

# Managing grief in the workplace

Finding guidance on how to support  
colleagues coping with bereavement



# Supporting bereaved colleagues... five thoughts to bear in mind

Different people react to grief in different ways, and it's important that employers and managers should never assume that they know what a particular employee might be going through after a bereavement. It's equally important to let the employee know you're thinking about them and care about their wellbeing – even if you're unsure what the best way is to go about this.

Expert guidance on supporting employees is now available from a number of sources, and you may consider investing in some training to help your managers to provide sensitive and effective support. We've included some contact details in this short guide – but to help you start thinking about the kind of support that's most valuable to grieving colleagues, it's worth keeping the following points in mind:

## **1 Don't assume back to work is back to normal**

Although there may be different stages within the grieving process, it's never helpful to think in terms of a period of time after which an affected person 'gets over' a bereavement. A person which returning to work shouldn't be thought of as having 'recovered' or even come to terms with how they're feeling. The process isn't linear, and anything from a random thought to a seemingly unconnected event can re-intensify grieving almost without warning.

## **2 It's fine to say that you don't know what to say**

Don't make the fact that you're unsure what to say to a bereaved employee become a reason for saying nothing at all. Grief counsellors tend to be quite frank about this understandable difficulty in finding the right words, using phrases along the lines of "I don't know what to say, just know that I care and I'm here if you want to talk."

## **3 Don't be tempted to get the conversation 'over with'**

Employers or managers may feel a sense of relief after first broaching the subject of an employee's bereavement with them, but this shouldn't mean that it can never be mentioned again. It's important to put time aside regularly to check in with affected employees just to ask how they're feeling and whether anything can be done to help them.

## **4 Have a policy, but be flexible**

It can be reassuring for employees to see that the business has a policy allowing a minimum amount of leave for employees who are grieving, and setting out the type of support it can offer. But this should not be set in stone. People don't go through identical emotions or experience uniform stages within the process of grieving, so it's important to personalise support according to need without comparing one person to another.

## **5 Recognise that grief isn't just for close family**

We can't attempt to measure one person's friendships against another's, or to calibrate the scale of their grieving according to how closely related they were to the person who has been lost. Again, it's important to be flexible in the amount of support or time away from the workplace each individual may need.

# Where to find support

## Training for your leaders, managers and HR staff

### **Cruse Bereavement Care**

At Aviva, we work with this specialist training and consultancy provider to help our people to understand effective and sympathetic ways to interact with bereaved colleagues.

## Assistance for employees affected by grief

### **Your workplace benefits provider**

Your provider should be able to help you with a range of wellbeing services supplied as part of your benefits package, including access to expert support for colleagues coping with bereavement.

### **Care First**

Although it's essential that bereaved employees feel able to talk over their feelings with colleagues, you may also want to consider providing access to a dedicated bereavement helpline. This could be as part of an insurer-provided workplace benefits package, or through your employee assistance programme. Aviva works with employee Care First to offer this facility as part of our Group Life cover.

### **Grief Encounter**

It's important to consider the support we can offer employees' families, as well as the employees themselves. At Aviva we work with Grief Encounter, an organisation specialising in supporting bereaved children and young people.

### **NHS**

Supportive information on the symptoms of bereavement and loss are available on the NHS website, as well as guidance on the stages of grief and suggestions on actions which affected people can take.

### **Ataloss.org**

A signposting website for people who have been bereaved, with links to counselling helplines, group discussions and bereavement resources.

### **The Good Grief Trust**

A voluntary organisation helping people to get in touch with local and national support groups.