

Returning to work after your baby or child has died: guidance for employees

This information sheet has been developed with help from bereaved parents who have experienced the death of their baby or child. It is one of a pair - a separate guidance sheet is provided for employers.

Returning to work after the death of your baby or child can be daunting. The amount of annual leave given or taken after a bereavement varies enormously. No matter how much time you have had, you will still be grieving for your baby or child and the decision regarding your return to work can be difficult. It may be that for financial reasons, you must return to work sooner than you would like. If you do have a choice, you may find yourself postponing your return, as you may be anxious about how you will manage both practically and emotionally. On the other hand, for some people returning to work is a positive step, providing some routine and structure in their day and time in an environment not directly connected with their child. Work can also provide some stability in a world that can feel very 'out of control'.

Some planning can help ease the transition back into work. It is important to make sure that your employer knows what has happened. You only need to give as much information as you are comfortable with - the circumstances around the death of your baby or child may feel very personal and may not be something you want to be discussed in detail at work.

Having one key person as the main point of contact can help you to retain control over what information is given, and can avoid you having to speak to too many individuals, if this is not something you feel like doing. That person can then keep others updated as necessary on funeral arrangements, how you are, and so on.

Before your actual return to work, it may be helpful to arrange to go in just for a short time to meet colleagues - perhaps for coffee or lunch - as a way to overcome the hurdle of seeing lots of people on your first day back after your child has died. This might make your actual return to work a little easier.

When you do return to work, it is important to find ways of supporting yourself. You may be anxious about how you will feel, whether you can trust yourself to 'hold it together', and whether you might 'break down' in front of colleagues. This can happen, of course, but you can ease the pressure on yourself by letting people know what has happened. The thought of everyone expressing how sorry they are may feel daunting, as you can't be sure how you might react. Perhaps even worse is the thought that no one will acknowledge what has happened. In a 2018 survey by Sands of parents whose baby had died, 2 in 5 parents said that no one talked to them about the loss of their baby when they returned to work.

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Colleagues may be unsure how to act around you and may avoid you out of fear of saying something inappropriate and causing you more upset. They may also assume and worry that mentioning what has happened will be a painful reminder of something you would rather forget – you need to let them know if you don't mind talking about your child or what has happened.

It may be that you decide you would rather not talk about things at work, but it may be equally important that people understand that just because you're not mentioning what's happened this doesn't mean you're not hurting or that you're 'over it'. It is important to remember that you can have control over how much or how little you choose to say, and that you don't have to go into detail if you don't want to.

Thanking someone for their concern but finding a way to say that you don't feel like talking just now will allow you to take things at your own pace. People will tend to take their lead from you.

Concentration and motivation are known to suffer during bereavement and you may feel concerned as to how your grief will affect your work. Particularly in the early days of grief, you may find yourself both mentally and physically exhausted. Don't expect that you'll immediately be able to perform at your usual capacity. Grief can make it hard to concentrate on the job in hand and it is not at all unusual to find your mind drifting to everything that has happened. Whether you left work suddenly, or you have been away from work for some time, either on maternity leave or looking after a sick child at home, you may well feel overwhelmed by how much you have missed or need to catch up on.

Try to take on manageable, short-term tasks: big projects can seem daunting. Work can be a useful distraction from grieving, but you are unlikely to be

able to switch off completely. Give yourself short breaks in the day to go for walks and have moments of peace, or time for a few tears if you need to.

Being realistic about what you can manage, and communicating with your line manager so you both have a clear picture of what is expected and manageable, is important to support you in your return to work. This communication is vital in ensuring your employers are aware of your situation and can find ways to support you in the short-term. It may be possible to arrange to return to work gradually, perhaps working just mornings initially or a few days a week.

In larger companies, the HR Department will handle this type of situation, and some organisations make provision for counselling support for their employees. There are also several voluntary organisations that may be of help and can be found on the Child Bereavement UK website.

Find out what resources are available to support you. Talk to your line manager about your workload, and if you find yourself falling behind, don't be afraid to ask for help. Let colleagues know what is most helpful to you when you are having a particularly bad day. The more they know what they can do for you, the more comfortable they are likely to be in approaching you and offering their support.

Above all, be patient with yourself. However tempting it may be to throw yourself back into work as a way to occupy your mind and avoid the painful emotions associated with the death of your baby or child, it is important that you also pay attention to how you are feeling and don't expect too much of yourself. You will learn what works for you and what doesn't, and that may change over time. Maintaining good communication with your line manager and colleagues is important in ensuring a smoother transition back into the workplace.

Resources and further reading

Other Child Bereavement UK information sheets you may find helpful.

These can be downloaded from our website: www.childbereavementuk.org

- *When a baby dies - a particular sort of grief*
- *When a child dies - a loss like no other*
- *How you can help someone return to work after the baby or child has died: guidance for employers*

Other organisations

ACAS www.acas.org.uk

- *Managing bereavement in the workplace
- a good practice guide*

Sands www.sands.org.uk

- *Returning to work after the
death of your baby*
- *Information for employers - helping
a bereaved parent return to work*

Miscarriage Association

www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk

- *Miscarriage and employers
- a guide for the workplace*

The Compassionate Friends

www.tcf.org.uk

- *Back to work - helping a bereaved
employee after the death of their child*

Further resources and/or references are available from Child Bereavement UK, upon request.

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