk/organisations/bereavement-at-work-policy/>

Research by Marie Curie showed that 58% of employees felt their performance was affected by grief months after bereavement, and 54% of employee's worried taking time off after a bereavement would affect their job security.

We will all experience a bereavement in our lifetime, and many of us multiple experiences during our working lives. This year for Dying Matters Awareness week the campaign focuses on Grief in the Workplace, there is a long way to go for all workplaces to be safe and compassionate spaces to return to following a bereavement, but we all have a part to play in ensuring a better future for employees.

Lucy Dennis is a Project Manager at Cruse Bereavement Support who has spoken on several This Can Happen webinars.

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