

How you can help when someone returns to work after their baby or child has died: guidance for employers

The guidance in 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 available for employees.

Why it makes sense to help your employees

Grief is experienced by many thousands of parents every year in the UK and bereavement is one of the most common factors potentially affecting employees' performance at work, with an estimated one in ten employees affected at any point in time.¹ Yet research has shown that bereaved people are being failed by a lack of support in the workplace.

Research on behalf of Co-op Funeralcare in 2018² 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.

Similarly, a 2018 survey by Sands³, 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.

A basic principle for any good employer is to recognise their duty of care for their employees' health and well being in the workplace. Being prepared, being aware of the issues and having in place a bereavement policy can mitigate the costs of bereavement for all concerned, and the subsequent impact on productivity and the business or organisation as a whole.

When employees do receive sensitive and appropriate support, there are numerous benefits in the workplace:

- Individual performance and return to productivity is managed.
- Improved motivation, commitment and attitude to work.
- Reduced sickness absence.
- Reduced staff turnover as employees are more likely to stay with the organisation
- Reduced risk of litigation through alleviation of any workplaces stresses
- For some occupations, effective management of health and safety risks

Being an organisation that recognises the impact of bereavement on all concerned and is sensitive to the needs of individuals who are bereaved, will ultimately make a huge difference to individual performance, staff retention and how people feel about your organisation.

All organisations will encounter bereavement and some have found it helpful to include training for staff on bereavement issues as part of their general programme of staff training. This allows the organisation to be prepared for the inevitable, rather than finding itself having to provide an uninformed response at a time of crisis. Child Bereavement UK can provide guidance and training.

Understanding the impact of a death in the family

Everyone's grief is unique and the way one parent responds to the death of their baby or child may be very different to another. There is no 'right way' to grieve. People do as they must, in their own time. They have lost an entire future with that child and are likely to be struggling with very painful feelings from this untimely death that is entirely against the accepted natural order.

Grief can manifest itself in a range of ways, both physical and emotional, several of which are particularly relevant to the workplace:

- Loss of confidence, including fear of returning to work
- Sleep disturbance: sleeping too much/unable to sleep
- Decreased energy
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Over-sensitivity to noise
- Minor illnesses
- Difficulty in making decisions
- Poor memory
- Preoccupation
- Difficulty in concentrating/mental lapses
- Intolerance of others
- Insensitivity towards other people's problems

In her book *Family*, author Susan Hill⁴ describes it as 'having one skin less'. This increased sensitivity makes it important for employers to do all they can to support the bereaved employee and help to facilitate their return to work as much as possible.

There is a difference between the experience of a mother, who has physically carried a child, and a father whose 'working life' would usually continue unchanged after the child was born. A father's grief is no less, but men and women can grieve differently. Men are more likely to want to return to work and be restorative rather than focusing exclusively on the loss, as many women tend to do. When a mother experiences the death of her baby, returning to work may not have been planned for some time, if at all, and being at work when she should have been at home with her baby can be particularly difficult. Further information on the impact of returning to work from the employee's perspective can be found in *Returning to work after the death of your baby or child: guidance for employees*.

How you as an employer can help - a checklist

Some forward planning can help ease a bereaved employee's transition back into work, supporting the bereaved parent and minimising disruption in the workplace. Some practical aspects to consider are:

Before the employee returns:

- Identify someone to be the key person in regular contact with the bereaved employee to facilitate communication between the organisation and the employee. That person can keep others updated in line with what the bereaved employee wants colleagues to know.
- Ascertain what and how the bereaved employee would like others in the workplace to be told. It is vital they have control over this to ensure that any information shared is only that which they are comfortable with others knowing. The circumstances surrounding the death may be very personal to them or particularly traumatic, and not something they want widely known or discussed.
- Understand the cultural and family traditions important to the particular employee and accommodate these as far as possible.
- Provide information about bereavement leave, salary payments etc. This is important as it can help remove another anxiety from the individual. Recognise the need for flexibility as grief is individual and some employees may need longer than the standard bereavement leave provided by your business or organisation. The Government is currently proposing 2 weeks' paid leave for bereaved parents for the death of a child under 18 from 2020.
- Ascertain what the employee needs or would like from the organisation while they are away from work – perhaps periodic emails to inform them of any developments, being invited to any informal gatherings etc. Being proactive in making suggestions can be helpful as, at such a time of crisis, it can be hard for bereaved parents to know what they might want or need.
- Recognise that where a baby has died, seeing other pregnant women in the workplace can be difficult and bereaved parents are often surprised at the strength of feelings they experience in relation to someone else's pregnancy. Letting a bereaved parent know in advance of returning to work if anyone else has become pregnant may be preferable to them experiencing the shock of finding out on their return, which can be uncomfortable for both parties.
- Suggest that when the time comes to return to work, the bereaved employee might like to arrange a prior informal visit to the workplace for coffee or lunch to reduce anxiety around seeing everyone for the first time on their first day back at work.
- Offer restricted working hours or a different working pattern for the first few weeks/months to ease the employee back into their normal work routine.
- Support other staff by arranging a session for all affected to provide them with an understanding of grief and to allow them to air their concerns and anxieties about when their bereaved colleague returns. The section below about the impact on colleagues includes some of the issues that are likely to be raised. Child Bereavement UK's Training Team can help if you prefer to bring in an external facilitator for a staff information session.

When the employee returns:

- Encourage the bereaved employee to let others know what will be most helpful to them and what they would like in the way of support from others.
- Help other employees understand that a simple acknowledgement, that they are sorry to hear what has happened, can go a long way. Avoiding the subject altogether is unhelpful, as are colleagues' attempts at 'counselling' or sharing their own experiences.
- Take your lead from the employee in terms of whether they want to discuss what has happened or not.
- Talk to the employee about their workload and establishing strategies for times when they might find they are struggling or falling behind, having a particularly bad day emotionally or becoming overwhelmed with work.
- Consider redistribution of those parts of an employee's workload that are subject to tight deadlines or targets, as eliminating this type of pressure will be supportive particularly in the early days of returning to work. This may, of course, temporarily lead to an increased strain on other employees which will need to be sensitively managed.
- Appreciate that for a time the employee is likely to be physically and mentally exhausted, may be distracted or preoccupied and may need to take longer breaks or make more personal calls than usual.
- Understand that the bereaved employee is likely to be unable to work at their usual capacity, for a period of time, and be realistic in your expectations and supportive of them in managing their workload.
- Be flexible by accommodating employees' requests to work from home or take a longer break on an occasional basis.
- Be aware that some employees may return too soon and throw themselves back into work as a means of avoiding their grief and pain, or may overwhelm others with their constant desire to talk about what has happened. If this persists, they may need more formal support in dealing with their feelings about their baby's or child's death. You may then be able to offer access to an employee assistance scheme or workplace counselling through your organisation. A directory of helpful organisations can be found on Child Bereavement UK's website.
- Never assume that just because the bereaved parent may not be mentioning what has happened, they are 'over it'.
- Recognise that a father's grief is no less than a mother's when a child dies, and appreciate that there is no hierarchy in grief – the loss of a baby at an early gestation may be every bit as devastating to parents as the loss of an older child. No parent ever expects their child to die before them, no matter what age that child may be.
- Be aware of the significance of the anniversary of the death, the child's birthday, Mother's Day, Father's Day and so on, for the bereaved parent and their likely increased vulnerability around these times.

- Appreciate that when a baby or child has died, bereaved parents are susceptible to heightened concern about the health and wellbeing of any other children they have. A call from school to say a child is unwell is likely to be a much greater cause for alarm than it may otherwise have been. Equally, they may be preoccupied with and concerned about the grief reactions of any other children in the family, and need directing towards some sources of information and help for this. Child Bereavement UK's helpline (0800 02 888 40) can provide confidential listening, support, information and guidance.
- Recognise that for someone who has lost a baby or child in the past, being pregnant again will be a particularly stressful time and there will be a requirement for sensitivity towards their increased vulnerability/anxiety.
- Maintain good communication with an open-door policy and regular meetings between the bereaved employee and their line manager to offer support and monitor progress over time.

The impact on colleagues

Employers frequently underestimate the strength of workplace relationships and the resultant impact of a death on colleagues of the bereaved employee. The impact of the death of a baby or child is such that the effect on colleagues can be profound. This is unlikely to be confined purely to those who are close to the bereaved parent and, as a result, colleagues may be particularly distressed themselves. Other employees may be pregnant at the time or have children of their own, and such an untimely death can be very disconcerting for everyone who knows the family.

'What do I say?'

Colleagues often feel uncomfortable or perhaps uncertain whether or how to approach the person who is bereaved. 'I don't know what to say?' is a frequent comment. Bereaved parents tell us that it is not so much the words that people use, but the fact that people show they care that matters to them. Unsure as to how they should act, colleagues may actually avoid the bereaved employee out of fear of saying something inappropriate and causing them more upset, or reminding the person of something they assume they would rather forget. However, bereaved parents frequently express that lack of acknowledgement of what has happened to them is the most hurtful thing. A simple expression of sorrow regarding what has happened can go a long way. It is important that colleagues take their lead from the bereaved person in terms of how much they want to talk about their child's death.

'What is the best way to provide support?'

Employees often have photographs of their children at their place of work and may feel awkward about this, either in terms of displaying their own child's photograph or the bereaved colleague keeping a photograph of their child who has died on their desk. It is perfectly natural for bereaved parents to want to keep their child's photograph with them, and colleagues should not be worried about referring to it. Supporting the bereaved employee to enable them to voice how they would like people to behave around them, and what would help them most, is likely to ease the potential awkwardness of these situations.

'How do we manage the work?'

Workload distribution is likely to change for a time around a significant bereavement. It is important to recognise that those working to cover for the bereaved colleague, who might be absent or less productive for a period, may themselves become temporarily stressed and overburdened with their additional workload. Understanding the nature of grief and its impact on a bereaved colleague may help diffuse any growing resentments.

Support for your organisation

Child Bereavement UK is a national charity with early 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 Research conducted by Atomik with 2,000 UK adults, February 2018

3 Sands, stillbirth and neonatal death charity, June 2018

4 *Family* by Susan Hill Published by Penguin, 1989. ISBN 0-14-010886

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 bereavement enters the workplace*
- *Returning to work after the death of a baby or child: guidance for employees*

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.