

CIPD

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A GUIDE TO COMPASSIONATE BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT

Guide

February 2021

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

Guide

A guide to compassionate bereavement support

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1 Introduction: why act now on bereavement?

- Most people have experienced bereavement at some point, including during their career.
- The impact of COVID-19 has specific challenges and implications for the bereaved.
- Many employees are unaware of any bereavement or compassionate leave policies in their workplace.
- Grief is not linear and does not have predictable stages.
- Bereavement policies and support should be holistic, long term and take into account individual circumstances.

At any time, one in ten employees is likely to be affected by a bereavement (McGuinness 2009¹). Research from the CIPD found that just over half (54%) of employees said that they were aware of their employer having a policy or support in place for employees experiencing bereavement while many were not.² Suffering the loss of a family member, partner or friend can be a devastating experience, and grieving employees need to be treated with the utmost compassion and support in the workplace. Bereaved employees will need time to come to terms with what has happened and will be highly unlikely to be able to perform well at work if they are forced to return too quickly.

Grief is not linear and does not have predictable stages. Employees will react differently to their experiences of bereavement and this should be understood and respected by both employers and colleagues.

That is why it's so vital for organisations to develop, and act on, bereavement policies that offer holistic, long-term support to bereaved employees and that recognise individual circumstances.

Bereavement and the impact of COVID-19

Sadly, in the UK to date, tens of thousands of people have died as a result of COVID-19. This makes it more important than ever for organisations to properly support those experiencing loss and grief, both in the immediate aftermath and in the longer term.

The ongoing impact of the pandemic means that employees will have lost family members, partners and friends. Some employees might also have experienced the loss of co-workers. Much of this loss will be unexpected and shocking.

Due to the infectious nature of the virus, many people will have been unable to have a final conversation with loved ones before death, either in hospitals or care homes or at funerals, where attendance has been severely restricted. Depending on when the bereavement has happened, grieving employees might also be having to deal with a number of COVID-19-related issues in their life, such as being furloughed, being made redundant, returning to the office, or working excessive hours due to front-line/essential work. All of this could exacerbate employees' grief symptoms, which may heighten the need for psychological and emotional support such as counselling and therapy to help them come to terms with what they have experienced. The pandemic is also having an impact on resources, with traditional face-to-face bereavement support unavailable in lockdown and for a considerable period.

It is also worth emphasising that there have been a lot of non-COVID-19 deaths that have happened because of the crisis and are likely to have been equally traumatic.

No matter the cause, it's vital that employers work to provide employees with the support that they need, both in the short and long term.

Bereavement in the workplace

Bereavement in the workplace can be challenging – 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 and is likely to reduce sickness absence and help retain employees. Furthermore, how employees are treated by their employer is likely to have a significant impact on how they handle the bereavement, and how employees feel towards their organisation and their work in general going forward.

Bereavement leave vs Compassionate leave

Often people will use the terms 'bereavement leave' and 'compassionate leave' to mean the same thing. However, **bereavement leave** is specifically when an employee takes time off after the death of a loved one.

Compassionate leave is broader than bereavement leave and can include time off to look after a dependant, or a sick relative, or to deal with challenging personal circumstances.

The purpose of this guidance

This guidance aims to help employers and managers properly support grieving employees by providing compassionate and flexible responses in the immediate aftermath of bereavement and in the longer term. The guide will look at the law relating to bereavement, developing a supportive culture and policy, and the training and support that should be offered to line managers and employees.

2 What you need to know: the law on bereavement and employee rights

- Be knowledgeable about the law and bereavement, including:
 - parental bereavement leave and pay (Jack's Law)
 - emergency time off for family and dependants.
- Address employer health and safety obligations in relation to bereavement.
- Avoid discrimination and address risk of bullying, including:
 - discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief
 - discrimination because of disability
 - monitor behaviour and attitudes that may cause conflict and could amount to bullying, even unintentionally, if not handled properly.

Anyone classed as an employee has the statutory right to time off if:

- their child is stillborn (from 24 weeks of pregnancy) or dies under the age of 18 (parental bereavement leave, known as Jack's Law)
- a 'dependant' dies, for example their partner, parent, child, or someone else who relied on them.

Employees may also have a 'contractual' right to paid special/compassionate leave.

Employers may also decide to allow other workers who are not employees, such as some casual and agency workers, to take compassionate leave, and many employers will allow for this to be paid.

Parental bereavement leave and pay – Jack's Law

On 6 April 2020, legislation known as 'Jack's Law' came into effect. It entitles all employees who lose a child under the age of 18, or whose child is stillborn from 24 weeks of pregnancy, to a statutory minimum of two weeks' leave.

The right to parental bereavement leave (PBL) applies to all employed parents irrespective of how long they have been with their employer (the leave is a 'day one' employment right).

The leave must be taken within 56 weeks of the date of the child's death and can be taken at short notice. The two weeks' leave can be taken either in one block of two weeks, or as two separate blocks of one week. If an employee loses more than one child, they can take a separate period of leave for each child.

Parents with at least 26 weeks' continuous service with their employer and weekly average earnings over the lower earnings limit will also be entitled to Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (SPBP), paid at the statutory rate.

SPBP is administered by employers in the same way as existing family-related statutory payments, such as Statutory Paternity Pay. Employers can recover 92% of the SPBP paid, and those eligible for small employers' relief can reclaim 100% plus a further element, which is currently 3%.

Time off for family and dependants

Employees have the right to take a reasonable amount of unpaid time off work to deal with certain situations affecting their dependants, including making arrangements to deal with unexpected disruption, termination or breakdown of care arrangements for a dependant. This right also covers the death of a dependant, although it is not specifically tailored to deal with that situation.

There is no legal right to be paid for statutory time off for dependants; however, the time should be 'reasonable' ([Acas](#)³). Some employers offer contractual pay and at the CIPD we would strongly recommend that you do so, if you can. The 2018 CIPD *Reward Management* survey found that 72% of employers provided paid leave to all employees who had suffered a bereavement, but this proportion has fallen slightly from previous years⁴.

The CIPD are calling on the Government to introduce bereavement leave and pay to all employees experiencing a close family bereavement. That is the right to two weeks' leave or paid leave, if the recipient is classed as an employee.

The law does not say how much time can be taken off if a dependant dies under these provisions. It simply says the amount should be 'reasonable'. This will vary depending

on an individual's needs and we recommend that employers should be flexible and compassionate in accommodating these needs. The right to time off for dependants is intended to be a brief period for dealing with unexpected logistical issues and emergencies involving the dependant, including leave to arrange or attend a funeral.

Some employees will request the minimum amount of time off work as they will prefer to avoid dealing with their feelings (known as an avoidant coping strategy). While avoiding confronting one's grief may be a helpful short-term strategy, continuous avoidance over the longer term may affect healthy grief adjustment (Stroebe and Schut 2016⁵). Encourage the bereaved employee to talk through the benefits of a balanced approach to taking time off work. However, you need to respect their preferences in their decision-making.

Other leave and flexible working legal provisions

In addition to the above minimum legal measures, employers may provide paid bereavement leave (as mentioned above) or have a compassionate leave policy. Other matters to consider may include unpaid leave, parental leave, flexible working, phased return, part-time working or working from home.

More information on these types of leave and forms of working can be found on the [CIPD website](#).

Health and safety

Bereavement can have a significant effect on a person and their work. Sometimes people are not aware of how the death is affecting them and this has obvious implications for safety-critical jobs. McGuinness (2007)⁶ outlines the tragic example of a pilot who had a 'cockpit incident' – where he suffered a breakdown while attempting to land a plane a couple of days following the burial of his deceased child.

In order to assess the potential impact of bereavement on an employee, you should conduct a health and safety assessment of the workplace; this should include a consideration of the impact of bereavement on the employee, their duties, and the context in which they are working (see further information from [the HSE](#)).

Any employee concerned about their ability to safely conduct their duties following the loss of an immediate relative should discuss this with their line manager (McGuinness 2007⁷).

Avoid discrimination and address bullying

Employers should be aware of, and address, any inappropriate behaviour following bereavement. There is a real need for compassion and support following a bereavement and most would expect empathetic behaviour in the workplace at this time. However, bereavement can be complex to understand and deal with, and can even cause conflict and inappropriate attitudes and behaviour, even unintentionally, if not handled properly.

Employers should consider any request for time off in respect of bereavement from an employee in a reasonable and objective manner. Acas provides helpful [guidance](#) around avoiding discrimination and addressing bullying during bereavement, which is summarised below.

Discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief

The Equality Act 2010 protects employees from discrimination because of their religion or belief. Employers should try and accommodate religious beliefs and customs surrounding bereavement where it is 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. Refusing to allow an employee

to attend religious rites after death, or to grieve in accordance with the demands of their culture, could be considered indirect discrimination. For more information, see the Acas guidance.

Discrimination because of disability

For some employees, the effects of loss and grief can amount to a disability (such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder) where the condition is long term (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. The CIPD has produced [practical guidance](#) with Disability Confident for line managers on managing people with a disability or health condition. See also the CIPD's and Mind's [people managers' guide](#) to mental health.

Bullying and harassment

Bereavement absence can result in stress and extra work for people managers and colleagues. This may lead them to put pressure on, or bully, a bereaved employee into returning to work or performing their duties to the same level as they did before the death. For example, a well-intended manager might encourage a bereaved employee to return to work, thinking that a little pressure to return to work is a good thing. This could be seen as 'unwanted behaviour' by the employee, which falls under the definition of bullying.

Bullying can be defined as '*Offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power through means that undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient*' (Acas, 2014⁸). If the bullying is related to a protected characteristic, it is harassment. For more information and support on dealing with conflict in the workplace, including bullying and harassment, see the CIPD's [report on managing workplace conflict](#).

While employers must meet these minimum legal requirements, they should also look to provide a culture and policy around bereavement that provides employees with both short- and long-term support that can be flexible to meet their specific needs. The next section of this guide looks at how organisations can build open and supportive workplace cultures around bereavement and aid understanding and compassion in the workplace.

3 Engendering a cultural shift to understand and speak more openly about bereavement

- Aim to create an open culture of support so people feel more comfortable raising any issues and asking for support.
- Understand and acknowledge the range of feelings people may feel after a loss.
- Consider COVID-19 and its impact on grief and trauma.
- Emphasise the need for compassion and support across the organisation.
- Provide guidance for supporting a bereaved employee or colleague.
- Build supportive workplace cultures for mental health.

Why is it so difficult to talk about death and bereavement?

It's not always easy to talk about death and bereavement. It's something that is not discussed enough in wider society, let alone in the workplace. As charity Dying Matters underlines:

*'Awkwardness, embarrassment and fear means we tend to shy away from connecting with those who are dying or those who are grieving. But when we don't talk about what matters, it can increase feelings of isolation, loneliness and distress.'*⁹

Death is challenging, especially at work, where it can be seen as a taboo topic that is best avoided, or at least dealt with privately (McGuinness 2007¹⁰). However, death is an inevitable and normal part of life and something that all of us have to face at some point in our lives. It's unlikely that you will make a bereaved person sadder by acknowledging their bereavement and offering support; saying nothing will certainly be more upsetting. The more open conversations we are able to have around this in society and at work, the better prepared we will be to deal with dying and death.

The first step is to understand and acknowledge that grief can cause a range of emotional responses and the types of feelings people may experience following a loss.

What does grief feel like?

Bereavement affects everyone in different ways and it's possible to experience a range of different emotions.

Grief is a very individual process, affecting people emotionally, psychologically, behaviourally, intellectually, physically and spiritually. It can affect one's identity on a social level and may alter personal circumstances due to having to make practical caring arrangements for other family members.

When considering work-related activities, bereavement can affect concentration and sleep patterns, which may lead to tiredness, forgetfulness and impaired decision-making.

Feelings of grief can also happen because of other types of loss or changes in circumstances, such as: when a significant relationship ends; the loss of a job; moving away to a new location; a decline in the physical or mental health of someone we care about.

Mind have a helpful list of some of the feelings people may experience after a loss.

Feelings people may experience after a loss

- **Shock or disbelief.** Shock provides emotional protection from becoming overwhelmed, especially during the early stages of grief, and it can last a long time, depending on individual circumstances.
- **Numbness and denial.** It is natural for our minds to try to protect us from pain, so following a loss some people may feel quite numb about what has happened. This is natural and helps us to process what has happened at a pace that we can manage, and not before we are ready. It can be a helpful stage – the only problem being if numbness is the only thing we feel, and none of the other feelings associated with grief, as this can cause us to feel 'stuck' or 'frozen'.
- **Sadness or depression.** This can be brought on at the realisation of the loss and may cause people to isolate themselves while reflecting on things they did with their loved one or focusing on memories from the past.
- **Panic and confusion.** Following the loss of someone close to us we can be left wondering how we will fill the gap left in our lives, and can experience a sense of changed identity.

- **Anger or hostility.** Losing somebody is painful and can seem an unfair thing to happen. The bereaved may find that they feel angry or frustrated and want to find something or someone to blame for the loss, so that they can try to make sense of it.
- **Feeling overwhelmed.** Grief can hit people immediately and with full force, potentially causing them to cry a lot or feel like they are not coping. People can worry that their feelings are so overwhelming that they don't know how they can live with them. But over time feelings of grief tend to become less intense and people do find a way to live with them.
- **Relief.** The bereaved may feel relieved when somebody dies, especially if there had been a long illness, if the person who died had been suffering, if they were acting as the main carer for the person, or if their relationship with the person was difficult. Relief is a normal response and does not mean they did not love or care for the person.
- **Mixed feelings.** All relationships have their difficulties and someone may think that, because they had a difficult relationship with the person, they will grieve less or cope better. Instead, they may find that they feel a mix of emotions like sadness, anger, guilt and anything in between.

As Mind suggests, people can feel all, none or some of these things. There is no right or wrong way to feel following a loss. Some people seek help immediately by showing their emotions and talking to people; others prefer to deal with things slowly, quietly or by themselves.

In order to allow employees to have the confidence to seek the support they need, employers should work to create an open culture of support within an organisation that will ensure that people experiencing bereavement will feel more comfortable raising any issues they might be experiencing and asking their managers for support.

COVID-19: grief and trauma

Employees may have lost family members, partners and friends as a result of COVID-19. Some employees will also have experienced the loss of co-workers. Much of this loss will be unexpected and shocking. Many will have been unable to say goodbye properly to loved ones. This is also made harder if affected employees need to self-isolate or socially distance from friends and family. Death and non-death-related cumulative loss at this time may result in a lasting psychological impact on affected employees (grief can be cumulative so when we experience a recent loss it can remind us of all the losses we have previously experienced particularly if we have found them difficult to address). Social media has provided daily updates of deaths in terms of numbers, potentially creating the feeling of the death of a loved one becoming reduced to a statistic. Further, due to an absence of involvement at the point of dying and severely restricted mourning rituals, some people will inevitably struggle to accept the reality of the death for some considerable time. Organisations need to be mindful that this may heighten the need for psychological and emotional support such as counselling and therapy to help employees come to terms with what they have experienced.

The British Psychological Society provides some helpful guidance around supporting yourself and others – [*Coping with Death and Grief during the Covid-19 Pandemic*](#) – which employers could share with their employees. [Cruse Bereavement Care](#) also [provide guidance](#) relating to COVID-19 grief and trauma and how people can help themselves and others.

As the British Psychological Society outlines, the current pandemic presents a number of quite unusual circumstances that may result in additional thoughts and emotions for the bereaved. Some will experience complicated grief that leaves the person who has been bereaved feeling stuck and struggling to cope with the emotional impact of their grieving. Talking things through with friends and family can be comforting. This can be done remotely if people are isolating. If employees feel that the intensity of their feelings is affecting their daily lives, it is important that they seek support and contact their GP for access to more specialist services.

The HSE Employee Assistance [Programme](#) has produced guidance for healthcare workers affected by the death in service of a colleague due to COVID-19. The NHS has also produced a range of helpful [bereavement support resources](#) for colleagues across the NHS following the loss of a colleague, friend or family member during the pandemic.

Even if people aren't directly experiencing bereavement, the impact of COVID-19 and the frequent press coverage mean that the topics of death and bereavement have been much more transparent and people may have been thinking about these issues in a way that they might not have done previously. If employers feel employees need support related to this, they should signpost them to any internal resources available, like employee assistance programmes or occupational health, or provide information on external sources of support like those in [section 7](#) of this guide.

Build supportive workplace cultures for mental health

Creating an open culture of support within an organisation will ensure that people experiencing bereavement will feel more comfortable raising any issues they might be experiencing and asking their managers for support. This should flow from an organisation's culture to encourage openness and inclusion around mental health issues where people feel able to talk about how they are feeling and seek support if they need it.

The [CIPD/Mind people managers' guide to mental health](#) provides comprehensive practical advice on how to develop a mentally healthy workplace. The guide addresses the whole lifecycle of employment, from recruitment, through keeping people well and managing a disability or ill health at work, to supporting people to return to work after a period of absence. In essence, developing a supportive culture around mental health means having in place effective policies and support pathways such as counselling and an employee assistance programme, to provide employees with the support they need when they need it. These need to be brought to life, so that employees know what support is available and how to access it, and managers know how to signpost people and make any adjustments for people when needed. The [Mental Health at Work commitment](#) also helps organisations to start creating an open culture around mental health.

Prevention of work-related stress and early intervention if someone does experience mental ill health following a bereavement (and beyond) lies at the heart of an effective approach. This means providing 'good work' for people and ensuring good people management practices. It also includes carrying out stress audits to highlight any risks to psychological health and training line managers so they can manage people's workloads and offer flexibility to job roles and working hours where needed. It also means ensuring they are trained to spot the early warning signs of stress or distress.

Managers need to feel confident and competent to have conversations with staff about sensitive issues like mental health and signpost to specialist sources of support if necessary. Many managers and employees are afraid to talk about mental health in case they say the wrong thing or are discriminatory, but this perpetuates the silence and stigma around the issue. Most people would prefer a genuine enquiry about how they are feeling, and this could be as simple as asking ‘How are you?’ to encourage a conversation. The use of empathy and common sense by managers lies at the heart of effective management of mental health and bereavement in the workplace. People professionals should ensure that employees know how to access the support provided by the organisation even if they don’t wish to disclose an issue to their manager.

Employers may want to share the accompanying line manager [guidance](#) with managers in their organisation to provide support in having these types of conversations.

Emphasise compassion and support

As the next section of this guide outlines, it’s really helpful to develop a bereavement policy to ensure bereaved employees are aware of and given the support they need. However, it’s also important that the policy is communicated widely and linked to broader sources of support and line manager education.

To raise awareness and empathy, organisations could consider holding workplace training sessions for managers and colleagues on how to support a bereaved employee. Such sessions should highlight the support available in the organisation and could also cover how to support the wellbeing of HR, people managers and employees if they have been affected, by association, by supporting someone with a bereavement or several bereavements.

Such sessions could also cover helpful language and behaviour tips when supporting a bereaved colleague or team member, as this is often something that people worry about getting wrong. The box below gives some helpful language and behaviour tips around how to support bereaved employees or colleagues.

Guidance for supporting a bereaved employee or colleague

DO

- Be caring and compassionate.
- Allow time and space for the bereaved person. It can be hard to formulate thoughts and recall facts following a bereavement.
- Offer your condolences, such as ‘I’m sorry XXX has died.’
- Ask how they are coping.
- Say, ‘What do you need from me?’ Wants and needs may change over the course of the grieving process. Valued help may be in the form of a practical task.
- At times they may wish to talk about the person who has died. At other times they may not wish to, for fear of getting tearful or upset in the workplace. Follow the wishes of the person ‘in the moment’. Don’t feel offended if an offer of support is rejected. Respect any decisions; however, reassure of your offer of support if they change their mind.
- Be available – let them know you’re there to listen or just provide company, if that would be of help to them. Some people find a need to repeat their recollection of the event to help them make sense of it. Allow them to discuss what is of most concern. Validate their circumstances during this difficult time.

- Be aware that special dates such as inquests, birthdays and the anniversary of a death may have an impact on the bereaved.
- Remember that the full impact of a bereavement may not be felt until some time after the death.

DON'T

- Ignore the situation.
- Assume you know how the bereaved employee is feeling – every bereavement is unique.
- Give advice.
- Compare your past losses with the bereaved employee's. You are taking the attention away from their loss onto yours.
- Say anything that may minimise or undermine the loss, such as 'we all have to go sometime' or 'she had a good innings.'
- Say anything to make light of bereavement, such as 'time will heal'; 'pull yourself together'; 'it must be a great relief for you'; 'this will help you move on.'
- Make the assumption that just because they are back at work they are 'over it' and 'back to normal'.

These helpful and less helpful ways of providing support have been drawn from [Cruse's employer's guidance](#).

It's important that HR, managers and colleagues are compassionate and supportive in relation to bereaved employees in the short and longer term. Sections 4, 5 and 6 of this guide outline ways in which organisations can provide short and longer-term support. Section 5, in particular, focuses on the important role of people managers and section 6 looks at the practical support that a phased return to work and flexible working can provide.

4 Develop a bereavement policy

- Understand the benefits of having a bereavement policy.
- Communicate your approach and embed a culture of support.
- Involve unions/staff representatives in developing a bereavement policy.
- Consider what a bereavement policy should cover:
 - reporting a bereavement
 - bereavement leave and pay
 - return to work
 - other services and resources to support bereaved employees
- Understand what to do when a member of staff dies.
- Review your bereavement policy.
- Provide support for specific bereavements.

The benefits of having a bereavement policy

Organisations vary hugely in terms of culture, size and operating environment. What will work as a policy in a large organisation may not be possible in smaller organisations. Therefore, when developing a bereavement policy, it is important that it reflects the

culture, aims, principles and ethos of the organisation as well as the environment in which the business or organisation operates (McGuinness 2007¹¹).

It's a good idea to have a bereavement policy that includes absence and pay, to keep things clear. A policy can also help clarify anything offered in addition to legal requirements and outline what employees can expect in terms of support.

Your policy should provide support and guidance for employees who have been bereaved and for the death of an employee. It's important to regularly communicate the policy and to review and update your approach periodically.

Employers who currently provide a policy may need to amend it to incorporate parental bereavement pay and leave (as described above) and to refer to this in documentation for new staff, for example in the employee handbook. Where employers do not have express policies, the new statutory provisions relating to parental bereavement pay and leave shall automatically apply.

At the CIPD we are calling on the Government to create a legal right to bereavement leave and pay for all employees experiencing a bereavement of a close family member or dependant. That is the right to two weeks' leave (as a day 1 right) or paid leave, if the recipient is classed as an employee. We would encourage organisations to be as generous as they can with bereavement leave and pay.

Communicate your approach and embed a culture of support

Organisations can demonstrate comprehensive policy and support provision on paper, but if these are not communicated or known throughout the workplace and backed up by a culture of support around bereavement, they will be ineffective.

Creating an open culture of support within an organisation (as discussed in section 3 of this guide) will ensure that bereaved people will feel more comfortable raising any issues they might be experiencing and asking their managers for support. Good communication of your bereavement policy and wider support is essential. This can be done in a number of different ways, from providing basic information through staff induction processes, detailing information on the organisation's intranet or staff message boards, through to wider workplace awareness-raising sessions involving colleagues and managers.

Involve unions/staff representatives in developing a bereavement policy

It is important to involve trade unions or staff representatives in developing a bereavement policy. They are likely to have good ideas about what support is likely to be most helpful and how this can be communicated to employees.

What a bereavement policy should cover

Reporting a bereavement

In this section you should look to include:

- how soon the bereavement should be reported
- who can report it, for example, a member of the employee's family if the employee is not able to do it themselves
- who it should be reported to, for example, the employee's line manager
- what, if anything, a bereaved employee would like their work colleagues to know about the bereavement (if they would like to share, who they would like to do the sharing) and if they wish to be contacted by colleagues.

Remember to be as flexible here as possible and use your policy as guidance only. It is highly unlikely that a person who has just been bereaved will be thinking through all the practicalities of reporting what has happened. Do your best to make the reporting process as supportive and stress-free as possible.

Bereavement leave and pay

In this section you should look to include:

- a list of family members and others in respect of whom the right to take leave will apply
- the range of circumstances under which leave is to be granted (for example to deal with practical arrangements and as a result of personal distress)
- information on how much leave is provided (offering flexibility to cater for individual needs, with some employees not needing to take the full allowance and some needing additional leave)
- information on how much pay is provided
- information on what happens if the person who died is not a child or dependant
- how the leave is classed by the employer, for example 'compassionate' or 'bereavement' leave
- what happens if an employee needs more time off than stated in the policy, including exceptional circumstances such as attending a funeral abroad.

If possible, we would recommend providing paid leave for the bereavement of a family member or dependant and we are calling on the Government to extend the right to parental bereavement leave and pay to all employees experiencing a close family or dependant bereavement.

Grief is not a linear process and does not have predicted stages. Employees will react differently to their experiences of bereavement and this should be understood and respected. Be as flexible as you can when considering the type of bereavement and leave. Bereavements of close friends can be just as difficult as family members. Employees might well need additional leave to that laid out in your policy, so think about options for this, including taking annual leave, additional unpaid leave or sabbaticals. Also consider providing flexibility in the way that leave is taken – some employees might prefer not to take blocks of leave but might find regular half days for a specific period beneficial.

It is also important to think about the financial stress that some employees may face having to suddenly find the money to fund a funeral for a loved one or potentially losing half of their household income. Employers that offer access to a hardship loan could point financially stressed staff in that direction. They could signpost them to other sources of financial assistance, depending on an individual's eligibility, such as the [Funeral Expenses Payment](#) available from the Government. [Citizens Advice](#) also provide helpful advice when dealing with the financial affairs of someone who has died.

Return to work

In this section of your policy you should look to include:

- how the employee's return to work is managed, for example whether they can return on reduced hours if they're not ready to return full-time
- how you can support them through flexible working
- details of any risk assessment that may be undertaken in relation to the job role for health, safety and welfare purposes. Outline that this is to help support the employee rather than to suggest they are unable to perform their role.

Remember, flexibility is key in supporting bereaved employees. Employees that are forced back to work too quickly or on a full-time basis are highly unlikely to be able to perform

well at work. Talk to employees and see what type of approach would work best for them – they might like to work from home for a period or take a phased approach to returning to work. Think about how you can provide ongoing support to them through the use of flexible working. Section 6 of this guide covers flexible responses in more detail.

Other services and resources to support bereaved employees

Your bereavement policy should link to other helpful services and resources, if you offer them, such as occupational health and employee assistance programmes. Employee assistance and occupational health professionals have a lot of experience in dealing with situations of loss and are good resources for a manager in advising if a bereaved employee may need specialised help (McGuiness 2007¹²), or point to external sources of support if you don't offer these services directly. Supporting the mental and emotional wellbeing of bereaved employees is extremely important and support will often need to be ongoing.

Despite experiencing extreme sadness and other grief symptoms, approximately 80% of bereaved people can gradually learn to manage their loss over time with the help of emotional and practical support from family members, close friends, informative literature and other sources.¹³ Approximately 10%–20% of people may benefit from specialised help such as formal bereavement support, psychotherapy or counselling.¹⁴ However, employees will react differently to their experiences of bereavement and that is why it is so important that organisations provide a supportive culture that offers a range of resources and that people managers are able to have sensitive conversations with employees about how they are coping and what support they might need (see [section 5](#) of this guide for more guidance on this).

Reviewing the bereavement policy

Building in a structured review of the policy after 18–24 months allows its effectiveness to be evaluated and any relevant changes/developments incorporated (McGuiness 2007¹⁵).

Support for specific bereavements

<p>Support when an employee's child has died</p>	<p>As detailed in section 2 of this guide, in April 2020, legislation known as 'Jack's Law' came into effect. It entitles all employees who lose a child under the age of 18, or whose child is stillborn from 24 weeks of pregnancy, to a statutory minimum of two weeks' leave.</p> <p>When a bereaved parent returns to work, they will need support from their employer and colleagues. A number of UK charities specialise in this area and have some guidance on how to help:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Returning to Work When a Baby or Child Has Died: Guidance for employers [pdf] (Child Bereavement UK 2018) • Helping a Bereaved Parent Return to Work [pdf] (Sands 2016)
<p>Support for LGBT+ colleagues</p>	<p>There are some particular considerations to be aware of when supporting LGBT+ people around bereavement or when an LGBT+ colleague has died. It may not be evident or known that a person is LGBT+, for instance. The NHS Scotland's Support Around Death site offers extensive and helpful guidance in this area: Supporting LGBT+ people around bereavement.</p>

<p>Support in relation to suicide</p>	<p>Suicide is a tragic and shattering reality that not only brings a life to an untimely end but also has a far-reaching effect on family, friends, colleagues and communities. It takes courage to break the silence in the workplace and speak about suicide and it's important that employers support those affected by suicide in a compassionate and informed way.</p> <p>The Irish Hospice Foundation has produced helpful employer guidance: A Guide for Employers on Responding to Suicide in the Workplace [pdf] (Irish Hospice Foundation 2012). See also helpful guidance and a toolkit from BITC and see Mind and The Samaritans for further sources of support.</p>
<p>Support in relation to murder or manslaughter</p>	<p>After this type of bereavement employees can often feel lonely, frightened and isolated, feeling as if no one understands their pain and grief. It's important that employers support those bereaved through murder or manslaughter in a compassionate and informed way. Support after Murder and Manslaughter (SAMM) gives callers an opportunity to speak confidentially with volunteers who have been bereaved by homicide, and to receive advice and support.</p>

What to do when a member of staff dies

Experiencing the death of a staff member or co-worker can be distressing and can affect other employees and the workplace in general. You need to support your workforce but also seek to minimise any additional distress for the deceased staff member's next of kin. Confirm with the next of kin when and the extent of the details that may be shared with the wider team. Acas provides some helpful guidance, which is summarised below.

Practical steps

- Let people at work know the person has died, in an empathetic way.
- Offer support to those affected by the death.
- Offer condolences to the person's family or next of kin.
- Share with staff how they can give their condolences.
- Provide details of the funeral /ceremony, if staff have been invited.

Offering support

Talk to staff about how you can provide ongoing support to those affected by the death. Encourage line managers to have regular catch-ups with those affected to see how they are coping and whether they need any further support. Make sure that line managers are also offered support. If employees do need further support, point to your organisation's health and wellbeing services and resources, if you offer them, such as occupational health and employee assistance programmes, otherwise signpost to external sources of support (see [section 9](#)).

Honouring the person who has died

It might be appropriate to honour the person who died. For example, you might consider:

- creating a book of condolence for staff to share their memories of the person who died
- commissioning a memorial
- holding an event to honour the person who died, inviting the family or next of kin, if appropriate
- organising a fundraising event in support of a particular charity, if relevant, according to the employee's cause of death, for example heart/cancer-related.

Media interest

If there is media interest in the death, this could be incredibly distressing for the person bereaved. Acknowledge and support them. You might also need to identify a spokesperson. If applicable, prepare a statement and plan how confidentiality will be dealt with.

Finalising an employee's affairs

HR or a senior manager should contact the family or next of kin of the person who died to answer any questions they may have in a sensitive and empathetic manner about:

- pay
- their pension
- other benefits, such as life insurance
- returning any personal belongings – family members/next of kin may wish to pick up any belongings in person or may prefer that these are sent. Whatever the preference, make sure that the way you return personal belongings shows true care for the deceased and their family/next of kin.

You should also take necessary steps concerning data relating to the deceased such as removing information (such as email address, details on databases, circulation lists) and informing key contacts about the death (for example notifying contacts of other organisations).

More information is available on the Government [website](#).

Information on reporting accidents and incidents at work (including work related accidents which cause death) and on work [related](#) death protocol is available on the HSE [website](#).

5 Educate and support people managers

Educate and support people managers to:

- show empathy and compassion when dealing with bereaved people
- understand your organisation's bereavement policy/support structure
- acknowledge the bereavement and stay in contact with a named person
- discuss what bereaved employees would like communicated
- understand and accommodate any religious/cultural considerations
- provide ongoing support.

People managers have an important role to play in supporting bereaved employees, understanding their specific circumstances and helping them return to work when they are ready. You should educate and support people managers to take the following steps to support bereaved colleagues.

Understand your organisation's bereavement policy and support

Make sure your people managers understand your organisation's bereavement policy, any processes relating to this policy, and how they can provide immediate and ongoing support to bereaved employees, where needed. Embed information about the policy in your induction and/or your people management training.

Acknowledge the bereavement and stay in contact

It's important that an employee's manager acknowledges the bereavement that the employee has experienced. The person may or may not want to talk about the situation in detail, but acknowledging that it has happened is very important.

Ask an employee how they would like to stay in contact and maintain regular but not intrusive contact with them while they are away from work. Be aware that bereaved people may be more sensitive at this time. Insensitive comments may be keenly felt.

Sending a thoughtful card, email or text can let a bereaved employee know that you are thinking about them and care.

Show empathy and compassion

Empathy and compassion are vital, as is the ability to have sensitive and supportive ongoing conversations.

People experience grief in different ways and there is no set path. However, there are lots of things that are common and these can include:

- sleep difficulties
- eating difficulties
- difficult feelings
- people who are normally outgoing may start to avoid family, friends and colleagues
- fatigue or tiredness
- being more prone to colds and minor illnesses
- losing enthusiasm for normal activities
- forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating.

It's important to be aware of these as they can have an impact on the employee's work life, relationships and productivity, and being aware of these effects may also help managers understand a little more how bereaved employees are feeling and help them adopt an empathetic approach to conversations.

Conversation checklist

This conversation checklist has been adapted from the [CIPD and Mind's people manager's guide](#) to mental health and can be used by line managers to help structure their conversation with a bereaved employee:

- Avoid interruptions: switch off phones, ensure colleagues can't walk in and interrupt.
- If you haven't done so already, offer your condolences.
- Be caring and compassionate.
- Ask simple, open questions, such as 'How are you coping today?'
- Ask, 'What do you need from us?' (as an organisation).
- Avoid judgemental or patronising responses.
- Speak calmly.
- Maintain good eye contact.
- Listen actively and carefully.
- Encourage the employee to talk if they would like to.
- Be prepared for some silences and be patient.
- Avoid making assumptions or being prescriptive – the individual is the best person to know what support may help them, and one person's experience of bereavement will rarely be the same as another's.
- Remember that the full impact of bereavement may not be felt for some time after the death, so support may need to be ongoing – make it clear that you are available to talk when needed.
- It might be helpful to discuss how employees might manage difficult moments in the workplace, when they may need to take some time out. Jack's Rainbow have developed 'Just a Moment Cards' for organisations to give to bereaved employees in case they need to take some time out from a meeting or be away from their desk when grief hits. More information about Jack's Rainbow is available in section 7 of this guide.

If there are any agreed actions to help the individual, it may be helpful to follow up in a supportive email.

Discuss what the bereaved employee would like communicated

It's also important that managers discuss what bereaved employees would like communicated. By law, an employee can keep their bereavement private from work colleagues. It's a good idea for managers to ask their employee what, if anything, they would like their work colleagues to know about the bereavement and if they wish to be contacted by colleagues. If the bereaved employee would like this communicated, discuss whether the employee wants to tell colleagues or whether they would like their line manager to tell their colleagues.

Understand and accommodate any religious/cultural practices or special arrangements

Under normal circumstances (and as a result of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on those from ethnic minority backgrounds), it will be important to have a raised awareness of the ways differing cultures grieve. People managers should explore, through sensitive conversations, what extra support would be helpful to affected employees. Different cultures practise a wide range of mourning rituals and respond to death in significantly different ways. Line managers should check whether the employee's religion or culture requires them to observe any particular practices or make special arrangements. For information on cultural attitudes to dying and death see:

- [Sudden's Guide to Cultural and Religious Issues Professionals May Encounter Following a Bereavement](#)
- Public Health England's (2016) *Faith at End of Life – A resource for professionals* (pp12–26).

Provide ongoing support

Make sure people managers understand that grief will likely be ongoing and therefore the support they provide will also need to be ongoing. Everyone's experience of grief will be different and it can take years in some cases for people to manage their loss. This will also depend on the nature of the death and the state of the bereaved individual's own mental health.

Have regular conversations

When managers have regular conversations with employees about how they are coping and what support they might need, this demonstrates a compassionate ethos within the organisation.

Take bereavement into account when considering performance

Ensure people managers approach performance conversations supportively and positively and take the bereavement into account if there is an impact on performance. It's also important to identify any extra support the person may benefit from.

Signpost to helpful services and resources

Managers should signpost to helpful services and resources, if you offer them, such as occupational health and employee assistance programmes; otherwise, provide information on external sources of support.

Consider the impact on other members of the team

Managers should also consider the impact that bereavement leave/a phased return or changes in duties might have on other members of the team. Make sure that co-workers are supported if they have additional tasks to achieve. Encourage them to be alert to, and act swiftly on, bullying and harassment relating to bereavement (as covered in section 2). Be mindful that a colleague's bereavement could also trigger feelings of grief for employees who have suffered similar losses and might therefore also need support.

Support for managers

Supporting someone through bereavement can be tough for the manager. It is worth considering what specific support is available to line managers and what they can do to look after their own wellbeing during this period. Managers should have access to employee assistance programme/occupational health services if organisations have them, and if not, you should point them to external helplines like those listed in section 7 of this guide (such as the Mind Infoline).

Managers should feel equipped and confident to support bereaved employees through organisational training. Debrief sessions with their managers might also be helpful (with confidentiality and no specific case details) as well as regular wellbeing conversations. It is also important to maintain clear boundaries – managers need to be clear on what their role is and isn't when supporting a bereaved colleague. For example, they are there to support bereaved employees in the workplace and put in place any reasonable adjustments, but they should not be counselling them.

Build flexible responses

Finally, as the next section of this guide discusses in more detail, it's also important to be flexible with bereaved employees and to discuss phased returns to work and flexible working options where relevant. Encourage people managers to hold regular reviews and make adjustments, where necessary, to the employee's working situation. More people managers will be managing people virtually during and coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, so extra care will be needed to stay in regular contact with employees experiencing a bereavement.

6 Build flexible responses

- Remember that flexibility is key when supporting bereaved employees.
- Be sensitive to requests for time off, especially around anniversaries and other special events.
- Consider a phased return to work.
- Be open to ongoing flexible working provisions.

Flexibility is key

Flexibility is key when supporting bereaved workers. Each person will experience bereavement in different ways and will need different responses and support from their organisation. The bereavement may have led to changes in personal circumstances, such as caring responsibilities (see [CIPD guidance](#) on becoming a carer-friendly organisation).

Ensure that people managers speak supportively to their bereaved team member to discuss when they feel they will be able to return to work, and whether they would prefer to come back to working their usual hours or a phased return. It might also be helpful to discuss whether a temporary change of duties might be needed.

Be sensitive to requests for time off

It's important that managers are open to flexible working beyond that initial return-to-work period and that they are sensitive to requests for time off, especially around anniversaries or other special events.

Consider a phased return to work

A phased return to work is a way of enabling employees to return to their duties in a gradual way. It is typically adopted following illness or injury through an occupational health referral, but it can also be helpful for providing a supportive and manageable return for those who have been bereaved.

If a bereaved staff member returns to work on a phased basis, they will work a reduced number of hours at first, followed by a gradual increase in workload until they reach their normal number of hours. A phased return to work usually lasts anywhere between two and six weeks but can be extended if necessary. A phased return to work plan should cater to the bereaved staff member and their specific needs.

Be open to ongoing flexible working provisions

Flexible working options can be particularly helpful to bereaved employees in the short and longer term. In fact, flexible working is beneficial to all employees, so employers should take steps to create flexible working cultures across their organisation. Our cross-sector case studies show that flexible working in some form can be accommodated across most contexts. Be as flexible and supportive as you can when it comes to flexible working requests and make use of trial periods to test things out, review and implement changes.

Be creative

Get creative when it comes to thinking about flexible working. There is a whole array of flexible working patterns that you can make use of. While flexible working arrangements may vary across different sectors and job roles, it is possible to consider some form of flexible working arrangement in almost all roles – even in roles that are traditionally seen as being difficult for flexible working, including senior or customer-facing roles, and in sectors like manufacturing. Short and long-term flexible working can really help a bereaved employee return to work and feel able to balance work and personal issues and responsibilities.

Support people managers

Flexible working options can be particularly helpful to bereaved employees, and people managers are pivotal in enabling successful flexible working. Give people managers support and guidance to help them feel confident in dealing with flexible working requests and managing flexible workers.

Good management practices support flexible working and should include:

- being inclusive of flexible workers (such as being considerate of working patterns when scheduling meetings)
- reviewing whether flexible working is going well for both the individual and the team
- having regular conversations, both informally and through the appraisal/performance review system
- regularly checking in with employees regarding their wellbeing and holding these meetings by visual means whenever possible; when working remotely it can be difficult to pick up on non-verbal cues of someone struggling/poor mental health
- including a 'good people manager' performance objective against which a manager is assessed and a team supported
- ensuring ongoing access to development and career conversations for flexible workers
- encouraging and recording training sessions and continuing professional development so that flexible workers can catch up on it later
- implementing flexible working fairly.

7 Signpost to supportive services, charities and organisations

- Provide information on workplace support for bereaved employees.
- If bereaved employees feel that the intensity of their feelings are affecting their daily lives, encourage them to seek support from their GP.
- Signpost employees to external sources of information and support.

It's important to provide information on workplace support for bereaved employees. Bereavement policies should link to other helpful services and resources such as occupational health and employee assistance programmes, if you offer them, or point to external sources of support. Supporting the mental and emotional wellbeing of bereaved employees is extremely important and support will often need to be ongoing.

It is important to emphasise that if bereaved employees feel that the intensity of their feelings are affecting their daily lives, they should seek support and contact their GP.

You might find it helpful to include information on or signpost to some of the following sources of information and advice (all current at the time of publication).

Acas

Acas gives employees and employers free, impartial advice on workplace rights, rules and best practice. They also offer training and help to resolve disputes. Acas provides guidance on bereavement policies, time off for bereavement and avoiding discrimination during workplace bereavement, amongst other related areas.

At a loss

At a loss is the UK's signposting website for the bereaved. They can help with finding bereavement services and counselling. They also have coronavirus-specific resources.

BEAD

BEAD (Bereaved through Alcohol and Drugs) provides information and support for anyone bereaved through drug or alcohol use.

BereavementUK

BereavementUK is a hub for bereavement support and information worldwide. BereavementUK offers Human Aspects training courses specifically for employers and employees. Human Aspects is training that looks at the personal impact of bereavement and activates greater communication in the workplace and understanding of the ongoing effect of death and absence of loved ones on the bereft.

Child Bereavement UK

Child Bereavement UK helps children and young people (up to age 25), parents and families to rebuild their lives when a child grieves or when a child dies. They also provide training to professionals, equipping them to provide the best possible care to bereaved families.

Coroner's Court Support Service

An independent voluntary organisation whose trained volunteers offer emotional support and practical help to bereaved families, witnesses and others attending an inquest at a Coroner's Court.

Cruse Bereavement Care

[Cruse](#) offers support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies. The charity also provides training and consultancy to organisations and those who may encounter bereaved people in the course of their work.

Dying Matters

[Dying Matters](#) raises awareness of dying, death and bereavement and has over 12,000 members.

Government bereavement support

The Government offers various types of bereavement information support, including:

- [information relating to death and bereavement](#)
- [funeral payment support](#).

The Scottish Government offers similar [bereavement support](#) and [funeral payment support](#).

Grief Encounters

[Grief Encounters](#) is a peer support group for LGBTQ people who have experienced a bereavement. It is part of Switchboard, a charity for LGBTQ people looking for community, support or information.

Health Education England

Health Education England (HEE) exists for one reason only: to support the delivery of excellent healthcare and health improvement to the patients and public of England by ensuring that the workforce of today and tomorrow has the right numbers, skills, values and behaviours, at the right time and in the right place.

Jack's Rainbow

[Jack's Rainbow](#) offers consultancy and bereavement in the workplace training alongside peer support groups for anyone who has been bereaved.

Loss Foundation

The [Loss Foundation](#) is dedicated to providing bereavement support following the loss of a loved one to cancer, whether that be spouses, family members, friends or colleagues.

Marie Curie

[Marie Curie](#) is the UK's leading end of life charity. They provide frontline nursing and hospice care, a free support line and a wealth of information and support on all aspects of dying, death and bereavement. Marie Curie's Support Line is open to anyone who's been bereaved, whether it happened recently or some time ago. You can call to discuss practical and emotional concerns with a trained Support Line Officer, to speak with a spiritual care coordinator, or get up to six sessions of support from a trained bereavement volunteer. The charity also helps organisations looking to improve how they support bereaved employees and those with a terminal illness.

Mind

[Mind](#) provides advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. They campaign to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding. Mind also offers [specific support around bereavement – and linked to COVID-19](#).

Miscarriage Association

The [Miscarriage Association](#) provides information and support related to miscarriage.

National Bereavement Alliance

The [National Bereavement Alliance](#)'s vision is that all people have awareness of and access to support and services throughout their bereavement experience.

National Suicide Prevention Alliance

The [National Suicide Prevention Alliance](#) is an alliance of public, private, voluntary and community organisations in England that care about suicide prevention and are willing to take action to reduce suicide and support those affected by suicide.

NHS Grief after Bereavement or Loss Support

[NHS support](#) around things people can do to try to help with bereavement, grief and loss. Includes a mood self-assessment tool to help people work out how they are feeling and further support and links around stress, anxiety or depression.

Sands (stillbirth and neonatal death charity)

[Sands](#) (stillbirth and neonatal death charity) is the leading stillbirth and neonatal death charity in the UK. Sands exists to reduce the number of babies dying and to ensure that anyone affected by the death of a baby receives the best possible care and support for as long as they need it.

SAMH

[SAMH](#) is the Scottish Association for Mental Health. It operates in communities to provide a range of mental health support and services.

Support after Murder and Manslaughter (SAMM)

[SAMM](#) gives callers an opportunity to speak confidentially with volunteers who have been bereaved by homicide, and to receive advice and support.

Sudden

[Sudden](#) helps people who have experienced a sudden bereavement to access specialist information and advice.

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide

[Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide](#) exist to meet the needs and overcome the isolation experienced by people over 18 who have been bereaved by suicide.

The Compassionate Friends

[The Compassionate Friends](#) offers a range of services supporting bereaved parents and their families.

The Good Grief Trust

[The Good Grief Trust](#) is a charity run by the bereaved, helping all those suffering grief in the UK. It can help you find reassurance, advice and support. They have a detailed page of coronavirus bereavement advice.

The Samaritans

[The Samaritans'](#) vision is that fewer people die by suicide and their mission is to make sure there is someone there for anyone who needs someone. Every year, the Samaritans answer more than 5 million calls for help via their unique 24-hour listening service, email, letter, face-to-face and through their Welsh language service.

The WAY Foundation

[The WAY Foundation](#) is a UK charity that offers a peer-to-peer support network for anyone who's lost a partner before their 51st birthday – married or not, with or without children, whatever their sexual orientation.

WAY UP

[Way Up](#) provides peer support for widows/widowers in their fifties and sixties, creating national, regional and very local meets. They communicate with members via their forum, so callers need to be comfortable using the Internet.

8 Appendix

HR-inform resources

- [Template letter of condolence to an employee following the death of a family member](#)
- [Template letter offering condolences to a relative on the death of an employee](#)
- [Template letter announcing the death of an employee](#)
- [Letter to all staff regarding their right to take statutory parental bereavement leave](#)
- [Parental bereavement leave policy](#)

9 References

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