

Employees who are bereaved

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

This guidance is designed to help line managers have confidence to support employees who have experienced bereavement during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Managers may naturally feel apprehensive about handling this; however, the principles outlined below can help to deliver empathetic support to the person who is grieving, whilst also acknowledging the needs of their team and the organisation. Line managers should be familiar with their organisation's Bereavement Policy; this guidance is intended to support application of this.



Grief and bereavement

Bereavement may be experienced following the death of a close family member, as well as friends, more distant relatives or anyone we know. Everyone will experience grief in a unique way and a person's needs may change over time. Adopting a compassionate approach in the workplace may reduce anxiety and help to lessen the impact of grief.ⁱ

As a result of COVID-19, people may not be able to be with a person as they approach the end of their life and may find themselves isolated from their usual networks of support.

Restrictions put in place may also prevent people from being able to gather and respond in the way they usually would after someone dies. This brings additional challenges and may contribute to the person's sense of grief which can affect all aspects of their wellbeing (physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual).



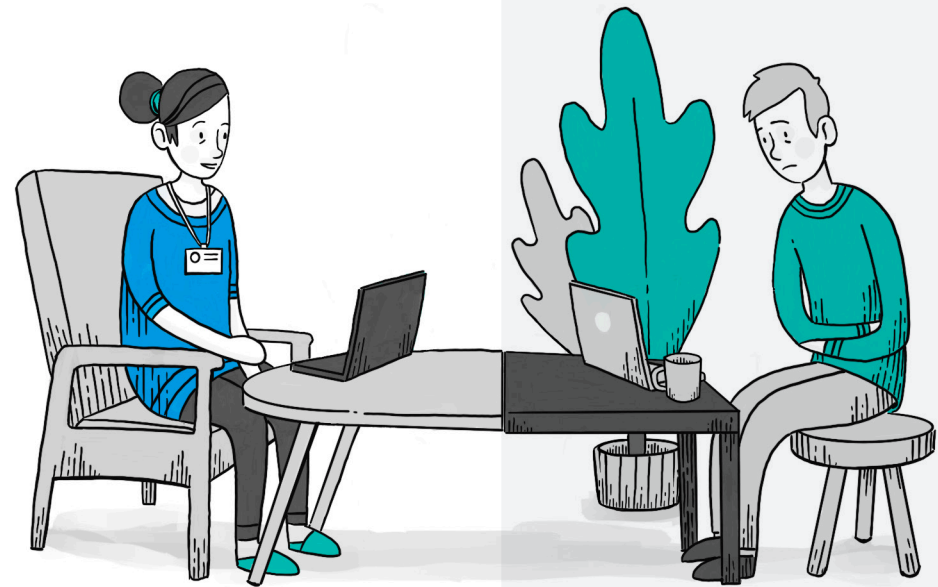
Please see also

Experiencing the death of a colleague: key points for staff, teams and managers in health and social care
<http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/bereavement/dealing-with-bereavement-in-the-workplace/>

When you have been made aware that a person is bereaved

What should you say?

- + Find a quiet place to talk and listen to the member of staff, whether face to face, by video call or telephone. Set aside enough time and think about what you want to say in advance.
- + Be compassionate, genuine and show empathy.
- + Mirror the words and phrases used by the person who is bereaved. Consider asking the name of the person who has died and then refer to them by name or by their relationship, unless it doesn't feel appropriate or comfortable to do so.
- + Make it clear that the member of staff is not expected to be at work.
- + Use active listening skills and be non-judgemental. You are not expected to know all the answers and it is okay if you don't know what to say.
- + Ask the member of staff if there is anything from a team/organisational point of view that would help support them.



What should you do?

- + Familiarise yourself with relevant organisational policies, e.g. special and/or compassionate leave, and encourage the person who is bereaved to use as appropriate.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, health and social care staff may be reluctant to take any/as much time off following a personal bereavement as they usually would. The need to maintain adequate frontline staffing levels should be balanced with the short and long-term wellbeing of colleagues who are bereaved.



- + Be aware of different cultural, faith and religious practices and the implications of these on funeral arrangements. Be as flexible as is practical within the workplace. Even if someone isn't able to attend a funeral due to COVID-19 restrictions, consider offering them time away from work, so they can mark the day in a way that is meaningful for them, or perhaps join the funeral, burial or cremation by video link.
- + Make sure the colleague has contact details for sources of support in the organisation, including Chaplaincy, Occupational Health, employee assistance scheme or staff counselling services.
- + Ask how and when they would prefer you to stay in contact with them, so you know how they are getting on. Also, establish what they want co-workers to know and whether they would wish to be contacted by their colleagues whilst they are away from work.
- + Recognise that they may be upset and may not be able to give and/or take in a lot of information. Take time to listen and expect there to be a need for follow up conversations. Arrange to speak again at a later date, but recognise this arrangement may need to change.

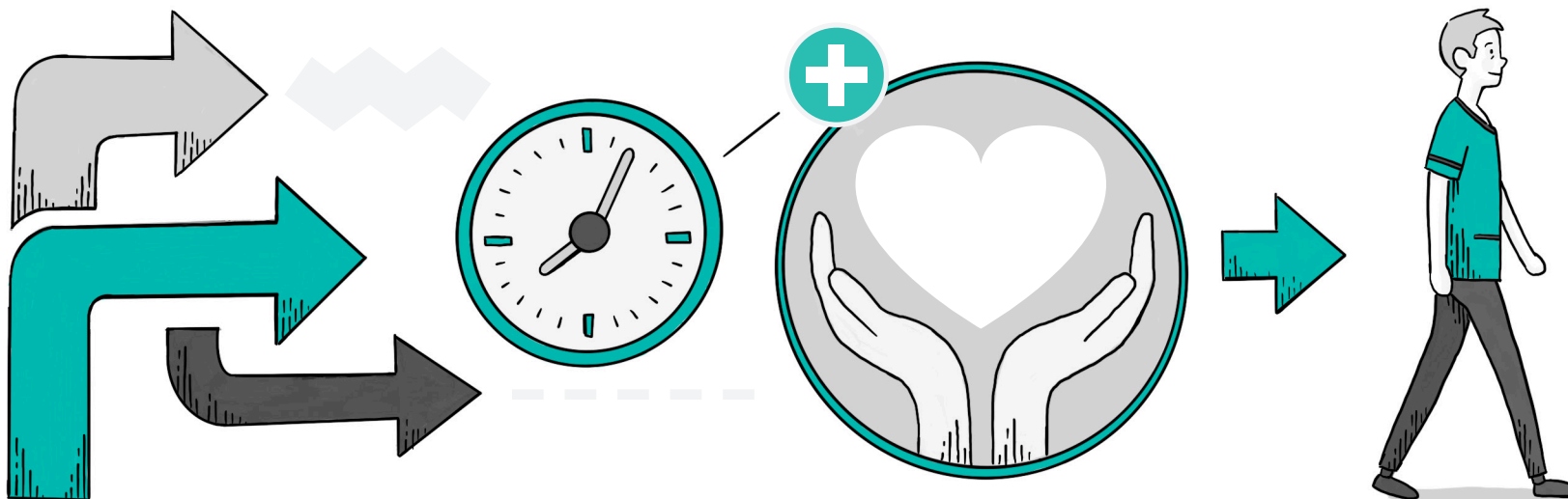
Overseeing a person's return to work

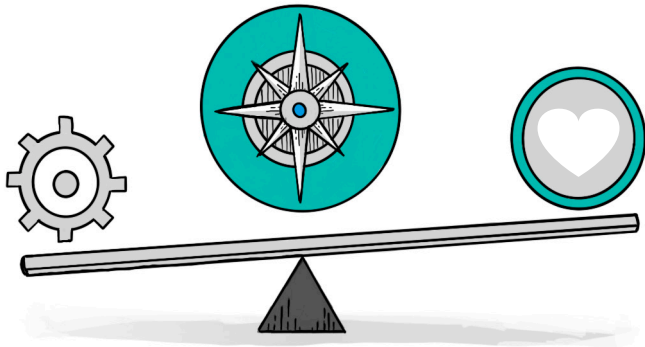
Before they start back

- + Recognise that plans on how and when a person will return to work may need to alter depending on how they are doing. Other factors, such as an increase in caring responsibilities resulting from a death and whether they are self-isolating, may also require additional flexibility as their return to work is planned.
- + Discuss any adjustments (e.g. to working hours) or support needs in advance that would help as they return to work. This may be particularly important if their work acts as a reminder of their recent bereavement; for instance, if it is based in a similar clinical or care setting, or causes them to encounter people with the same illness or condition.

Once they have returned

- + Arrange regular reviews to monitor how they are getting on, and ensure adjustments are working and any pre-identified or new support needs continue to be met.
- + Be sensitive to significant days, for example anniversary of death or birthdays, when the person may request leave from work, and try to anticipate these ahead of time.
- + Experiences of grief, whilst they often lessen over time, can last a lifetime, so it is important to recognise the impact of a bereavement over the long term.





In summary

Balancing the workplace demands on staffing levels with the support needs of a colleague who is bereaved can be challenging, and managers may be particularly aware of this during the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, evidenceⁱ shows compassion in the workplace increases a person's attachment and commitment to the organisation and fosters stronger connections between colleagues. Therefore, where possible, the approaches outlined above should help teams navigate these difficult circumstances together.

ⁱDutton, J. E., Workman, K. M., & Hardin, A. E. (2014). Compassion at work [Electronic version]. Retrieved [20/04/20], from Cornell University, SHA School site: <http://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/articles/749>

Further resources

-  NHS Education for Scotland Support Around Death website | <http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/>
-  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>
-  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/>
-  Cruse Bereavement Care - Bereavement at work information | <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/
-  Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief & Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care: A Road Less Lonely: Moving forward with public health approaches to death, dying and bereavement in Scotland (Section 5 - Compassionate Workplaces) | <https://www.palliativecarescotland.org.uk/content/publications/A-Road-Less-Lonely-WEB.pdf>