

When bereavement enters the workplace

Bereavement is one of the most common factors affecting employees' performance at work, with an estimated 1 in 10 employees affected at any point in time¹, and it has been identified as a major life event that can cause or exacerbate mental health conditions, yet research has shown that bereaved people are being failed by a lack of support in the workplace.

Child Bereavement UK's 2016 Omnibus YouGov survey reported that less than 1/3rd (32%) of British adults working at the time of their bereavement said they had felt very supported by their employer².

Key findings of a 2014 report³, based on research by Comres, which polled some 4,000 people, included:

- 32% of those who had been bereaved in the past 5 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.

This 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 significant part in influencing a grieving employee's experience of their workplace.

Research on behalf of Co-op Funeralcare in 2018⁴ showed that 58% of adults felt pressured to return to work after a loss, with 30% feeling they needed more than 2 weeks off before they were truly ready to come back. In addition, 46% of grieving adults felt actively avoided by others, with 4 in 10 feeling isolated at work after bereavement. And a 2018 survey by Sands⁵, 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 after the death of their baby.

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 the circumstances, 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 affect an employee physically, emotionally, cognitively, socially and practically, and may lead to a radical change in their personal circumstances. The fear of returning to work and facing colleagues, a 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. There can be higher incidences of job-related injuries and accidents⁶. This not only has the potential to have an 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. Also, over time they 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 occasions such as anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, Mother's or Father's Days, Christmas, or other religious holidays, are therefore times when an employee may be affected, even years after a death. Each individual will be on their own time scale.

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, ultimately minimising 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. Having 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, striking 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.

Child Bereavement UK is a national charity with nearly 25 years' experience in providing training around grief and bereavement. We have developed training on managing bereavement in the workplace in general, in addition to specific guidance for both employers and employees on the difficult issue of returning to work after the death of a baby or child.

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 Child Bereavement UK's YouGov Survey had a total sample size of 2036 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 29 and 30 June 2016. The survey carried out online and the figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (18+)

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

4 Research conducted by Atomik with 2000 UK adults, February 2018

5 Sands, stillbirth and neonatal death charity, June 2018

6 BACP Guidelines for counselling

Further reading and resources

Other Child Bereavement UK information sheets you may find helpful.

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

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

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