

# A GUIDE TO COMPASSIONATE BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT

Guidance for line  
managers

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

# How to manage and support someone who has been bereaved: guidance for line managers

Managing an employee who has suffered a bereavement requires compassion, sensitivity, and flexibility. This guide provides some key tips on how to support employees who are dealing with a bereavement, both in the short term and in the longer term. How you respond as a manager will make a huge difference to the experience of your bereaved colleague and how supported they feel when they are able to return to work.

## Understand your organisation's bereavement policy and support

Make sure you understand your organisation's bereavement policy or framework and the support available in terms of bereavement leave or access to an employee assistance programme or counselling services if available. It might also be helpful to share the further sources of specialist support included at the end of this guide.

As part of your legal duty to conduct a health and safety assessment, it would also be helpful to consider the impact of bereavement on the employee, their duties, and the context in which they are working. If the employee raises any concerns about their ability to safely conduct their duties following the loss of an immediate relative, make sure you take immediate steps to ensure the safety of the employee and your colleagues in collaboration with HR.

## Acknowledge the bereavement and stay in contact

As soon as you are aware that someone you manage has been bereaved, it's important you acknowledge the bereavement. They may or may not want to talk about the situation in detail, but acknowledging that it has happened is very important. Saying 'I'm very sorry for your loss' and asking open questions such as 'how are you coping?' when you learn about an individual's loss will help them feel they can talk to you about their situation if they need to or want to.

Ask the employee how they would like to stay in contact and the best way to maintain regular but non-intrusive contact with them while they are away from work. Sending a thoughtful card, email or text can let a bereaved employee know that you are thinking about them and care.

Empathy and compassion are vital, as is the ability to have sensitive and supportive ongoing conversations. You might find the conversation checklist below helpful for this.

### Conversation checklist

- Avoid interruptions: switch off phones, ensure colleagues can't walk in and interrupt.
- If you haven't done so already, offer your condolences.
- Be caring and compassionate.
- Ask simple, open questions, such as, 'How are you coping today?'
- Ask, 'What do you need from us?' (as an organisation).
- Avoid judgemental or patronising responses.
- Speak calmly.

- Maintain good eye contact.
- Listen actively and carefully.
- Encourage the employee to talk if they would like to.
- Be prepared for some silences and be patient.
- Avoid making assumptions or being prescriptive – the individual is the best person to know what support may help them, and one person’s experience of bereavement will rarely be the same as another’s.
- Remember that the full impact of bereavement may not be felt for some time after the death, so support may need to be ongoing – make it clear that you are available to talk when needed.
- It might be helpful to discuss how employees might manage difficult moments in the workplace, when they may need to take some time out. Jack’s Rainbow have developed ‘Just a Moment Cards’ for organisations to give to bereaved employees in case they need to take some time out from a meeting or be away from their desk when grief hits. More information about Jack’s Rainbow is available at the end of this guide.
- If there are any agreed actions to help the individual, it may be helpful to follow up in a supportive email.

*This checklist has been adapted from the [CIPD and Mind’s people manager’s guide to mental health](#).*

### **Discuss what they would like communicated to colleagues**

It’s also important to discuss what bereaved employees would like communicated. By law, an employee can keep their bereavement private from work colleagues. It’s a good idea therefore to ask an employee what, if anything, they would like their work colleagues to know about the bereavement and if they wish to be contacted by colleagues.

### **Understand and accommodate any religious/cultural practices or special arrangements**

Explore in a sensitive way what extra support would be helpful to bereaved employees. Different cultures respond to death in significantly different ways. Line managers should check whether the employee’s religion or culture requires them to observe any particular practices or make special arrangements. If you have an HR lead, talk to them about any time off that is required and how that should be handled.

### **Build flexible responses**

Flexibility is key when supporting bereaved workers. Each person will experience bereavement in different ways and will need different responses and support from their organisation. The bereavement is likely to have led to changes in personal circumstances, such as caring responsibilities (see [CIPD guidance](#) on becoming a carer-friendly organisation for more information).

The most important thing to do is to ensure that you speak supportively to your bereaved team member to discuss when they feel they will be able to return to work, and whether they would prefer to come back to work on their usual hours or a phased return. It might also be helpful to discuss whether a temporary change of duties might be needed.

Consider the following to be flexible:

- **Be sensitive to requests for time off:** It's also important to be sensitive to and accommodating of requests for time off, wherever possible, especially around anniversaries or other special events.
- **Consider a phased return to work:** A phased return to work is a way of enabling employees to return to their duties in a gradual way. It is typically adopted following illness or injury through an occupational health referral, but it can also be helpful for providing a supportive and manageable return for those that have been bereaved. If a bereaved staff member returns to work on a phased basis, they will work a reduced number of hours at first, followed by a gradual increase in workload until they reach their normal number of hours. A phased return to work usually lasts anywhere between two and six weeks but can be extended if necessary. A phased return to work plan should cater to the bereaved staff member and their specific needs. Talk to HR about any support you might need in developing this plan.
- **Be open to flexible working provisions:** Flexible working options can be particularly helpful to bereaved employees in the short and longer term. In fact, flexible working is beneficial to all employees, so employers should take steps to create flexible working cultures across their organisation. Our [cross-sector case studies](#) show that flexible working in some form can be accommodated across most contexts.

### Provide ongoing support

Grief will likely be ongoing for someone who has been bereaved and therefore the support that you and the organisation provide will also need to be ongoing. Everyone's experience of grief will be different and it can take years in some cases for people to learn to manage their loss. This will also depend on the nature of the death and the state of the bereaved individual's own mental health.

The following steps can help when offering ongoing support:

- **Have regular conversations:** Have regular conversations with employees about how they are coping and what support they might need. As part of those conversations, discuss how employees can manage difficult moments in the workplace, when they may need to take some time out.
- **Take bereavement into account when considering performance:** Approach performance conversations supportively and positively. Take any bereavement-related issues fully into account where there is underperformance on the part of an individual. Identify any extra support the person may benefit from.
- **Consider the impact on other members of the team:** Consider the impact on other members of the team that bereavement leave/a phased return or changes in duties might have. Make sure that other team members are being supported if they have additional work to do and watch out for and act swiftly in relation to any bullying and harassment relating to bereavement. Be mindful that a colleague's bereavement could also trigger feelings of grief for employees who have suffered similar losses and might therefore also need support.

### Support for you as a manager

Supporting someone through bereavement can be tough for you as a manager. It is worth considering what specific support is available within your organisation that you can draw upon if needed, like employee assistance programmes or occupational health services. If your organisation does not have those services, you might want to make use of different external helplines like those listed at the end of this guide (such as the Mind Infoline).

Debrief sessions with your manager might also be helpful (with confidentiality and no specific case details) as well as regular wellbeing conversations and catch-ups. It is also important to maintain clear boundaries – it's important to be clear on what your role is and isn't. For example, you are there to support bereaved employees in the workplace in the short and the longer term and to put in place any reasonable adjustments they might require, but you are not a trained counsellor and you should not be counselling them.

### **Signpost to helpful services and resources**

Make sure you direct bereaved team members to helpful services and resources, if you offer them, such as occupational health and employee assistance programmes, or point to external sources of support.

Supporting the mental and emotional wellbeing of bereaved employees is extremely important and support will often need to be ongoing. It is important to emphasise that if bereaved employees feel that the intensity of their feelings are affecting their daily lives, they should seek support and contact their GP. You might find it helpful to include information on or signpost to some of the following sources of information and advice:

#### **Acas**

Acas gives employees and employers free, impartial advice on workplace rights, rules and best practice. They also offer training and help to resolve disputes.

#### **BereavementUK**

BereavementUK is a hub for bereavement support and information worldwide.

BereavementUK offers Human Aspects training courses specifically for employers and employees. Human Aspects is training that looks at the personal impact of bereavement and activates greater communication in the workplace and understanding of the ongoing effect of death and the absence of loved ones on the bereft.

#### **Child Bereavement UK**

Child Bereavement UK helps children and young people (up to age 25), parents and families to rebuild their lives when a child grieves or when a child dies. They also provide training to professionals, equipping them to provide the best possible care to bereaved families.

#### **Cruse**

Cruse offers support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies.

#### **Government bereavement support**

<https://www.gov.uk/browse/births-deaths-marriages/death>

<https://www.mygov.scot/bereavement-support/>

<https://www.gov.uk/funeral-payments>

<https://www.mygov.scot/funeral-support-payment/overview/>

#### **Grief Encounters**

Grief Encounters is a peer support group for LGBTQ people who have experienced a bereavement. It is part of Switchboard, a charity for LGBTQ people looking for community, support or information.

#### **Jack's Rainbow**

Jack's Rainbow offers consultancy and bereavement in the workplace training alongside peer support groups for anyone who has been bereaved.

### **Mind**

Mind provides advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. They campaign to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding.

### **NHS Grief after Bereavement or Loss Support**

NHS support around things people can do to try to help with bereavement, grief and loss. Includes a mood self-assessment tool to help people work out how they are feeling and further support and links around stress, anxiety or depression.

### **Sands (stillbirth and neonatal death charity)**

Sands (stillbirth and neonatal death charity) is the leading stillbirth and neonatal death charity in the UK. Sands exists to reduce the number of babies dying and to ensure that anyone affected by the death of a baby receives the best possible care and support for as long as they need it.

### **SAMH**

SAMH is the Scottish Association for Mental Health. It operates in communities to provide a range of mental health support and services.

### **Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide**

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide exists to meet the needs and overcome the isolation experienced by people over 18 who have been bereaved by suicide.

More resources and useful websites are listed in the employer's guide to compassionate bereavement support available on the CIPD website.



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