# NHS Education for Scotland

# Experiencing the death of a colleague

Key points for staff, teams and managers in health and social care during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

**Experiencing the death of a colleague can be a particularly upsetting and unsettling time for their co-workers and team, especially if they have been involved in caring for the person before they died.**

The impact of such a death can also be far-reaching across an organisation, and during the COVID-19 pandemic the impact may be amplified and potentially more complex.

Restrictions put in place due to COVID-19 may prevent people from being able to gather and respond to this news in the way that they usually would, but there are still things that individuals, a team or an organisation can do that can help staff and potentially the deceased person's family too.

This resource is designed to aid staff and managers to identify some initial responses and actions that may help in this challenging situation – to ensure people have an opportunity to express their grief, to mark the death in a way that feels appropriate for them and to receive the support that they need.

> **Please see also**
> **Employees who are bereaved: key points for line managers in health and social care**
> http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/bereavement/dealing-with-bereavement-in-the-workplace/

## As a team or line manager

### Breaking the news

➕ It is important to find a sensitive and appropriate way to inform individuals about the death of a colleague. This is especially important for close co-workers who had a friendship with the person who has died. Wherever possible, tell people in person; if there is no opportunity for a face-to-face conversation, contact them by video call or telephone. You may then wish to circulate news of the death to others within your organisation, perhaps by email, to inform those who did not work with them closely.

➕ Be aware that news of the death may spread very quickly, so prioritise contact with the immediate team as soon as is practical.

➕ Take direction from the person's family regarding the information that they would wish people to know.

➕ Grief can affect all aspects of a person's wellbeing - physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual. Each team member may react in a very different way to the news of the death.

➕ Consider having a chaplain or spiritual care lead with you when breaking the news, or arrange for them to visit the team afterwards as soon as is practical, if appropriate.

**Practical considerations**

➕ Consider how to re-allocate the work of the person who is deceased and deal with their desk, lockers and files in a sensitive way.

➕ Consider contacting the deceased person's family, perhaps by sending a condolence card from the team.

➕ Inform the workforce about funeral arrangements. COVID-19 restrictions may prevent close colleagues or a representative from the organisation attending as they normally would; however, wherever it is possible, give team members time off to attend (virtually or in person), or time away from work when the funeral is happening to reflect or mark the day in a way that feels right for them.

➕ Be aware of, and use, the organisation's formal mechanisms for reporting the death of a colleague.

BEREAVEMENT POLICY

We are here for you
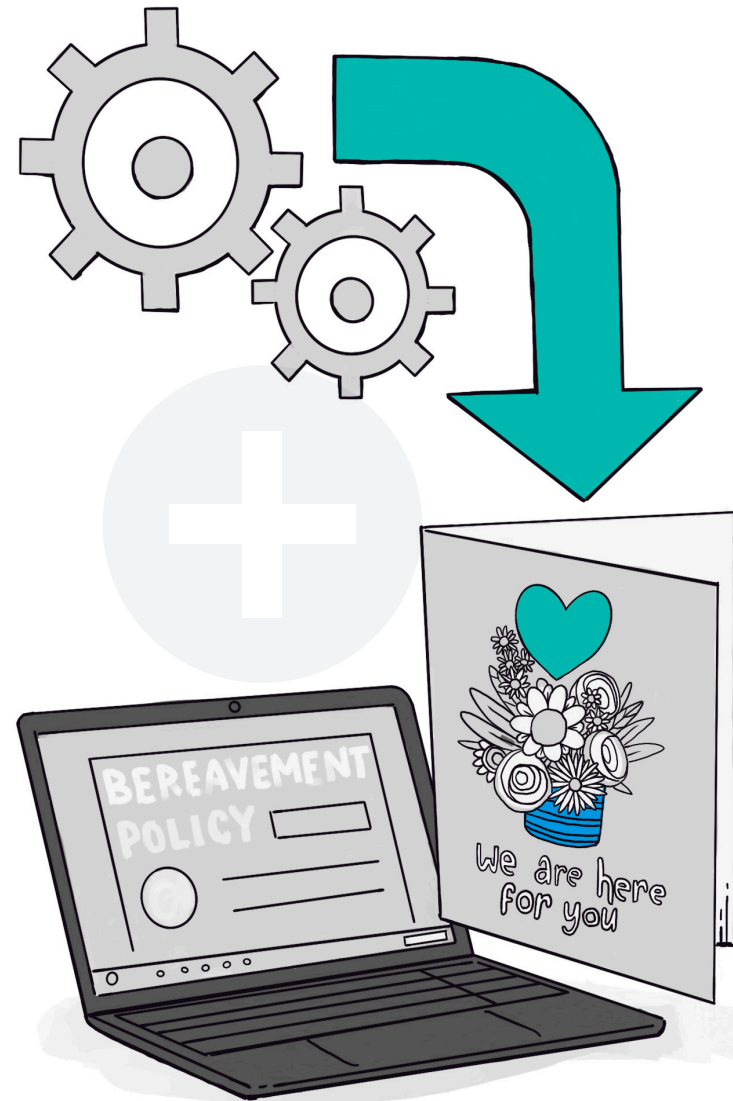
## Initial responses to support staff

➕ Consider seeking early support and guidance yourself as a line or team manager, for example from a chaplain or spiritual care lead, to help you to deal with this situation and the complexities that may arise.

➕ Recognise that it can be particularly challenging for teams to deal with the news of a death if they were involved in caring for their colleague in their final illness.

➕ Provide staff with contact details for sources of support.

➕ Help the immediate team acknowledge the death by giving them space to express their grief and share memories and experiences of working with the person who has died. This can be more difficult if teams are unable to gather together in person, but online tools exist which may be useful. Acknowledge that you too may be grieving.

➕ It is important to make sure that the death does not go unnoticed or unmarked, and the team is not required to 'just get back to work'. This may be challenging when clinical or caring workloads are high, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

➕ Be open about what it is possible to do now to mark the death and acknowledge that this may not be what the team would choose to do in normal circumstances. Try to give staff and teams options to pick what feels right for them.

➕ Consider planning for a future date when the team can all come together in person to remember their colleague and share memories and experiences. Hearing these can be particularly consoling for the deceased person's family and may reveal aspects of their working life that they weren't aware of. Teams may wish to invite the family to join them.
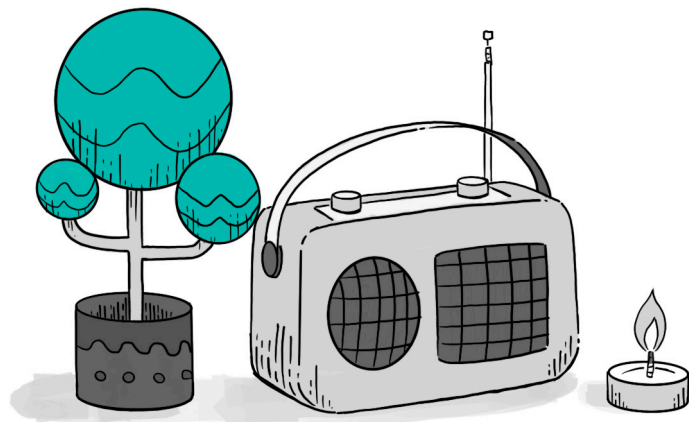
**Some examples that could be used to mark the death of a colleague include:**

▶ Lighting a candle
▶ Planting a tree or plant
▶ Playing a favourite piece of music or a film
▶ Holding a minute's silence in the person's memory
▶ Holding a virtual memorial with photos, mementoes, music, poems or readings
▶ Setting up a book of remembrance in a room with refreshments, where colleagues can write their memories of working with the person. People can visit individually or in groups. Eventually the book of remembrance could be passed on to the person's family.
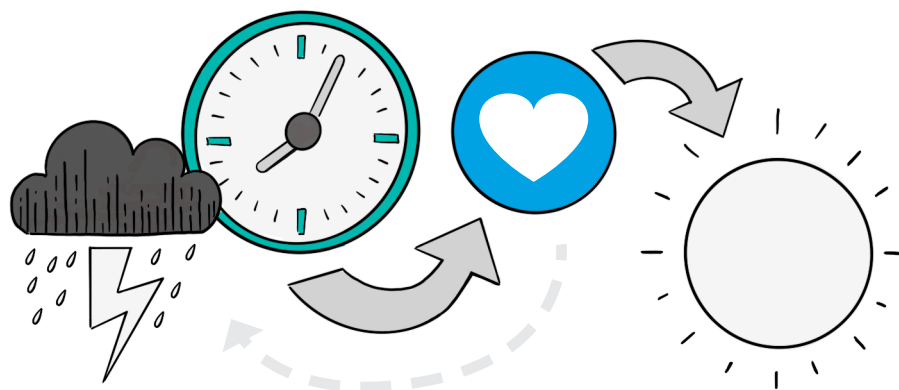
## In the longer term

Acknowledge that grief is an ongoing process - follow up with the deceased person's colleagues to meaningfully ask how they, and the team as a whole, are getting on and adjusting.

Be aware that the joining of new staff, especially anyone filling the deceased person's role, may be a particularly challenging time for a team.

## Further resources

NHS Education for Scotland Support Around Death website | http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/

Cruse Bereavement Care - information on bereavement at work, including the death of a staff member | https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/about-grief/bereavement-at-work

Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief - Scottish Bereavement Friendly Workplaces Toolkit | https://www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk/content/workplace_home/

Irish Hospice Foundation - Grief in the workplace information and resources | https://hospicefoundation.ie/bereavement-2-2/working-in-bereavement-and-loss/grief-in-the-workplace/

Talking and being with people who are bereaved short animated film | https://vimeo.com/264030127 | and accompanying **summary leaflet** from NHS Education for Scotland | http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/media/16286/talking-with-people-web-only.pdf

ACAS Guidance – Managing bereavement in the workplace – a good practice guide | https://archive.acas.org.uk/media/4114/Managing-bereavement-in-the-workplace---a-good-practice-guide/pdf/Managing-bereavement-in-the-workplace-a-good-practice-guide.pdf

Scottish Government: Reporting the death of a colleague arrangements DL (2020) 12 | https://www.sehd.scot.nhs.uk/dl/DL(2020)12.pdf