



Managing bereavement in the workplace

A good practice guide



Managing bereavement in the workplace – a good practice guide

This good practice guide, published by the Agency, closely follows the guidance in Great Britain developed by Acas (the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service) in partnership with Cruse Bereavement Care, the UK's largest bereavement charity and the helpful involvement of many other organisations.

Legal information is provided for guidance only and should not be regarded as an authoritative statement of the law, which can only be made by reference to the particular circumstances which apply. It may, therefore, be wise to seek legal advice.

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Introduction

Grief impacts on the emotional, physical, spiritual and psychological wellbeing of the person who is bereaved. At any time, one in 10 employees is likely to be affected (McGuinness, 2009). Whilst this is an intensely personal experience, a compassionate and flexible approach from employers can ensure that the impact on both the individual and the organisation is minimised. This guidance aims to help employers manage this difficult situation through appropriate and sensitive discussions with their employee, both in the immediate aftermath of bereavement and in the longer term.

Bereavement in the workplace can be challenging to manage: employees may need to take time off unexpectedly; find their performance is impacted, or be temporarily unable to perform certain roles. However a compassionate and supportive approach demonstrates that the organisation values its employees, helps build commitment, reduces sickness absence, and retains the workforce (HM Government, 2010).

Grief does not have predicted stages and phases. Everyone reacts differently to bereavement, and this should be understood and respected by both employers and colleagues.

What the law says

Article 85(A) of the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 gives a “day one” right for an employee to have ‘reasonable’ time off work to deal with an emergency, such as a bereavement involving a dependant. This could be a spouse, partner, child, grandchild, parent, or someone who depends on the employee for care. ‘Reasonable’ is not defined and will depend on the situation. An employer does not have to pay an employee for this time away from work but many employers offer paid special or compassionate leave.

Equality legislation in Northern Ireland protects employees with protected characteristics from unlawful discrimination. When dealing with requests for leave employers must ensure that they do not treat some employees less favourably than others because of a protected characteristic (see page 10).

Employees experiencing mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, which can be as a consequence of bereavement, may be considered disabled in some cases and then the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 requires employers to make reasonable adjustments for these employees to remove workplace barriers (see page 10).

An employee may be entitled to special or compassionate leave under their contract of employment. The Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development research suggests that, in general, most employees are given five days paid leave to deal with emergencies.

Female employees who suffer a stillbirth after 24 weeks are entitled to up to 52 weeks statutory maternity leave and/or pay. Similarly the subsequent death would not affect the mother's entitlement to maternity leave.

An employer has a duty of care to employees generally and should take into account the effect bereavement might have on the employee in undertaking their duties.

Good practice when managing bereavement in the workplace

Grief impacts on almost every aspect of the bereaved person's life. It can interfere with their thought processes, concentration and sleep patterns at a time when they may need to make important decisions. Fatigue, anxiety and mood swings are common. Knowing that they are supported by their employer can help to minimise the employee's stress levels and reduce or avoid periods of sick leave.

Employers can prepare for managing bereavement in the workplace by having a clear bereavement policy, see Annex 1 and by training managers, HR teams and selected staff to have compassionate and effective conversations with bereaved employees. It is good practice to involve trade unions or staff representatives in developing a bereavement policy.

Bereavement – dealing with the notification, and the immediate aftermath, of death

Whilst there is some key information managers will need to ask a bereaved person, it is important to recognise that they may be feeling numb or distressed during this initial conversation, and may not be able to take in or provide much information. A follow-up call or email may be appropriate. A calm, empathetic approach in all communications from managers will ensure employees feel supported, and minimise their anxiety about returning to work.

In the early days of an employee's bereavement, it is good practice for a manager to:

- Offer their condolences.
- Ensure the bereaved employee knows they are not expected to work on the day the death has taken place. They need to hear that work comes second and that they must take what time out is needed.
- Begin a dialogue with the employee, asking how they would like to stay in contact. Is phone or email contact preferred? Are there particular times to avoid? Be aware that in the first few days, they may not wish to speak to anyone as they may be in shock. Be careful not to pressurise the employee into making decisions at this point.
- Ask how much information they wish their co-workers to have about the death and remember that this information is private under data protection legislation and to stick strictly to the facts.
- Consider what action needs to be taken if the death is in the media; particularly if the press contact the workplace or approach co-workers for interview.
- Ask if the employee wishes to be contacted by colleagues.
- Be conscious of diversity within the workforce and the impact this may have on, for example, days taken to allow the employee to fulfil religious or cultural expectations such as mourning rituals.
- Be open to revising and reviewing the situation with the employee. Keep the dialogue open.

A conversation about when the employee anticipates returning to work may not be appropriate in the first days of bereavement. However it is important to start a dialogue which will allow an open discussion around how the employee is coping, the employer's policy on bereavement, when they might be ready to return to work, and any adjustments that might help with this (eg phased return).

Remember – every bereavement is different: some employees may feel able to return to work very swiftly, whilst others may need more time. The relationship with the person who died, and the circumstances of the death will all have an impact on the employee, particularly if the death was sudden or traumatic. It is often difficult for bereaved employees to judge how they will feel in the workplace, and a swift return to work does not necessarily mean that an employee will not need support.

Anne's husband died suddenly of a heart attack early in the morning. She was expected to be chairing a meeting that same day. She was able to contact her line manager who assured her that she didn't need to worry about work and asked her what she would like her co-workers to know regarding her husband's death.

Over the next few days, her line manager spoke with Anne over the phone and reassured her that her workload would be dealt with by other members of staff. The manager sent a condolence card on behalf of the organisation and agreed to speak with Anne after the funeral to discuss how she was doing and anything the organisation could do to offer support and make the return to work easier.

Anne felt that she had been listened to and her bereavement recognised. Regular contact followed after the funeral and until such time as she was able to return to work.

Managing bereavement and returning to work

There are likely to be ups and downs, as the bereaved person adjusts to life without the person they lost. The full emotional impact of the bereavement may not be felt for some time after a death.

Regular reviews will allow the manager and the bereaved employee to discuss and agree any strategies or adjustments which may be needed to enable them to return to work and to support them in the workplace after their return. This might lead to a temporary or long-term change in, for example, hours or responsibilities. In the case of larger organisations, a referral to the employee assistance programme might be appropriate. Other organisations should consider referral or signposting to an external organisation for bereavement counselling. It should be clear to the employee who in the organisation they should talk to if they need additional support.

Particular care should be taken where the work itself involves dealing with death or bereavement eg those working in palliative care. The bereaved employee may find that their capacity for working resiliently may be reduced by a personal experience of loss.

Special or significant days, such as the inquest, anniversary of the death, or the birthday of the person who died, can also be particularly difficult times for bereaved people. Sensitivity around these times, particularly when considering requests for specific days off, will help employees to manage their grief.

Over a year, a bereaved employee may breach company sickness limits. Employers should consider whether it is appropriate to exclude some or all of the time off associated with the bereavement. Similarly, it would be good practice to take the bereavement into account should there be an impact on any aspect of the employee's work or performance irrespective of any ongoing issues between the employer and employee

Mala is 24 and works for a clothing retailer. Her twin brother died eight months ago. Initially Mala felt she was coping well and she returned to work full-time shortly after the funeral. Mala is now finding things increasingly difficult and her manager Gloria notices that she is making more mistakes on the tills and is snapping at customers.

Gloria asks Mala for an informal chat to discuss how she's coping. Mala explains that her birthday is the following week and this will be the first one without her brother. She asks if she can have the day off, but all leave needs to be booked well in advance, and as it is a Saturday, the busiest day in the shop, Gloria explains that she will not be able to spare her.

Later Gloria looks at the rota again, and is able to reconfigure the shifts so that Mala has the day off. Talking together about this, they also agree that Mala will swap to stockroom duties for the next ten days, as she feels she will be okay to be in work, but might find dealing with customers hard. At this stage, Gloria gently asks if there are any other dates coming up which Mala might find difficult to be at work, and they book in annual leave for the anniversary of the death. Mala feels supported by her boss and has a renewed level of loyalty to the company.

Bereavement will frequently lead to changes in the personal and financial circumstances of the bereaved employee. An employee who loses their partner, for example, becomes responsible for raising their children as a single parent. An employee whose sibling dies may take on caring responsibilities for an elderly parent. Any death which affects children or vulnerable adults will mean they need increased support from the people who care for them. Bereaved children's needs can emerge months or even years after the death, as they understand more about what they have lost and face more changes in their life.

Employers need to be mindful of the family unit of the bereaved, and appreciate that in many cases, a flexible approach for example, offering part-time hours, or flexible working is most likely to support and retain the employee, and minimise sick days, as they negotiate new or increased caring responsibilities (HM Government, 2010). For more information on flexible working, go to [The Right to request flexible working](#)

Colin had been with the company for 12 years but his job was both stressful and demanding. He approached his boss to explain that his wife Mary's health was deteriorating and that he needed to spend more time with Mary and care for her and their two children. He asked his boss if he would consider offering him a few days work a month on a contract basis as this would allow him to work part-time from home without giving up work altogether, which financially the family could not afford.

His boss listened attentively and showed great empathy for Colin's situation. Colin's boss arranged for him to work from home and reduce his hours. This enabled the family to spend time together until Mary's death. Afterwards Colin continued on this basis, providing a sense of stability for the children as the family grieved, until the family felt ready for him to return to full-time employment. It was agreed that he would start half an hour later in the mornings so he could continue to take the children to school.

Both the company and Colin gained from this arrangement as Colin was able to continue working.

When a child dies

For parents, the loss of a child will be devastating and employers will need to recognise that the whole family will be affected. For example, is the employee a single parent, was the child an only child or are there siblings involved? The answers to these questions may influence how much support from the workplace is needed. A single parent with other children to attend to will possibly need more flexibility (eg time off, flexible working etc) in order to return to full-time work. Some bereaved parents may need a longer term change in their working hours.

A couple grieving over the death of a child may also need flexibility regarding their work hours especially if one parent is not coping as well as the other. They may need to leave the workplace at short notice to support their partner.

Sanjay works for an IT support company. He and his wife Richa have two small children. Their third child, Anil, is born with serious heart defects and survived for three weeks before he died in hospital. Sanjay's line manager Andre feels under pressure, as Sanjay has been away from the office and things are piling up. He tells Sanjay that apart from three days compassionate leave, any extra time off will now have to be taken as 'holiday'.

Sanjay returns to work but on several occasions in the following weeks he is very late for work, or leaves early. Clients are beginning to complain. In a review meeting Sanjay explains to Andre that Richa is struggling to cope with her grief and that his older daughter has started refusing to go to school. He has not kept Andre informed because he did not feel the company was supportive of his bereavement.

Andre talks things through with Sanjay. They agree that Sanjay will work from home, and will switch to the later shifts, as Richa finds it hardest in the mornings. Later that year, the couple decide to split up, and Sanjay is awarded joint custody of the children. Andre agrees Sanjay can work flexible hours, so he has more time with the children on the days they stay with him.

When a colleague dies

In some situations a death can have an impact on a number of employees or across the whole workforce. Examples are where a co-worker has died, where the death occurred at or near the place of work, and where a number of the dead person's family or friends are employed at the same place of work.

The principles of flexibility and empathy outlined above still very much apply but there may be increased impact on the organisation and the way it is dealt with can have long-lasting implications (positive or negative) on the relations between the employer, the workforce and the wider community.

Communicating the news of the death to other employees is key and the method of communication should be personal and sensitive. There may be areas of the organisation, for example the team where the person who died worked, that are particularly affected and they may need more support.

The employer should contact the family to offer condolences, and agree a point of contact for any questions they may have – for example, about pay, or pension arrangements. Practical points like books of condolence and attendance at the funeral should be considered by managers and clearly communicated to the wider workforce. There may be appropriate ways of commemorating the person who has died and of marking key dates; the family should be consulted about these. How an organisation deals with events such as this will usually define their culture and the attachment that employees generally have to the organisation.

Andrea, a team leader at a cleaning company, was killed in a road crash driving home from work. The managing director, Peter, received a call from one of Andrea's close friends, a co-worker during that evening in a very distressed state.

Although Peter was shaken himself, he spoke to members of Andrea's team as soon as they arrived at work and then called all the staff together to tell them personally what had happened, express his condolences to Andrea's friends and colleagues, and explain how the company would be supporting Andrea's family and affected employees. He allowed members of Andrea's team to go home early if they wished – most declined as they found it helpful to be together even though they were not able to focus well on work.

Peter set up a small group of employees to help the organisation through the situation. Key customers who might be affected were contacted and proved very supportive. Other teams in the business stepped in to take on some of the work of Andrea's team. Peter spoke to Andrea's family to express his condolences and to ensure that the company observed their wishes for the funeral. As a mark of respect the company closed for two hours on the morning of the funeral so that everyone who wanted to could attend.

Over time Peter noticed that his relationship with many employees had changed. They were happier to approach him directly with thoughts and ideas and despite losing a close colleague their motivation seemed very good and productivity was up. There were still difficult days but overall the business had gained in standing and reputation from the way it had reacted to a terrible situation.

Avoiding discrimination and addressing bullying

Employers should consider any request for time off in connection with bereavement from an employee in a reasonable and objective manner.

Discrimination on the grounds of religious belief

The Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, as amended, protects employees from discrimination because of their religion or belief and recent decisions of the Courts mean that employers should try and accommodate religious beliefs and customs where it would be reasonable and practicable to do so. Many religions have bereavement requirements and employers should carefully consider these against the business reasons for not observing the belief or custom.

Joe tells his employer that his father has died and he requires the following day off to attend the funeral. As an observant Jew, he is expected to stay at home and mourn for seven days, as a requirement of his faith. The employer allows time off for the funeral but refuses Joe's request for seven days mourning because he considers the notice inadequate and would be unable to rearrange Joe's work duties. Unless the employer can objectively justify this decision, it may amount to indirect religious discrimination under the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, as amended.

Discrimination because of disability

For some employees, the effects of loss and grief can amount to a disability (*eg depression*) where the effects are long term (generally defined as lasting or likely to last over a year) and the impact affects the employee's ability to undertake day-to-day activities. An employee with a disability has the right to reasonable adjustments and their employer will need to take reasonable actions to reduce or remove the effect of the impairment on the employee at work.

Employers should ensure their employees are aware of disability and be alert to recognise it, especially when performance or absence of a bereaved employee becomes unacceptable over the longer term for no other apparent reason.

Angela, a manager, is interviewing one of her team, Richard, because of his unacceptable attendance and sickness record. Angela notes from the personal file that Richard's attendance began to deteriorate after the death of his son a year ago. Although the company had given him five days compassionate leave and as much support as was available at that time, he was regularly signed off because of stress and one doctor had diagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Angela realises that Richard may have a disability under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 as PTSD is clearly affecting his normal day-to-day activities. She stops the interview and seeks further information from the company's occupational health doctor. Angela also speaks to other managers in the company who confirm her view and suggest she should be considering reasonable adjustments for Richard rather than an investigatory meeting into his high absence levels.

Angela discusses what could be a suitable adjustment with Richard and agrees to a higher sickness threshold and also to a modified job role which no longer involves driving (Richard has found that he feels worse when he is out of the office and away from colleagues as he has time to dwell on his son's death).

Angela reviews Richard's attendance and wellbeing some months later and whilst he still has bad days, his attendance and reliability have improved and continue to do so.

Addressing bullying

Bullying is defined as unwanted behaviour or conduct which has the purpose or effect of violating an individual's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that individual. If the bullying is related to a protected characteristic then it is harassment.

Employers should be alert to inappropriate behaviour following bereavement. Absence through bereavement can place burdens on co-workers and line managers alike who may pressurise (inadvertently or otherwise) or bully a bereaved employee into returning to work or performing their duties to the same level as they did before the death.

The intentions of the bully do not matter – what is important is the impact that the behaviour has on the employee who is being bullied.

Rouji works on a telephone helpline and recently lost her mother. On her return from bereavement leave she is finding it hard to cope at work: she is struggling to reach her targets for calls answered and sometimes leaves the room visibly upset.

Brandon, the manager, notices that the staff are unhappy at what they see as “carrying Rouji”, an attitude reinforced by the vocal views of her supervisor who has been overheard saying “she should get a grip, when my mother died, I found work a relief, look at the problems she is causing us.”

Rouji has noticed the shaking heads of colleagues and their “tuts” when she leaves the room and this is adding to her distress.

Although Brandon recognises the burden on the team, the company has a policy of not tolerating bullying and harassment. Brandon tells the supervisor to stop this behaviour and let it be known that staff may face disciplinary action if this unwanted behaviour continues. At the same time he sees if a temporary worker can be deployed until Rouji is able to reach her performance targets.

Frequently asked questions

Q. My employee has told me that their relative has been diagnosed with a life-limiting illness. What should I do?

A. As with bereavement, everyone will respond differently to a diagnosis of a life-limiting illness (sometimes called a 'terminal' illness). The impact on the employee, and on their practical and financial concerns, can be similar to bereavement, and should not be underestimated. In addition to employees' right to 'reasonable' time off to deal with emergency situations, it is good practice for employers to follow the guidance on page 3, opening a dialogue and taking a compassionate, flexible approach. This means holding regular reviews with the employee to check how they are coping, and facilitating time off when needed through flexible working, annual leave, special/compassionate leave or a career break. (NB where the employee needs to take leave, they should be offered a choice between using annual leave and unpaid leave.) Your organisation may have a flexible working policy which will give further guidance on this.

Employees who take leave to care for someone who is dying are still likely to need support after the death.

Q. Should employees be given paid bereavement leave?

A. It is good practice to offer employees some paid leave after a bereavement.

Leave entitlement should be clearly set out in your organisation's bereavement policy. Some employers may choose to offer different amounts of leave depending on who has died (more days for a child than for a grandparent, for example) whilst others may prefer to have a set number of days for any significant bereavement. Managers should be flexible when applying the policy.

The physical and emotional impact of grief may mean that some bereaved employees become unwell and are unable to be at work for a period after bereavement. As a result they may take time off sick. Some bereaved employees may need additional time away from work to cope with their grief, make practical arrangements, or to support a bereaved child. In cases where the employee feels they need time away from work but where sick leave is not appropriate, it would be good practice to offer an alternative, for example flexible or part-time working, or a period of special leave or a career break. This can be paid or unpaid.

Q. In the year after their bereavement, my employee has taken more than the normal or trigger number of sick days. Should I start disciplinary action?

A. It is good practice to take bereavement into consideration when looking at absence rates. If you notice continued absence then a discussion between you and the employee would be helpful as bereavement affects physical as well as emotional health. If after a period of time you are unable to allow further absence then you should let the employee know and the effect this could have on their employment.

Q. Could it be considered discrimination if I don't allow a bereaved employee time off to attend a funeral? What if the funeral is abroad?

A. Funeral requirements vary across cultures, and some communities may require that these are carried out promptly. Refusing to allow an employee to attend religious rites after a death could be considered indirect religious discrimination. It is good practice to accommodate requests to attend funeral rites wherever possible.

Where a funeral is abroad it would be good practice to accommodate time off for travel where the employer can accommodate this absence. This can be as paid or unpaid leave. Sometimes an employee may wish to supplement bereavement/compassionate leave with further unpaid or annual leave, where you allow this, you should let the employee choose between either unpaid or annual leave.

Q. One of my employees has been bereaved. What should I say to the rest of the team?

A. Bereavement is a personal issue and employees have the right to keep this confidential under data protection legislation. Good practice would be to speak with your employee and ask them what they would like their colleagues to be told. If you can't contact them, then say as little as possible to the team. It may be appropriate to explain their absence by referring to 'personal reasons' or at most 'bereavement'. The employee can decide how much they want their colleagues to know at a later point.

If a bereaved employee is worried about how they will be treated by colleagues on their return to work, ask them what would help, and offer to share this with the wider team. For example, some employees may ask that no one mentions the bereavement, but instead keeps things focused on work matters. Others will appreciate gestures of empathy and support.

Q. If I give my employee time off for their bereavement, does it mean I'll have to give all my employees the same allowance?

A. It is good practice to have a bereavement policy that clearly outlines what all employees are entitled to. However, every bereavement is different, and there may be exceptional circumstances in different cases. Each bereavement should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Q. We are a small organisation with no dedicated HR team or employee assistance programme. Where can I get advice or training about what to say, or arrange support for my employee?

A. Cruse Bereavement Care is a national charity offering support to anyone who has been bereaved. Services are free and confidential. For more information go to www.cruse.org.uk/bereavement-at-work

For advice on employment rights and rules, best practice or about a dispute, the Labour Relations Helpline can be contacted on 028 9032 1442

For a directory of end-of-life and bereavement support services, go to <http://help.dyingmatters.org/>

.Helpful links/contacts

Cruse – for employers, Cruse offers training and consultancy on managing bereavement at work, and workplace support after the death of a colleague. For bereaved employees, Cruse offers support through a Network of local services and helpline. For more information please see www.cruse.org.uk/bereavement-at-work

Jacks Rainbow – www.jacksrainbow.com Jacks Rainbow helps families create new memories who have lost a child through sudden and tragic death and provide advice and training to employers and employees

The Dying Matters Coalition aims to raise public awareness about the importance of talking more openly about dying, death and bereavement. Dying Matters has produced a wide range of information about end of life issues www.dyingmatters.org

Child Bereavement UK produces guidance for employees and employers on returning to work. <http://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

Macmillan Cancer Support have comprehensive information and guidance for employers about cancer and bereavement at work. www.macmillan.org.uk/Cancerinformation/Livingwithandaftercancer/Workandcancer/SME/Bereavement.aspx

Little Hearts Matter – www.lhm.org.uk.

References

Breffni McGuinness MA (2009) Grief in the workplace, Bereavement Care, 28:1, 2-8, DOI: 10.1080/02682620902746037

HM Government (2010) - Recognised, valued and supported: Next Steps for the Carers Strategy. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/recognised-valued-and-supported-next-steps-for-the-carers-strategy>

Annex 1

An employer may use the following policy as a checklist where they intend to use existing policies (such as attendance and flexible working policies) to cover bereavement. It is good practice to involve Trade Unions or staff representatives in developing a bereavement policy.

Draft Bereavement Policy

[Name of Organisation] acknowledges the personal nature of bereavement and grief and is committed to supporting employees in practical and reasonable ways.

1. Leave entitlements

Paid leave

Bereavement leave is paid leave that allows an employee time off to deal with their personal distress and related practical arrangements, primarily, but not limited to, when a member of their family dies.

[Name of organisation] acknowledges that bereavement impacts all individuals differently and the guidelines below are intended to show the minimum paid leave an employee is entitled to in different circumstances.

[Name of organisation] acknowledges that not all employees will need to take the full allowance, and some employees will need additional time, depending on their relationship with the person who has died and the circumstances of the death.

In the event of the death of an immediate relative, [...] working days paid leave will be granted. An immediate relative includes a spouse, civil partner or partner (including same sex partners),* child,** parent, step-parent, sibling or a person with whom the employee is in a relationship of domestic dependency.

*Spouse also includes a partner with whom the employee is co-habiting, but who is not the employee's legal spouse.

**Child includes children in respect of whom the employee is the adoptive parent and legal guardians and carers. [...] days leave will be allowed on the death of a mother/ father-in-law, grandparents, grandchildren, son/ daughter-in-law.

[...] days of leave will be allowed on the death of an uncle/aunt to facilitate attendance at the funeral.

In exceptional circumstances, [...] to [...] days leave may be granted on the death of someone outside the immediate family. These circumstances would include (but are not limited to) situations where the employee is responsible for funeral arrangements or has to travel abroad to attend the funeral.

An employee should notify their line manager of their need to take leave as soon as possible or, at latest, on the first day of absence. In exceptional circumstances, applications for leave will be considered after the first day of absence. Line managers have the right to exercise discretion in exceptional circumstances as outlined above. Leave days do not have to be taken consecutively.

Annual leave

In the event of a bereavement, an employee will be able to take unpaid leave or annual leave at short notice to supplement their bereavement leave. Requests should be directed to the employee's line manager.

An employee who suffers a family bereavement while on annual leave can convert their annual leave into bereavement leave and take their annual leave at a future date.

Unpaid leave

Unpaid leave on compassionate grounds up to a maximum of [insert period] may be granted after bereavement. An employee must consult with their line manager before starting unpaid leave.

2. Return to work

In certain circumstances a full return to work may not be possible for an employee following the death of an immediate relative – for example, when the employee's grief is likely to impact on their ability to perform their role, or where new child care arrangements have to be sourced or responsibility for the care of an elderly parent has transferred to the employee.

In such instances [Name of Organisation] will allow a phased return to work on a part-time or reduced hours basis where practicable. Alternative duties may also be considered. Any such arrangement would need to be agreed in advance by the line manager, would be subject to an agreed maximum number of days and would be managed in line with [name of organisation] flexible working/part-time working policy.

3. Employee support

[Name of Organisation] acknowledges that bereavement leave is intended to support employees in the immediate period around the death of a relative. However, the process of grief, the natural reaction and adjustment to loss and change may take a significant time and will be personal to each individual.

An employee with any concerns about the grieving process impacting on their work performance should discuss this in confidence with either their line manager or the Human Resources Department, to ensure that any reasonable adjustments that may be necessary are discussed and put in place and that the employee is supported in their return to the full range of duties and responsibilities that they had prior to the bereavement or their duties and responsibilities are adjusted (as necessary) with the prior agreement of line manager.

[Name of Organisation] recognises that the majority of people do not require counselling to cope effectively with their grief. However, for employees wishing to avail themselves of professional help in coming to terms with a significant loss, the organisation will cover the cost of up to [insert number] counselling sessions with an independent counselling practice. This is a confidential service and can be accessed directly through HR or the employee assistance programme.

4. Health and safety

Bereavement can have an impact on concentration, sleep, and decision making.

The health and safety assessment of the workplace will include consideration of the impact of bereavement on employees, their duties and responsibilities, and the context in which they are working, eg do they operate heavy machinery?

Any employee who is concerned about their ability to conduct their duties safely in the weeks following bereavement must discuss this with their line manager.

[Name of Organisation] reserves the right to request an employee to meet the organisation's doctor before resuming full duties.

5. Culture and Diversity

[Name of Organisation] recognises that different cultures respond to death in significantly different ways.

Line managers will check whether the employee's religion or culture requires them to observe any particular practices or make special arrangements which would necessitate them being off work at a particular time. Employees should not assume that their line manager is aware of any such requirements and should draw this to their line manager's attention as soon as possible.

Line managers who are unsure of how to respond to a bereaved employee from a different culture should ask the bereaved employee or someone else from their cultural group about what is appropriate.

This policy was developed from the work of Breffni McGuinness and the Irish Hospice Foundation (2009).

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