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 time. Yet research has shown that bereaved people are being failed by a lack of support in the workplace.

Key findings of a 2014 report, based on research by Comres which polled some 4000 people, 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 Government is proposing 2 weeks’ paid leave for bereaved parents for the death of a child under 18 from 2020)

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.

More recently, research on behalf of Co-op Funeralcare in 2018 showed that over half (58%) of adults felt pressured to return to work after a loss, with 30% feeling they needed more than two weeks off before they were truly ready to come back. In addition, almost half (46%) of grieving adults felt actively avoided by others, with 4 in 10 feeling isolated at work after bereavement.

Similarly, a 2018 survey by Sands, consulting over 2,500 bereaved parents, found that:
- only 1 in 5 parents had been offered or given any support by their employer on their return to work
- 2 in 5 said no-one talked to them about the loss of their baby
- 2 in 5 were not offered any additional time away from work

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. In the midst of events that can feel totally out of control, a supportive workplace can be an important source of structure and ‘normality’.

There is no prescribed or ‘right way’ to grieve; bereavement can impact on an employee physically, emotionally, cognitively, socially 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 additional pressures 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 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 line-management 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 over 20 years’ experience in training around issues of grief and bereavement, and has developed training on managing bereavement in the workplace in general, as well as 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

**Further reading and resources**
Information sheets available from the Child Bereavement UK website:

- Returning to work after the death of a baby or child: guidance for employees
- How you can help when someone returns to work after their baby or child has died: guidance for employers

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3. Research conducted by Atomik with 2,000 UK adults, February 2018
4. Sands, stillbirth and neonatal death charity, June 2018
5. BACP Guidelines for counselling at work 2007