

A GUIDE TO COMPASSIONATE BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT

Guidance for line
managers

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.

Introduction to the line manager support materials

Managers play a vital role in determining the health, wellbeing and engagement of their team. They also play an essential part in managing particular people management issues that arise in their team, such as bereavement, conflict, sickness absence and mental health problems, which can have a negative impact on employee health, wellbeing and engagement if not well-managed.

CIPD research identified five key behavioural areas that are important for line managers to support the health, wellbeing and engagement of those who work for them:



Being open, fair and consistent



Handling conflict and people management issues



Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance



Building and sustaining relationships



Supporting development

A line manager's behaviour and the culture they create in their team is the biggest influence on an employee's work experience. Capability in these five behavioural areas, underpinned by an attitude of care, respect, compassion, wisdom and kindness, is vital for line managers to manage the health, wellbeing and engagement of their employees. Such capability will also provide the foundation for line managers to manage particular people management issues and will enable managers to take a positive approach, recognise employee needs in these situations and manage them in ways that are sensitive, supportive and inclusive.

The CIPD has created a range of support materials to help you adopt a management approach that supports good health, wellbeing and engagement in your team by helping you explore and develop your management capability. Designed for anyone who manages people, the guidance and exercises are quick and easy to use. They can help you save time and get better results by managing people well – all of which is good for your own wellbeing as well as that of your team.

To build on these resources, the CIPD has also created a series of guides focusing on specific areas of people management that aim to support managers in dealing with particular people management issues. Each of these guides provides practical information and advice relevant to that particular people management issue, as well as linking it to the approach covered in the support materials. The intention is that managers use the five key behavioural areas as the basis for managing all the issues, and draw on specific relevant behaviours from within the framework to help with the particular issue in question. Look out for the icons to understand which of the behaviours is particularly relevant to the issues being discussed. You can then refer back to the exercises to develop these behaviours further.

Introduction to this guide

Managing an employee who has suffered a bereavement requires compassion, sensitivity, and flexibility. The employee is most likely to let you know what is happening and accept support from you if you already have a good relationship with them and have built an environment that is open, respectful, kind, fair and consistent, in which people feel 'psychologically safe'. (Psychological safety is where people feel they can speak up and share concerns, questions or ideas freely without being criticised or made 'wrong' for doing so.) The key behavioural areas which will assist you in managing this issue are:



Building and sustaining relationships



Being open, fair and consistent.

Exercises 5 and 1 in the line manager support materials offer advice on how to develop these behaviours.

This guide provides some tips on how to support employees who are dealing with a bereavement, both in the short term and in the longer term. How you respond as a manager will make a huge difference to the experience of your bereaved colleague and how supported they feel when they are able to return to work.

How to manage and support someone who has been bereaved: guidance for line managers

Understand your organisation's bereavement policy and support

Make sure you understand your organisation's bereavement policy or framework and the support available in terms of bereavement leave or access to an employee assistance programme or counselling services if available. It might also be helpful to share the further sources of specialist support included at the end of this guide.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance**. Look at Exercise 4 for advice on how to develop this area.

As part of your legal duty to conduct a health and safety assessment, it would also be helpful to consider the impact of bereavement on the employee, their duties, and the context in which they are working. If the employee raises any concerns about their ability to safely conduct their duties following the loss of an immediate relative, make sure you take immediate steps to ensure the safety of the employee and your colleagues in collaboration with HR.

Acknowledge the bereavement and stay in contact

As soon as you are aware that someone you manage has been bereaved, it's important you acknowledge the bereavement. They may or may not want to talk about the situation in detail, but acknowledging that it has happened is very important. Saying 'I'm very sorry for your loss' and asking open questions such as 'how are you coping?' when you learn about an individual's loss will help them feel they can talk to you about their situation if they need to or want to.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Building and sustaining relationships**. Look at [Exercise 5](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

Ask the employee how they would like to stay in contact and the best way to maintain regular but non-intrusive contact with them while they are away from work. Sending a thoughtful card, email or text can let a bereaved employee know that you are thinking about them and care. Developing your capacity to build and sustain relationships, particularly around showing concern for people and interacting with them in a friendly way, can help with this.

Empathy and compassion are vital, as is the ability to have sensitive and supportive ongoing conversations. You might find the conversation checklist below helpful for this.

Conversation checklist

- 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 at the end of this guide.
- If there are any agreed actions to help the individual, it may be helpful to follow up in a supportive email.

This checklist has been adapted from the [CIPD and Mind's people manager's guide to mental health](#).



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Being open, fair and consistent**. Look at [Exercise 1](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

Discuss what they would like communicated to colleagues

It's also important to discuss what bereaved employees would like communicated. By law, an employee can keep their bereavement private from work colleagues. It's a good idea therefore to ask an employee what, if anything, they would like their work colleagues to know about the bereavement and if they wish to be contacted by colleagues.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Building and sustaining relationships**. Look at [Exercise 5](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

Understand and accommodate any religious/cultural practices or special arrangements

Explore in a sensitive way what extra support would be helpful to bereaved employees. Different cultures 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. As before, listening, treating people with respect and bringing kindness and consistency will help, together with your capacity to build and sustain relationships. If you have an HR lead, talk to them about any time off that is required and how that should be handled.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Being open, fair and consistent**. Look at [Exercise 1](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

Build flexible responses

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 is likely to have led to changes in personal circumstances, such as caring responsibilities (see [CIPD guidance](#) on becoming a carer-friendly organisation for more information).

The most important thing to do is to ensure that you speak supportively to your 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 work on their usual hours or a phased return. It might also be helpful to discuss whether a temporary change of duties might be needed.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance**. Look at [Exercise 4](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

Consider the following to be flexible:

- **Be sensitive to requests for time off:** It's also important to be sensitive to and accommodating of requests for time off, wherever possible, 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 that 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. Talk to HR about any support you might need in developing this plan.
- **Be open to flexible working provisions:** Flexible working options can be particularly helpful for 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.

Provide ongoing support

Grief will likely be ongoing for someone who has been bereaved and therefore the support that you and the organisation 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 learn 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.

The following steps can help when offering ongoing support:

- **Have regular conversations:** Have regular conversations with employees about how they are coping and what support they might need. As part of those conversations, discuss how employees can manage difficult moments in the workplace, when they may need to take some time out.

- **Take bereavement into account when considering performance:** Approach performance conversations supportively and positively. Take any bereavement-related issues fully into account where there is underperformance on the part of an individual. Identify any extra support the person may benefit from.
- **Consider the impact on other members of the team:** Consider the impact on other members of the team that bereavement leave/a phased return or changes in duties might have. Make sure that other team members are being supported if they have additional work to do and watch out for and act swiftly in relation to any bullying and harassment relating to bereavement. 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.

Listening, treating people with respect and bringing kindness and consistency will help you provide this support, as will your capacity to build and sustain relationships, while skill at handling conflict and people management issues may also be needed



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Being open, fair and consistent**. Look at [Exercise 1](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

Support for you as a manager

Supporting someone through bereavement can be tough for you as a manager. It is worth considering what specific support is available within your organisation that you can draw upon if needed, like employee assistance programmes or occupational health services. If your organisation does not have those services, you might want to make use of different external helplines like those listed at the end of this guide (such as the Mind Infoline). You might also want to explore how to develop your capability to remain calm under pressure and your capacity for self-compassion and self-care.

Debrief sessions with your manager might also be helpful (with confidentiality and no specific case details) as well as regular wellbeing conversations and catch-ups. It is also important to maintain clear boundaries – it's important to be clear on what your role is and isn't. For example, you are there to support bereaved employees in the workplace in the short and the longer term and to put in place any reasonable adjustments they might require, but you are not a trained counsellor and you should not be counselling them.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Being open, fair and consistent**. Look at [Exercise 1](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

Signpost to helpful services and resources

Make sure you direct bereaved team members to helpful services and resources, if you offer them, such as occupational health and employee assistance programmes, 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:

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.

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 the 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.

Cruse

Cruse offers support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies.

Government bereavement support

<https://www.gov.uk/browse/births-deaths-marriages/death>

<https://www.mygov.scot/bereavement-support/>

<https://www.gov.uk/funeral-payments>

<https://www.mygov.scot/funeral-support-payment/overview/>

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.

Jack's Rainbow

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

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.

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.

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide

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

More resources and useful websites are listed in the [employer's guide to compassionate bereavement support](#) available on the CIPD website.



Providing resources such as these relates closely to the behaviour area **Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance**. Look at [Exercise 4](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

What to do when a member of staff dies

Experiencing the death of a team member or co-worker can be distressing. You need to support your team but also seek to minimise any additional distress for the deceased staff member's next of kin. Working with HR, 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 your team know the person has died, in an empathetic way.
- Offer support to those affected by the death.
- Share with staff how they can give their condolences.
- With support from HR 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. Have regular catch-ups with those affected to see how they are coping and whether they need any 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).

Make sure that you seek support for yourself as well, making use of the above resources, where helpful.

Offer as much flexibility as possible (in terms of hours and location, as well as with workload and deadlines) to those particularly impacted by the bereavement. More information on flexible responses can be found on page 5 of this guide.

Honouring the person who has died

It might be appropriate to honour the person who died. For example, with support from HR, 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.

If there is media interest in the death, this could be incredibly distressing for the bereaved. Acknowledge and support them. Make sure your team know how confidentiality will be dealt with.

Remember significant dates relating to the person who has died and remind your team of the support available to them.

Consider using the full range of support materials if you haven't already done so

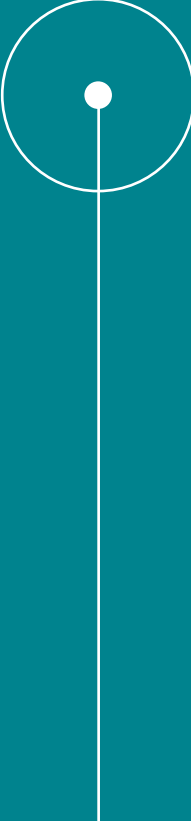
If reading this guide has highlighted areas of people management capability that you would like to develop, why not use the full range of support materials to help you adopt a management approach that supports good health, wellbeing and engagement in your team?

You can get insight into your management capability across all five behavioural areas by completing the [quiz](#) and then use the [step-by-step guidance](#) to help you get feedback, identify strengths and areas to develop and plan the action you will take. There is also an [action plan sheet](#), which can be used to note down and track your actions; a [quiz](#) to help you identify potential barriers and develop strategies to overcome them; and a [series of exercises](#) to provide ideas and inspiration relevant to each of the behavioural areas, some of which have already been highlighted above.





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