

Manager's Guide to Supporting Someone Bereaved



Suicide&co

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Introduction

1 in 5 of your employees may be affected by suicide. Bereavement is one of the most common factors affecting employees' performance at work, with an estimated 1 in 10 employees affected at any point in time (McGuinness, 2009).

We'll spend 1/3 of our waking hours clocked into the job of our choosing, and none of us are immune to bereavement and the impact of grief and loss. The individuality and unpredictability of grief and the complicated nature of suicide bereavement requires a flexible response from an employer. Approaching these situations with sensitivity, understanding and flexibility can help support a bereaved employee by reducing the anxiety they may have about returning to work and managing their workload, ultimately minimising the impact on the organisation.

Bereavement in all forms can be traumatic, and can affect an employee physically, emotionally, cognitively, socially and practically; however, suicide undoubtedly adds a specific range of emotions to navigate - shock, guilt, shame and isolation to name a few. What grieving employees need is ongoing support and understanding from their managers and colleagues. In the midst of events that can feel totally out of control, a supportive workplace can be an important source of support, structure and 'normality'.

World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that at least 800,000 people die by suicide each year on a worldwide scale. This translates to as many as 108 million people newly exposed to suicide annually (R, O'Connor, 2021). In 2019 (latest robust data due to Covid-19), 5,691 people died by suicide in England and Wales (ONS) and for every person gone, there are said to be 135 suicide survivors and 6 people directly bereaved, meaning the number of people bereaved by suicide a year is at least 34,146.

Hearing the news and how to update your team

If you have heard about your employee's bereavement from another source, when you learn this information, the first thing to do is to make contact with them to give your condolences and to assure them that they do not need to worry or think about work at this time. Please seek guidance from HR around the company's policy on bereavement leave as you prepare for the conversation with the employee. Be aware that they may need longer than the agreed policy before they feel ready to return to work and therefore it is a good idea to have a conversation around flexibility of length of time off, as agreed with HR.

Either yourself or your HR team should make this employee aware of the resources available to them from Suicide&Co and signpost them towards our [Help Hub](#) and our relevant services. Please see our [email templates](#) for guidance on what to say to your employee when they have been bereaved by suicide.

Our Early Bereavement Support and our App, are likely our most relevant resources during this stage. Suicide&Co's Early Bereavement Support is available to anyone who has been impacted by a loss to suicide during the first 6 months following a loss. Our App provides on-demand digital resources that people can access in their own time and in their own space, at any point in time during their grief journey. We can also accept applications for our Counselling Service at any point in time, however we don't start counselling sessions until people have reached at least the 6 month mark following their loss.

It is also important to keep the rest of your team up to date regarding this employee's time off to ensure that colleagues can work together to minimise the bereaved employees workload. Ensure that you respect the bereaved person's privacy and do not share specific details with the wider team if it is not necessary to do so. Consider having a conversation with your bereaved employee first to ask what information they are comfortable sharing with the team.

The topic of suicide often comes attached with stigma leading to awkwardness, and some colleagues and employees in your workplace may be less educated on the subject. It is a good idea to encourage the rest of your team to learn more about suicide and grief to help them understand and support their bereaved colleague. We have resources within our [Understanding Suicide Guide](#) and [Conversation Guide](#) that you can share.

Time off work and how to minimise workload

Sometimes managers may feel uncertain about how best to support a member of their team in the aftermath of a suicide in their personal life. Managers are not expected to be experts on grief or suicide bereavement, but it is important to know that grieving is a process that varies from person to person and therefore the amount of time needed off of work will vary between individuals.

As a manager you can help to support your employee's grieving process by:

- Being aware of the allowances you can make for your employee in the immediate aftermath of the loss, such as time off, funeral attendance, signposting and support.
- Provide clear communications regarding the bereavement policy and ensure your employee that they will be supported on their return to work and their workload will be reviewed.
- Encourage open communication between yourself and the bereaved employee regarding their needs and how these may change - it is important to keep checking in regularly.
- Respect their privacy and understand that they may want to keep information about their bereavement confidential.
- Ensure the rest of the team is up to date about supporting their colleague and taking on extra work while they are on leave.

Managers have the very challenging task of balancing the need to care for and support bereaved employees, whilst making sure that important work gets done. The bereaved employee's ability to concentrate, make decisions, meet deadlines, and maintain performance and productivity levels, can all be at least temporarily compromised. This not only has the potential to have an impact on a bereaved employee's ability to work effectively, but can also have a knock-on effect on other employees, who are often at a loss as to how to respond when a colleague returns to work after bereavement.

Returning to work after you have lost someone to suicide can be difficult and those bereaved by suicide often need longer than what is usually offered as standard bereavement leave, to feel ready to return to their job.

When your bereaved employee is returning to work, the fear of facing colleagues, a loss of confidence, and increased sick leave are factors that can occur. However, there is no doubt that returning to a supportive working environment following bereavement can be an important aspect of a bereaved employee's adjustment to their loss.

Allow them to take breaks if needed and schedule regular meetings with your employee to check in with how they are adjusting on their return to work, to discuss how they feel and to ensure they are not overwhelmed with their workload.

If your employee is the type of person who likes to throw themselves back into work, you should respect their wishes, but make sure to check in with them regularly and let them know that if they change their mind, they can always review their workload.



How to have conversations around suicide bereavement

By the nature of suicide bereavement none of us are ever prepared or know what to say to someone who has been bereaved so it's important to remember that often the person bereaved is struggling too.

Suicide is stigmatised, making it hard to talk about, but the power of conversation is huge so we really do encourage you to have conversations around suicide bereavement, both before and after your bereaved employee returns to work.

It's often not about the exact details of what you say to someone bereaved, but just that you have the conversation, listen non-judgmentally and support them in their grief.

Language:

When someone is bereaved by suicide and you're supporting them you have to learn a new language that you may have no previous knowledge of. New words are forced into your vocabulary and you have to navigate the language that the person bereaved feels most comfortable with.

The word committed, and phrase 'committed suicide' is triggering and outdated. It goes back to a time when suicide was a crime, which is no longer appropriate. We believe that we should all actively avoid using this word and phrase so that it is slowly but surely wiped out from society. However, if you have used it previously or it comes out, don't feel guilty; it's because it's entrenched in society, just actively try to stop using it. It's important that we try to change our language in a supportive way.

The most common phrases that people bereaved like using were 'took their own life' or 'died by suicide'. When supporting someone bereaved you can decide what you feel comfortable saying but also be led by the person bereaved. The person bereaved may not feel comfortable or ready to say the word suicide yet, and therefore they may describe their loved one's death differently, such as saying they 'died from mental illness' until they are ready to use the word suicide; so it is important to respect their language choices.

There is some language that is best to avoid. Don't say 'At least'. For example; 'at least they're in a better place or can't feel the pain'. This is a minimising phrase and is not comforting to those bereaved. Also avoid saying negative words like selfish or cowardly. These are outdated assumptions about suicide that are not appropriate, as we now know more about the reality of mental illness and suicide.



Questions:

When supporting someone bereaved, we believe questions are the key! Starting a conversation can be daunting. If you're starting the conversation to try and support them that is all that matters. Trust that they will know that and if they're not in the right place for this conversation they'll be able to say that, but they will always appreciate you reaching out and trying.

The difficulty with questions is that it can feel awkward as to what to ask, questions like 'how are you?' can seem too vague or offensive as most probably that person isn't ok or you wouldn't be asking! Our biggest tip for the workplace is to break down the questions so that they're not so overwhelming and contextualise the question to the moment, for example: Are you feeling up to this meeting? Is there anything I can do to help you with today? How are you coping with this particular project?

Another good tip is to focus less on feelings and emotions and more on practical subjects- this is particularly helpful in the workplace. For example: Are you feeling on top of your admin? Is there anything I can do to lighten your workload or anything I can take off your plate?

Triggers to be aware of:

There are moments when your bereaved employee will need extra love and care. In these times just do the same as we've been saying; start conversations, ask questions and listen.

Key Annual Dates can be anything from the anniversary of the person's death to Christmas, fathers day/mothers day, birthdays etc. The build up to these events in particular can be really challenging as the anticipation of how they might feel on the day can really trigger strong emotions.

Awareness events such as Mental Health Awareness Week and World Suicide Prevention Day can be big in the workplace, but they could also be triggering for those bereaved by suicide. On these days, suicide and mental health in general is front of mind. Remember to be mindful of your language and the messages you and your workplace are promoting. Check-in with your bereaved employee(s) on these days and let them know that you recognise these days could be triggering and that you are there to provide support.

Suicides are reported in the news a lot when celebrities die by suicide and more so now it is often featured in TV and film. This can sometimes be triggering for those bereaved, so it never hurts to drop them a message and ask how they are, you can even reference the event and say that you were thinking of them and wanted to check in.

Sources:

The Dinner Party, 2021.