

A Guide to Bereavement & Loss

Support and Advice for Managers



The Impact of Bereavement at Work

At any time, one in ten people in the UK are likely to be affected by a bereavement. Whilst many bereaved colleagues cope well during this time, others will struggle to manage their loss, and this may have an impact on them at work.

As a manager it can be difficult to know how to respond when a colleague tells you someone close to them has died. This guide has been put together to help you feel more confident in knowing what to do and how you can support colleagues who have been bereaved.

Understanding Grief

Grief is a very individual process and everyone will respond differently. The impact of a bereavement is not just emotional. It can affect someone's ability to think clearly, concentrate and process information; they may behave differently than they did before and experience physical symptoms, such as tiredness, tension, aches and pains etc.

Grief is a journey and while everyone's journey will be different there are some key stages that many people experience following a bereavement.

Stages of grief

In the early days people can experience a sense of shock, not able to take on board the reality that someone has died. They may be emotionally numb and continue as if nothing has happened.

Over time the reality that someone close to them has died sets in and they can experience a range of emotions: sadness, anger, anxiety, fear, relief, guilt... These emotions can change from moment to moment, like they are caught in a whirlpool. Some feelings are harder to accept but are very common following a bereavement. It is common for someone who has been bereaved to feel anger; sometimes towards the person who died or at themselves for something they did or did not say or do. When someone has been ill for a long time it can also be common to experience relief.

(e.g., that they are no longer in pain) but this can sometimes get mixed with guilt at feeling relief.

Sometimes grief can feel like a physical pain and at others there can be a sense of hopelessness and depression, as if there is no meaning to life anymore.

Grief comes in waves but gradually people come to accept the reality and find ways to carry on with their life and build a new life without the person who died in it. Grieving is not about getting over or forgetting the death, but of learning to live again and carrying the memories of those who died with them.

*However someone grieves and how long it takes,
it is normal for them.*

Everyone grieves differently

There is no 'right way' to grieve. It can depend on a number of circumstances, such as:

- Who died and their relationship with the bereaved
- How they died - e.g. if the death was expected, sudden, suicide
- What support they have
- Faith and culture - each has different practices and rituals following a death

As a manager, having some understanding of these factors can help you identify what support you and the organisation can provide or where else to signpost people for additional support.

No Set Timeline for grief

There is no set time for how long someone will grieve. When the lives of colleagues and friends start to 'return to normal' after a while, it may not be like that for the person who has been bereaved.

Their grief can be ongoing and is usually for longer than you think, so be prepared to offer support on an ongoing basis. Also be aware that it may impact their performance for longer, so as a manager you may need to take this into account.

Key things to remember as a manager

- Grief affects everyone in different ways
- People may feel a wide range of emotions
- How people grieve will depend on a range of factors
- There are different stage of grief and people may go through these stages at different times
- There is no right or wrong way for a person to feel or react following a loss
- Some people will want to talk and show their emotions openly; others prefer to deal with things slowly, quietly or by themselves. As a manager you can help by taking their lead and signposting to support.
- Try to avoid telling them what they should be feeling or doing
- During the grieving process people may behave out of character - e.g., a usually outgoing colleague may retreat from social situations, or a usually composed and calm colleague may become angry.
- Grief can be ongoing, so be prepared to offer ongoing support
- Try not to make assumptions about how people grieve and be guided by the individual's needs
- There are different types of losses - not just those connected to death. Your team member may be experiencing the loss of a loved person or the loss of a relationship, job, health or home. All these can trigger grief.

Anticipatory grief

With an ageing population and medical advances, when someone receives a terminal diagnosis, their illness may still be quite long. During this time, friends and family may experience the same symptoms of grief that they would after a death. They may have mood changes, feel less motivated, have difficulty concentrating etc.

Some long illnesses may involve other losses along the way, as people lose their physical and mental capacities and ability to relate to those who care for them. People will face the upcoming loss of a loved one, be fearful of financial challenges and start to grieve the future and dreams that they had talked about and planned together. This is called preparatory or anticipatory grief.

As a manager, be aware that this can also impact an employee in the workplace as they must cope with the grief of the anticipated death as well as caring for the person who is dying and may need similar support and consideration as they would following a bereavement.

The role of the Manager

At Co-op we don't expect managers to be experts in grief or bereavement to be able to support colleagues. Your role is not to deal with the grief itself but to acknowledge it in a compassionate and sensitive way; make it clear to your colleague how they will be supported and to outline what help is available.

We encourage you to use your discretion and judgement when supporting your colleagues. What one person needs may be different to what another person needs. We don't expect you to treat everyone in the same way and our Co-op policies allow for some flexibility. A bereavement may lead to changes in people's circumstances and responsibilities, e.g. childcare, which may mean making adjustments to their role.

To help you further there are some principles below that outline the basic responsibilities you have as a line manager to support a bereaved colleague:

- Be caring and compassionate
- Offer your condolences
- Make sure that your colleague knows that they do not need to come into work on the day of the death
- Ask them how they would like to stay in contact
- Ask them how much they want co-workers to know and if they want to be contacted
- Be conscious of accommodating any religious beliefs and customs where it is reasonable and practical
- Consider what action to take if the death is in the media
- Make yourself aware of relevant policies and support options
- Encourage them to read the **Compassionate Leave Policy** or the **Parental Bereavement Policy** if they are grieving the loss of a child under 18 or our **Pregnancy Loss Policy** if relevant
- Discuss with them when it's appropriate to return to work
- Consider any adjustments that may be needed on their return to work such as a phased return or temporary change of duties
- Signpost them to the relevant support if they need it. This **handy guide** has all of our other wellbeing support that they can access as a Co-op colleague.
- Take bereavement into account if there is an impact on performance
- Be aware of any changes in personal circumstances such as increased caring responsibilities
- Be aware that any special dates such as inquests, birthdays or anniversaries of the death may have an impact on your colleague. Make a note in your diary so you remember for future years.
- Different cultures/faiths have different responses and rituals when a death occurs. Check with your employee about what this means in terms of their specific needs and support.
- Remember that the full impact of a bereavement may not be felt until sometime after a death - have regular conversations
- Consider the impact on other members of the team
- Supporting people who have been bereaved can be tough, so seek support yourself if you need it.

Co-op Policies and Considerations

Compassionate Leave Policy

We have a Policy to support all our colleagues affected by bereavement and who need time off work. You can read the policy on our [Co-op Colleague Site](#).

There are a few important things to mention about our Co-op Compassionate Leave Policy that you need to know as a manager:

- We don't place restrictions on the type of relationship a person had with the person who died to be able to access compassionate leave
- The closeness of the relationship the colleague had with the deceased should be the primary factor in deciding how much time a person may need off work
- We will always support at least one days paid leave for the funeral of a dependant and this is a legal requirement for us as an employer
- We encourage managers to respect different religious practices
- As a guide we will usually agree five days paid leave compassionate leave but acknowledge the fact that some situations may need more or less. As a manager it is your role to talk to your colleague about what they need and how you can offer support

If you're supporting a colleague who has been affected, you will need to familiarise yourself with the policy as well as reading this guide.

Any colleague who reads our Compassionate Leave Policy will be encouraged to speak to their manager. It is important that you feel confident and prepared for any conversation and that is what this guide is for. Don't underestimate the positive impact that you can have as a line manager when supporting someone with their experience.

Parental Bereavement Policy

If your colleague has lost a child under 18 you would both need to read the Parental Bereavement Policy as their entitlement to time off work is different. In this situation colleagues are entitled to four weeks fully paid leave.

Pregnancy Loss Policy

If your colleague has experienced the loss of a pregnancy under 24 weeks gestation you would need to both read the Pregnancy Loss Policy. Entitlement within this policy is similar in approach to the core Compassionate Leave Policy.

Considerations

There are a few practical considerations that may be helpful to bear in mind when supporting a colleague through a bereavement: -

- Any time off work whether paid or unpaid should be recorded under the compassionate leave paycode in MyHR or Kronos
- Any time off work connected to compassionate leave would NOT be counted towards any absence triggers as it is not classed as sickness
- Most people experiencing bereavement don't become unwell as a consequence, but some people may become unwell following a bereavement. If this happens you would need to manage absence through the usual absence management processes and not through compassionate leave. This is because we want to make sure colleagues are getting the right support for their situation.

It is common to feel uncomfortable about what to say when someone you know has been recently bereaved. It is normal to worry about saying the wrong thing.

There are lots of things that you can do however as a manager to make it easier for you and any member of your team if they are affected by the death of someone close to them.

Acknowledge the Loss

It can feel uncomfortable to talk about death in the workplace and with people you may not know well. It is a deeply personal experience. But it's important to acknowledge what has happened and say you're sorry for their loss. Reassure them that the Co-op is committed to supporting them through their experience. At an appropriate point, ask them what they need but be aware that they may not know immediately. A simple acknowledgement of how difficult this must be will go a long way.

Listen and Respond

As a manager, you're more likely to understand what your colleague needs if you can listen carefully to what they choose to share and respond sensitively. The way you listen and respond will affect how much they tell you and how comfortable they feel about telling you more. Even if you've experienced a loss yourself, their experience may be very different. The suggestions below may help: -

- Find a place where you can both comfortably talk confidentially
- Avoid interruptions and distractions, e.g. phones, colleagues interrupting
- Allow enough time for the conversation
- Don't interrupt or impose your opinions or ideas
- Show empathy and understanding. Don't make assumptions about what they're experiencing or try and guess how it will affect their work
- Follow their lead in terms of the language they use to describe their loss
- Speak calmly and make eye contact
- Grieving can impact someone's ability to process information so be prepared to repeat things and to leave silences, so they have time to respond
- Ask simple, open questions. Let them explain in their own words. Give them time and be prepared for some silences or to repeat yourself

- Offer comfort and support. The most important thing you can do is to acknowledge what has happened. It doesn't have to be anything complicated or profound. Try not to worry about saying the wrong thing. The feeling will come across and it's more important that you say something than that you find the perfect words

"I'm sorry for your loss."

I'm sad to hear this and I am here if you need to talk."

I don't know what to say but I will be here if you need me

"Please let me know if there is anything you need."

Watchouts

These are some things we say that you might think would help – but usually don't. They tend to be things that try to 'look on the bright side' or start with 'at least'. Most people feel this diminishes the importance of this loss and how they might be feeling. When we are unsure of what to say we tend to fall back on cliché but this is generally not helpful.

"At least they had a good innings"

"They're in a better place"

"It was probably for the best"

"It must be a great relief for you"

"Everything happens for a reason."

"I know how you feel"

Encourage Conversations

If you're not sure how to start a conversation, use the questions below to get you started.

"How are you coping?"

"What, if anything, would you like colleagues/the team to know?"

"Do you need any time off work?"

"Have you seen our Co-op policies?"

"What do you think would help you right now?"

"What other support do you have?"

"How would you like me to keep in touch while you are away?"

"Is there anything you need me to find cover for, so you are not worrying while you are off?"

"Do you know how to access the wellbeing support the Co-op offers?"

Respect Confidentiality

Your colleague might not want others in the team to know what has happened. Ask them what, if anything, they would like to share with colleagues. They have a right to keep things private if they choose. Respect their wishes.

Create a supportive environment

One of the most important things that you can do is to be approachable and have the knowledge to respond appropriately and offer the right support for your colleague should they need it.

It's important to share any relevant information or policies with your colleague. Choose a time when they're not too emotional to take in the information. Remember that grief can make it more difficult for people to concentrate and take on board information. It might help to print off the policies and talk it through together. Don't overwhelm them with too much information at any one time. Maybe cover some and then have another conversation later.

Make sure they know who else they can talk to, share the details of the [Wellbeing Hub](#) with them and let them know they can access Lifeworks, our employee assistance programme, at any time by calling **0800 069 8854**. It may also help to share the details of other organisations that can help such as information about [Cruse bereavement care](#).

Support Time off if needed

Many people, but not all, will need some time off work. Some will need more time off than others. Depending on their individual circumstances some may need time off immediately and some later. Our Co-op policy is designed to be flexible enough for managers to respond to individual colleague's needs. Use your discretion to decide what is right for the individual's situation and circumstance. As a guide, we would generally recommend giving up to 5 days compassionate paid leave – but some situations may need more, or less. When recording an absence for compassionate leave please use the specific compassionate leave paycode in MyHR or Kronos. Remember this type of absence does NOT count towards absence triggers.

Consider the return to work

Returning to work after the death of someone close may be overwhelming. Your colleague may feel anxious about what colleagues will say or be uncertain about returning to 'normal' life. Death isn't always easy to leave in the past, everyone is different and it can be more challenging for some people. No matter how somebody initially coped with the loss, feelings of grief, anger, jealousy, guilt or sadness can come sometimes without warning, long after the loss itself.

A good starting point for discussing the return to work with your colleague would be to begin with the questions below. Their answers will give you an idea of whether you may need to consider making any reasonable adjustments for their return.

"Is there anything I/we can do to make coming back to work easier for you?"

"Would you like to meet up before coming back?"

"Is there anything you are worried about?"

"What kind of support do you think might help if you become upset or tearful at work?"

If you think that your colleague will need any adjustments to their role, it would be good practice to carry out a risk assessment and work together on a Wellbeing Action Plan. You can read more about Wellbeing Action Plans and download a template through our [Mental Health Policy](#).

Think about the nature of the work they will be going back to and the impact that and the environment might have on them particularly if they work in Funeralcare and are supporting others with grief and bereavement.

Note that some people will be keen to continue or return to work as it is a familiar place and apart from the bereavement. They may find comfort in the familiar routine, so don't discourage them unless you have concerns.

How grief may affect colleagues at work

The impact of bereavement on an individual can be very varied, including:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Finding it difficult to concentrate or to feel motivated
- Struggling with social interaction
- Experiencing mood swings
- Feeling more tearful and/or irritable and or finding it difficult to manage their mental health
- Need to adapt to practical changes e.g., childcare

Any of these may affect your colleague's ability to manage in a work environment, such as:

- Absence - need time off unexpectedly, practical arrangements, additional caring responsibilities, feeling unable to return to work
- Sickness - anxiety, depression, mental/emotional/physical consequences
- Availability - changes in the home routines may lead to a requirement to reduce/change hours of working or need greater flexibility, work from home
- Performance - Employees may work less quickly, make more mistakes. Presenteeism can "cost" more than absenteeism. Difficulties coping with deadlines, pressure to deliver

Keep the lines of communication open so that you can make sure your colleague has the right support in place to help them manage their work. Depending on their role, you may also need to consider if there are any health and safety implications for the bereaved person performing their job, e.g. if it has impacted their emotional state or ability to concentrate etc.

When a colleague dies

We know that the death of a colleague may be one of the most difficult things you and your colleagues may ever have to go through. You may also need to be in contact with the deceased's next of kin. If this is a situation you are facing there are a number of things below that we think it would be useful for you to know and do.

- Read the managers guide to [Managers Guide to Death in Service](#)
- Let people at work know the person has died, with care and empathy
- Offer support to colleagues affected by the death (signpost them to coop.co.uk/griefsupport)
- Share with staff how they can offer condolences.
- Share details of the funeral /ceremony, if staff have been invited
- Offer condolences to the person's family or next of kin and discuss with them what you share with staff about the death
- Talk to your colleagues regularly to find out how they are coping
- If appropriate you might consider ways of marking and remembering the staff member who died, e.g., book of condolences, fundraising event etc.

Prioritise your own wellbeing

It may go without saying but as a manager supporting someone else when they are grieving can be difficult. It may bring back thoughts of your own experiences of loss, so it is important to make sure that you are also looking after yourself.

If you need more support you can find out more about what is available to support your wellbeing by visiting the [Wellbeing Hub](#).

Key contacts

Employee Assistance Programme

0800 069 8854

open 24 hours a day

Cruse Bereavement Care

www.cruse.org.uk

Support for children, young people and adults

0808 808 1677

Monday and Friday 9.30am to 5pm

Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday 9.30am to 8pm

(excluding bank holidays)

Saturday & Sunday 10am-2pm

Grief Support

<https://www.coop.co.uk/griefsupport>

Wellbeing Hub

Bereavement Advice Centre

Practical help when you need it most

0800 634 9494

Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm

You can also access **GP support** through **Smart Health**, the Co-op's virtual health service, which offers free & confidential GP appointments to all colleagues and their dependants. You can call them to book an appointment on **020 3499 0167** - you'll need to have the policy code LG012363 to hand to book

This **handy guide** has all of our other wellbeing support that you can access as a Co-op colleague.

working in partnership with:

