

Grief at work

“I’ve nothing against death – I just don’t want to be there when it happens!”
Woody Allen

Death is an inevitable and normal part of life and work. It is a painful reality which all of us have to face at some point in our lives, though as Woody Allen highlights – most of us would prefer not to have to deal with it. Death is challenging, especially at work where it can be seen as a taboo topic which is best avoided or at least, dealt with privately. Death, loss and grief are not easy things to deal with, especially at work. However, they are normal and inevitable parts of life and they do impact on employees and the organisation.

Employees most commonly experience the impact of grief through the death of someone close to them. However, other significant losses such as separation, divorce or illness can also give rise to grief reactions.

Grief is a normal, though difficult, part of life. Work is also a normal part of life and the workplace along with family, friends etc. has an important role in helping employees to adjust to the losses that they encounter in their working lives.

Being proactive about managing grief in the workplace helps managers and employees to be prepared, and thus better able to respond when death and loss occur. It also ensures a speedier return to productivity than if the issues are ignored.

The development of a bereavement policy is an important first step in proactively managing grief at work. It sets out minimum standards, helps to ensure a consistent approach and provides guidance to managers and employees.

The benefits of developing such an approach are significant. It makes good business sense because employees will notice the way grieving colleagues are supported thus helping to improve morale and commitment to the organisation. It also helps to reduce unnecessary sick leave.

Managers, staff and organisations are generally compassionate towards employees who are bereaved and want to do the best possible for them.

Developing a bereavement policy is the next step in translating that compassion and concern in to a practical form which will benefit not just the bereaved employee but the organisation as a whole.

Supporting bereaved employees makes good business sense

A workplace that proactively supports bereaved employees helps them to come to terms with their loss and:

- supports their return to productivity
- helps to improve morale and commitment
- helps to avoid unnecessary turnover of staff
- may help to reduce sick leave resulting in significant savings*.

Returning to work can help the bereaved employee to begin adjusting to their loss and returning to productivity. This requires a workplace that supports bereaved employees through good practice and policies. In such an environment the need to take sick leave around bereavement could be reduced.

Taking the first step

Developing an organisational bereavement policy is the first step in proactively managing employee grief and the basis on which a supportive work environment can be built.

An organisational bereavement policy will:

- Set out a basic standard of key issues and entitlements which apply to all employees and help to ensure a consistent approach.
- Provide a reference for managers and staff which can help them to have confidence in dealing with what is a difficult and challenging workplace issue.
- Show that the organisation takes the reality of grief at work seriously, and provide an important foundation on which a supportive response to grieving employees can be developed.

How grief affects employees

Grief reactions

Grief is not an illness and it does not need 'to be fixed'. It is a process of adjustment which the grieving employee has to negotiate.

Grief affects people in a number of ways including physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually.

Some of what we know to be normal reactions for any person who may be grieving include:

Physical

We may feel grief in our bodies through pains, aches and fatigue. These reactions can persist for a long time after the death. Other physical aspects of grief include:

- Tiredness
- Sleep disturbances
- Appetite disturbances
- Crying
- Weakness in muscles
- Feeling flat and lacking enthusiasm
- Breathlessness

Understanding grief at work

Emotional

Emotionally grief can be like waves washing on a beach. It ebbs and flows. Sometimes the waves are small and manageable and at other times the grieving person can feel overwhelmed by them.

Emotions that are expected when grieving include:

- Sadness
- Anger
- Guilt and self-reproach
- Relief
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Helplessness
- Numbness

Psychological

Grief can affect us when we least expect it. Thoughts about the person who has died can suddenly come in to our minds or a smell or song might trigger memories. Grief is not easy to control.

Psychological reactions that may occur when grieving include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Preoccupation with the person who has died
- Dreaming of the deceased person

Spiritual

Death can bring up important questions of meaning for people. Why did this happen? What is the meaning of my life now without this person? Why me? This type of questioning is not uncommon when grieving.

Spiritual grief reactions include:

- Trying to make sense of what has happened
- Hostility towards God
- Searching for meaning
- Questioning

The grieving process

Acknowledging a person's loss

Death and suffering are difficult topics which make most of us feel uncomfortable. It is normal to be unsure of what to say or do. However, one of the most helpful things we can do for a bereaved employee is to acknowledge their loss. Something simple and straightforward such as "I'm sorry to hear of your mother's death" helps the employee to know that their loss is recognised.

Accept that you may feel awkward around a bereaved employee but don't let this stop you acknowledging their loss.

Grieving takes time

Grief takes longer than we may think. Two years is a good rule of thumb for someone to come to terms with the major aspects of the death of someone close to them. While it is important to support people around the immediate time of the loss, it can often be some time later (6 – 24 months) before the full impact of the loss begins to sink in and some of what we know to be normal feelings, behaviors and reactions come to the surface.

The grieving process takes longer than we may think. It may take some time before the full impact of the loss is felt by the employee.

A 'new normal'

The bereaved employee has to deal with the reality that they are never going back to the 'normal' that existed before the loss. This is because that 'normal' included the person who has died. The employee now has to deal with a 'new normal' which is one without this person, and this will take time to get used to.

Be aware that grieving employees have to adjust to a 'new normal' which will take time, and that they will not be 'back to normal' quickly.

People grieve in different ways

Each person's grief is unique and individual to that person. Some employees are very private and do not want everyone to know their business, while others prefer to talk openly about what has happened to them. This reflects different grieving styles. The intuitive griever needs to talk with others about the loss and is more openly emotional. The instrumental griever is more solitary and action oriented. Generally women tend to have more intuitive grieving styles and men more instrumental, but not in all cases⁷. Both styles of grieving are appropriate.

There is no one fixed way to grieve. People have different styles – some are more open than others. Both are appropriate.

The tasks of grieving

The grief of each employee is unique, though there are some common tasks⁸ that each person has to negotiate in the grieving process. These are:

1. Accepting the loss

This means accepting that the loss has occurred, and that the person is not coming back.

2. Experiencing the pain

There is no shortcut through grief. It is only by experiencing the pain of the absence of the person who has died, that people can begin to heal.

3. Adjusting to an environment without the deceased

This means adjusting to the 'new normal' that has come about as a result of the person dying. This can be challenging but it can also offer the bereaved person new opportunities.

4. Finding a new emotional place for the person who has died

This involves creating new ways of remembering the person who has died, so that they continue to be a part of the bereaved person's life.

These tasks of grieving take time to complete and involve constant reworking.

The employee has a role in their own grieving process. Grieving is something that is done by a person rather than happens to her/him.

Engaging with and detaching from grief

Grieving employees need to be able to engage with, and detach from, their grief. At times they need to be able to think and talk about the person who has died. At other times they need to be able to forget about the loss and concentrate on something different. Healthy grieving involves being able to do both and to move from one to the other.

Grieving employees will move back and forward between focusing on their loss and being able to concentrate on productivity.

Grief can be transforming

The experience of death can be painful and challenging, but it also presents opportunities. These may be hard to see initially, but gradually over time a person may see how grief has changed their life. Increased ability to enjoy life, empathy for others' pain, and confidence in one's own resilience etc. are some of the ways that grief can influence peoples' lives.

Although grief is difficult, over time it can have positive transforming effects on peoples' lives.

The importance of support

The single most important factor in coming to terms with grief is social support. While the grieving process is individual, the support of friends, family, colleagues and the workplace are very important. This support can be practical (sharing some work tasks, doing a shopping or school run), social (e.g. continuing to invite/include the person to social events etc.) and/or emotional (e.g. checking in with the person from time to time).

Practical, social, and emotional support are very important in helping the bereaved employee to come to terms with their loss.

Supporting employees who are caring for someone who is terminally ill

Caring for someone who is terminally ill (care-giving) can be a very stressful situation for an employee. There is a sense of being torn between the competing demands of work and the patient.

Different illnesses have different trajectories. For example, someone with late stage cancer may only have a number of months to live whereas someone with Alzheimer's disease could deteriorate gradually over a number of years. The demands on an employee in each of these cases will be different and each case needs to be assessed individually.

Employees who are in a care-giving role can experience grief before the person dies. This is known as anticipatory grieving, and can involve some/all of the grief reactions.

Understanding and flexibility

The two most important factors for employees who are care-givers are understanding and flexibility from their line manager and organisation. Knowing that the manager understands one's situation and is willing to be flexible in terms of how, when, and where work gets done is a tremendous relief for a care-giving employee.

Many employees can manage both demands well when they feel supported and recognised, and do not abuse the situation.

What helps – Supporting working care-givers

- An open approach in the organisation which recognises care-giving as a valid role for employees.
- Support for care-giving employees through flexibility around:
 - Work hours – flexitime, part-time, job-share, compacted hours etc.
 - Workplace – use of technology, working from home etc. paid, unpaid and compassionate leave.
- Other useful sources of help can be employee and employer organisations

Supporting bereaved employees

The role of the line manager

The line manager if properly supported and trained is in a key position to support the bereaved employee. She/he will generally know the employee and their circumstances, and will be used to dealing with them on a day to day basis.

What employees find helpful

Many employees when asked about what they would find helpful in their workplace if they were coping with a significant loss mention three things:

1. That their loss would be acknowledged
2. That they would be treated as normally as possible
3. That their manager would be flexible

How managers can support bereaved employees

Short-term

1. Establish good communication with bereaved employee, acknowledge their loss, check about what information to share, and inform colleagues appropriately.
2. Attend funeral rituals where possible, and provide practical help where appropriate.
3. Show flexibility and understanding around work issues and manage the return to work.
4. If unsure, seek advice from someone who has experience of dealing with grief e.g. an Employee Assistance or Occupational Health or other grief professional.

Long-term

1. Maintain good communication with bereaved employee and adjust work requirements as necessary.
2. Learn about the grieving process, and the organisation's policy and supports.
3. Be watchful for bereaved employees who may be struggling with their grief and direct them towards appropriate additional supports.
4. Encourage social, practical and emotional support of the bereaved employee.

The role of the organisation

Although managers have a key role in proactively managing employee bereavement, they must be supported at an organisational level both in terms of policy and culture. This means there must be buy-in throughout the organisation.

How organisations can support bereaved employees

Short-term

1. Ensure an open and proactive approach to employee bereavement amongst all staff, especially senior managers.
2. Acknowledge the employee's loss and facilitate staff to attend funeral rituals.
3. Support managers in adopting a flexible and sensitive approach to employee bereavement situations.

Long-term

1. Develop an organisational bereavement policy with the help of employees, and make sure it is known and accessible to all staff.
2. Train staff in understanding the grieving process and develop bereavement resource person(s) within the organisation.
3. Work proactively at creating an organisational culture that is supportive of employee bereavement through training and events (e.g. providing input on managing grief as part of induction training).

The role of human resources

If an organisation has a human resources function their role in employee bereavement is to support the managers and make sure that they are trained in understanding bereavement and aware of the organisation's policies and the employee's entitlements. If there is no bereavement policy in place then human resources will have a key role in developing this within the organisation.

The role of employee assistance / occupational health

Where an organisation has employee assistance / occupational health personnel or programmes, these can also be a support to managers as well as employees around bereavement.

It is important to note though that most bereaved people do not need counselling or therapy to come to terms with their loss.

Employee assistance and occupational health professionals have a lot of experience in dealing with situations of loss and are good resources for a manager in deciding if a bereaved employee may need specialised help.

Developing a bereavement policy

We are alerted to the individual nature of employee grief and the need for flexibility and discretion in the organisation's response. However, a minimum base standard is required, on which an effective and fair response can be built. A bereavement policy will provide such a base.

Organisations vary hugely in terms of culture, size and operating environment. What will work as a policy in a large organisation may not be possible in a smaller owner-led business. Therefore, when developing a bereavement policy it is important to reflect the culture and ethos of the organisation as well as the environment in which the business or organization operates.

The key elements involved in structuring a bereavement policy are:

1. Leave entitlement
2. The return to work
3. Supporting employees who are grieving
4. Health and Safety
5. Organisational values and ethos
6. Concluding remarks

Developing a bereavement resource person(s)

There may be employees who have had personal experience of bereavement and would be both suitable and interested in taking on a role of being a resource/support for others who experience grief in the workplace. Although this could be someone from management, human resources or employee assistance it could also be another employee who has had experience of the grieving process. The key here is that the person has the interest, experience and maturity to take on the role.

The role of the bereavement support person can be developed in different ways depending on the requirements of the organisation but some of the core aspects could involve:

1. Sourcing up-to-date information on different aspects of bereavement and making this available to all employees.
2. Finding out about local and national bereavement supports and keeping an up-to date list of these.
3. Learning about and keeping up-to-date with, best practice bereavement support.
4. Providing training on bereavement for managers and staff.
5. Being a resource for managers and human resource personnel on different aspects of bereavement.

Training and education

A policy on its own will not be enough to manage grief effectively in the workplace. Key personnel must be trained in understanding the grieving process, the organisation's bereavement policy, and how both impact on employees.