

Supporting a colleague with loss

When we think of loss and grief we often think of a loss due to bereavement. This is usually following the loss of a loved one. There can also be difficult circumstances surrounding the loss that may not be known, such as a pregnancy loss, or a death such as suicide that may be difficult for colleagues to share.

There are other losses that may also impact your colleagues such as pet loss, illness/loss of health, divorce, loss of income, transitional losses such as children leaving home, or retirement.

"Most employees in the UK have experienced a bereavement during their career, and 1 in 10 are coping with grief in the workplace at any one time."

Bereavement Policy | A Guide For Employers - Funeral Guide

Anticipatory grief

If a colleague is anticipating the death of a family member, they might start to experience grief before the death happens.

It can be a difficult time that can be emotionally and physically draining. They might be struggling with holding on to some hope that the person won't die but also worrying about what life will be like when they do.

It is hard to predict how a person's illness might progress and it can be very unsettling to not know what will happen next. People may feel like they are on high alert.

Reactions to loss

Some colleagues may prefer to have privacy and deal with their grief on their own. Others may want you to acknowledge their loss and may want to share how they are feeling. It is a unique process for each person and so everyone will respond in their own way.



Grief can impact sleeping, eating, and can affect people's ability to focus and concentrate. Colleagues may not behave in the same way as they did before their loss. They may be less engaged with their work and may appear more withdrawn than usual. Work can also be a welcome distraction for some people and being able to get back to a routine may be helpful.

What can be helpful:

Acknowledge their loss

It can be difficult to know what to say and you may feel uncomfortable talking about a loss, particularly if your colleague gets upset. It is much better to acknowledge their loss than to say nothing. Saying phrases like – “I am so sorry for your loss”, or “I can’t imagine how you must be feeling” shows that you care.

Reaching out

You may prefer to offer emotional support and a listening ear, or perhaps more practical support like sharing their workload or helping them with tasks. If they are not in work, send a card, note or text to let them know you are thinking about them. Include them in invitations to any social events and even if they don’t accept, keep offering the opportunity to stay connected.

Don’t try and fix it

It can be natural to try and make the bereaved person feel better. Sometimes people use clichés to do this like, “Time’s a great healer” or “They had a good life” or “I know how you feel”. Every loss is unique to that person and we can’t imagine what their loss means for them without asking.

Try to understand

People grieve in very different ways and so it can be difficult to understand how someone else might be reacting. Don’t assume that you understand, even if you have had a similar experience, instead approach the conversation with curiosity and openness to allow your colleague to express how they feel.



sadness
grief
lonely
depression
worried
loss
sorrow
despair
frustration
loneliness
emotional
thoughtful
pensive
young
suicidal
pain
women
emotion
female
alone
sad
drama
relationship
depressed
contemplation
miserable
together
concept
breakup
life
adult
stress
regret
hopelessness
thinking
mental
issues
person
dark
family
disappointment
conflict
face
unhappy
serious
anxiety
teen
illness
solitude
loneliness
headache
abuse
expression
teenager
mature
problems
frustration
pressure
problem
people
girl