

When bereavement enters the workplace

Bereavement is one of the most common factors affecting employees' performance at work, with an estimated one in ten employees affected at any point in time¹. Yet a recent report by the Dying Matters Coalition, together with the National Council for Palliative Care and the National Bereavement Alliance, has highlighted that bereaved people in Britain are being failed by a lack of support in the workplace².

Based on research by Comres, which polled some 4000 people, key findings included:

- ☀ 32% of those who had been bereaved in the past five years, and who were in a job at the time, felt they had not been treated with compassion by their employer
- ☀ 56% would consider leaving their job if their employer failed to provide proper support if someone close to them died
- ☀ 87% felt that all employers should have a compassionate employment policy, setting out what bereaved employees are entitled to, that makes provision for paid bereavement leave, flexible working and a range of other support
- ☀ 82% believed that providing employees with paid bereavement leave is likely to be beneficial to the employer in the long-term.

The report also calls for improved training to support all staff in regular contact with people who have been recently bereaved, and recognises this to be particularly important for line managers who play a hugely significant part in influencing a grieving employee's experience of their workplace.

The impact of bereavement

A mum-to-be has a miscarriage, someone's teenage son is killed, an elderly parent dies, a long serving employee is terminally ill, a colleague takes their own life – regardless of circumstance, what grieving employees need is ongoing support and understanding from their managers and work colleagues.

There is no prescribed or 'right way' to grieve; bereavement can impact on an employee physically, emotionally and practically, and may lead to a radical change in their personal circumstances. Fear of returning to work and facing colleagues, loss of confidence and increased sick leave are not uncommon. Ability to concentrate, make decisions, meet deadlines and maintain performance and productivity levels can all be at least temporarily compromised, and there can be higher incidences of job-related injuries and accidents.

This not only has the potential to impact on a bereaved employee's ability to work effectively, but can also have a knock-on effect on other employees, who are often at a loss as to how to respond when a colleague returns to work after bereavement, and over time may feel that accommodating the needs of a bereaved colleague places added pressure on them.

Bereavement is often viewed as an event at a particular point in time, but it is actually the start of a process whereby the employee will grieve and have to adjust to a changed life over time. Significant times like anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, Mother's or Father's Day, Christmas etc are therefore all times when an employee may be affected, even years after a death. Each individual will be on their own timescale.

What helps?

The individuality and unpredictability of grief requires a flexible response from an employer. Approaching these situations with sensitivity, understanding and flexibility can help support a bereaved employee by reducing the anxiety they may have about returning to work and managing their workload, and ultimately minimise the impact on the employing organisation.

An informed and supportive approach is likely to mitigate the potential for increased absence and decreased productivity, improve staff morale and maintain positive working relationships with those affected. Staff who are well informed and well supported are known to work more effectively and remain loyal to their workplace. There is no doubt that returning to a supportive working environment following bereavement can be an important aspect of a bereaved employee's adjustment to their loss.

A basic principle for any good employer is to recognise their duty of care for employees' health and wellbeing in the workplace. Organisations that are prepared, are aware of the issues related to bereavement in the workplace, and have a bereavement policy in place can mitigate the costs of employee grief to all concerned and the likely impact on productivity of both the individual and the business as a whole, strike the right balance between a supportive environment and job accountability.

Training HR personnel and those with managerial responsibility within the organisation, and fostering a 'bereavement-friendly' culture through having a clear bereavement policy, can provide an employer with a framework within which to effectively manage the individual needs of grieving employees.

As a national charity, Child Bereavement UK has 20 years' experience in training around issues of grief and bereavement, and has also developed specific guidance for both [employers](#) and [employees](#) on the difficult issue of returning to work after the death of a baby or child, a situation where people often feel at even more of a loss as to how to respond.

 To enquire about training for your organisation on managing bereavement in the workplace, please contact training@childbereavementuk.org

¹ McGuinness, B (2009) Grief in the workplace: developing a bereavement policy. *Bereavement Care* 28 (1) 2-8

² Penny, A (2014) Life after death: six steps to improve support in bereavement. National Council for Palliative Care