

For your team's wellbeing.



A guide to bereavement.

Support and advice for managers

Caring for your team and your own wellbeing during bereavement

We all deal with difficult situations in different ways, but we want you to know that you're not alone. In this guide we share some resources and practical advice for supporting your team and colleagues who may be dealing with grief.

The guide also provides advice on caring for yourself which is fundamental to being at your best so you can lead your team through difficult times.

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

At this time, you may be facing higher incident rates of bereavement amongst colleagues or experiencing this as a manager for the first time.

This guide, along with our [COVID-19 hub](#), is where you'll find all of our wellbeing support and guides to support you, your colleagues and their families.

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Supporting your team: recognising the stages of grief

We all deal with grief in different ways

Your team need to know that they're not alone. As a manager it's helpful to remember that there are stages of grief and people will go through them at different speeds. It's also important to note that the stages are not necessarily a linear process – individuals can go back and forwards. Knowing this will help your conversations with them.

Detailed information on the five stages of grief is on the next page.

Recognise that there are different types of losses

Your team may be experiencing the loss of a loved person or their loss could relate to loss of a relationship, job, health or home.

Loss impacts in different ways

How a person grieves will depend on many factors including the relationship that they had with the person who died.

It's important to let people deal with it the best way they can

There's no right or wrong way to grieve. Nobody can tell anyone what they should be feeling. You can signpost them to support but try not to tell them what they should be feeling or doing.

Advise them to give some time and attention to acknowledge their feelings. Some people find it beneficial to write down their thoughts and feelings as a way of being able to express them, some find it easier to speak about them, and others by getting creative. Only the individual knows what feels right for them.

During the grief process, individuals may behave out of character

For example, a normally outgoing person may withdraw from social settings, or a usually calm person may react angrily. This can be part of the grieving process for some people, so it's important that colleagues don't judge or criticise seemingly uncharacteristic behaviour.





The five stages of grief: what to be aware of

The five stages of grief describe how people emotionally come to terms with their loss. It's a tool to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not to be literally understood as discrete 'steps' or 'stages' on some linear timeline of grief; not everyone goes through all of them or in the described order and some people move forward then back.

Denial

Denial for many (not all) is the first of the five stages of grief. It helps us to emotionally survive the loss. In this stage, the world becomes meaningless and overwhelming. Life makes no sense. We are in a state of shock and denial. We go numb. We wonder how we can go on, if we can go on, and why we should go on (people may feel a sense of futility and hopelessness).

We try to find a way to simply get through each day. Denial and shock help us to adjust to and cope with the emotional enormity of the loss and make the feelings more bearable. An initial response of denial can therefore help us to 'pace' our feelings of grief.

Anger

Anger is a necessary stage of the healing process. We may be angry with the person who left us, or we may feel angry with ourselves. We might find ourselves shouting at people or showing irritation at everything from minor inconveniences to significant let downs.

This stage can happen at any time, even after going through a period of acceptance. The benefit of the grief stages is that they help you deal with the loss and move on. Anger can energize you to do just that.

Bargaining

At some point, we may find ourselves trying to reclaim what we have lost. This stage helps us cope with loss. People often promise God they'll live a better life if the tragedy is undone. Bargaining is a stage that sometimes brings up uncomfortable discussions that don't go anywhere.

Depression

We may feel unsafe and cry often. We might notice changes in appetite or sleep patterns. We might have unexplained aches and pains. This stage can occur in a breakup, following the death of a loved one, or any other loss, but it's a situationally triggered depression that may soon pass naturally as you move toward acceptance.

Acceptance

We understand what we have lost and recognise how important that thing or person was to us. We no longer feel angry about it, and we are finished with bargaining to get it back. We are ready to start rebuilding our life and invest in other attachments and relationships.

Complete acceptance brings peace, but often, this stage is never complete. Instead, we might feel sad during death anniversaries or angry when we feel life would work out so much better if we just had that thing or person with us now. When we accept the loss fully, we have psychologically adjusted to and navigated the emotional stages of the grief optimally.

Supporting your team with the loss of a colleague

If you're dealing with the death of a team member, you'll need to consider the impact on the wider team and yourself. Please take a look at page 12 for more on self-care.

It's not always easy to detect when a colleague is struggling with grief, but here are some things to look out for:

Productivity	Changes in behaviour or demeanour	Physical indicators
Change in the person's working patterns, for example, frequent absence, lateness or needing to finish work early	Conduct out of character with previous behaviour	Fatigue/sleep disorders
Reduced quality and quantity of work, for example, missing deadlines or a drop in usual performance standards	Changes in behaviour, for example becoming anxious, aggressive, depressed and tearful	Substance abuse
Spending a large amount of hours working	Worried about family members for no reason or even worried about being away from children and other family members	Decreasing appetite

Collective grief

Some members of your team may not have lost anyone personally, however, they may still be affected by feelings of grief. This is due to a collective grief that we have experienced as a country due to COVID-19. These losses are equally valid and it's normal to grieve for a collective loss.



COVID-19

Due to COVID-19, there have been tens of thousands of deaths in the UK. It's possible that your colleagues will have lost a family member, partner, friend or co-worker.

There have been restrictions placed upon us which can significantly impact the way your colleagues are able to grieve or process their loss.

It's important to be mindful that this can increase the psychological impact of the loss on your colleagues and adversely influence their ability to move through the stages of grief.

You may find that colleagues losing loved ones in challenging circumstances have been bereaved suddenly and without much warning, eg they may have been unable to have personal contact or have been unable to visit their loved one in hospital or say goodbye.

The COVID-19 restrictions mean that they may have also been unable to attend the funeral for their loved ones and have been unable to comfort family members in person. These restrictions can also mean it's not possible to follow important cultural and religious ceremonies.



Talking to someone about bereavement

Talking to someone who is grieving can be difficult. You might be worried about saying the wrong thing and making things worse or be unsure what to say at all. But, your support could really be experienced as helpful (people who are grieving often confirm that the worst thing someone can say is nothing). Knowing what to say to a colleague who is bereaved is often hard. However, it's important that as a manager you do speak to your team member. Try to use an empathetic manner to make them feel supported and less anxious.

Here are some things you can do:

- express your condolences
- encourage them to take some time off (refer to your compassionate leave and bereavement policies)
- ask them how they would like you to keep in touch and when the best time for you to contact them is. Remember, they may not want to be contacted much, especially during the first few days
- ask them if they're open to being contacted by other colleagues
- ask them what information they would like you to share with their colleagues

Be prepared for them to be upset and tearful. Allow plenty of time and space for them to speak. Encourage them to look after themselves and signpost to key contacts and services for support.

What not to say

- How are you doing?
- They're in a better place
- I know how you feel
- Be strong

What to say instead

- It's tough for you right now
- I'm sorry you're suffering
- I can imagine how you're feeling
- I'm sorry that you are going through this

Preparing for a conversation

- Choose an appropriate place and time
- Think about confidentiality
- Don't make assumptions
- Make sure you are aware of your company's compassionate leave and bereavement policies

Creating a supportive workplace

Create a safe space to talk

It's important to create a safe environment at work where employees can openly express their emotions without fear of judgement. Try to create opportunities for individuals to speak in confidence about their grief experiences and remind them of all the support available, whether that's face to face or virtually (when face to face isn't possible).

Be aware of the role of work in the coping process. For some people, work is an important coping mechanism. It can be a distraction, especially in the early stages of grief – some people find that it provides some normality, a sense of achievement and routine. Work can be an important anchor for some people when other areas of their life feel out of control.

It's especially important for managers to understand that a quick return to work doesn't mean it's 'business as usual'. Limit your expectations of these individuals and don't assume that they'll be able to perform at the same level straight away.

Individuals grieve at different speeds and in different ways. It may be weeks, months or even years before an individual is able to perform at the level they once did.

Encourage colleagues to sustain their social connections and maintain contact with people who they regard as sources of social support, whether they're colleagues or from outside work.

This means:

- connecting often, either face to face or virtually (when face to face isn't possible)
- remembering to share positive news in your life when you do connect. This includes having conversations with others about shared interests, including nostalgia for shared positive experiences in the past and continuing to participate in social media groups around common interests (sport, music, film, television etc.) taking time to consider how to support colleagues who may be more vulnerable



How to support colleagues

Your employees can also feel like family members, therefore it's important to understand the need to balance professional values and obligations with the needs of family life. Decisions in these situations can be challenging.

Make sure you are aware of company policies around compassionate leave and bereavement policies, including absence and pay.

Current policies may need to be adapted to refer to parental bereavement pay and leave. Where employers don't have these policies in place, the new statutory provisions will apply automatically.

The role of a manager is not to deal with the grief itself but to make it clear through the company guidance that employees will be supported and to outline what help is available.



Caring for yourself

It's natural to feel a whole range of emotions during such an unprecedented time and it can be difficult supporting someone dealing with bereavement.

Some days will be better than others for all of us. This is a time to practice being kind to yourself and to others.

Identify and use your support network

As well as family and friends, think about your wider work network, particularly people you trust and feel comfortable sharing your thoughts and feelings with.

Consider setting up check-ins with these people and use social media and technology to stay in touch. Remember, it's okay to ask for help from your manager.

Keep connected to your colleagues

Most likely, they're experiencing some of the same feelings that you are. Share your story with them and ask them to share theirs with you. It helps to remember that we are all in this together.

- At times like these, showing each other that you care can be demonstrated in the smallest of ways, by suggesting time for a chat, for example. The smallest of things can make all the difference to someone's day.

Take breaks

Leaders need to model good self-care and demonstrate the importance of rest and recovery to the team.

- When you step away from work, truly step away. Appoint someone you trust to assume the leadership role and understand that it's okay to take a break from your emails.
- Make sure that the person covering for you knows that whilst you might not be checking emails, you can be available on the phone if needed.
- Be disciplined in this and others in your team will get the message that adequate personal rest is a priority.

Prioritise self-care

Taking care of your own emotional health as a manager will give you a head start in managing the difficult circumstances you may face. You'll know best about what works for you to keep you feeling well. Focus on whatever helps you and make time for these self-care activities where you can – you may feel guilty, but doing something that helps you to 'come down a gear' for even five or ten minutes can make a big difference in how you're feeling and give you more energy to help others. Be patient with yourself too.

Make a start by watching our [self-care webinar](#). Here are a few more ideas on how you can take care of your physical and emotional wellbeing:

exercise

We know how busy you are so finding time for exercise might not feel like a priority right now, but exercise is not only good for your physical health, it also helps to manage anxiety and stress levels.

This [article](#) gives you some advice on how you can fit even a small amount of activity into your day by getting creative with your routine.

nutrition

It's important to have regular meals, to try and stick with healthy options and not to turn to comfort and convenience foods to keep you going. Try to make sure you have your five a day and remember to keep hydrated.

With normal routines out of sync, you might find yourself drinking more alcohol than usual. If you would like more information on this, you can speak with a nurse or GP or visit:

alcoholchange.org.uk

sleep

Make sure you are getting adequate rest and, as much as possible, maintain a consistent sleep schedule. Take brief self-care breaks when needed throughout the day. Here are some resources that could help:

[sleep podcast](#)

[sleep tips](#)

[sleep recovery toolkit](#)

Need more information and tips?

[Learn about self-compassion](#)

[Watch our wellbeing webinars](#)



Key contacts

Employee assistance programme (EAP)

24/7 support to help employees cope with a range of personal problems

Speak to our friendly team about arranging access for your people

0345 600 3476

We may record or monitor our calls.

Cruse Bereavement care

Support for children, young people and adults

0808 808 1677

Monday and Friday 9.30am to 5pm
Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday
9.30am to 8pm
(excluding bank holidays)

Bereavement Advice Centre

Practical help when you need it most

0800 634 9494

Monday to Friday
9am to 5pm

Mind

Mental health information and support

0300 123 3393

Monday to Friday
9am to 6pm

The Samaritans

Free 365 days a year,
24/7 support

116 123



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