



Returning to work after a bereavement

www.griefatwork.ie



Some points about returning to work after a bereavement.

1. **A supportive workplace** can help a bereaved worker to cope with their grief.
2. **Returning to work** after a bereavement can sometimes be challenging.
3. **Returning towards the end of the week** or on a part-time basis for the first few days can help the bereaved worker to adjust.
4. **Most workers want to have their loss acknowledged and be treated as normally as possible** when they return to work after a bereavement.

Privacy—Being discreet

The first reference to the grief should be private and as natural as possible. A warehouse or open plan office may be perfectly adequate providing the conversation is private.

How can I help?

1. Make contact

Returning to the workplace after a bereavement can sometimes be challenging for both the bereaved person and work colleagues. It can help to make contact with the person (see the *What Do I Say* information sheet) before they return to work and sensitively:

1. Acknowledge their loss if you have not already done so
2. Reassure the person of the organisation's support for them
3. Check with them about how they would like colleagues to respond to them (some people like to talk about the loss while others are more private)
4. Inform the worker of any flexible options that may be available to them in relation to their work. For example, if their job involves dealing with the public it may be possible to do some back office work for a while or if a bereaved worker has new caring responsibilities it may be possible avail of flexible start/finish times.
5. Ask them if there are ways that you or the organisation can support them (they may not be able to answer you immediately but you can reassure them that they can talk to you about this again).

Feeling uncomfortable is normal

Do not expect to feel comfortable talking to someone who is bereaved – your discomfort may be an indication that you are being genuine. Sometimes other people's losses can remind us of how fragile life is. But do not let your discomfort stop you from reaching out to a worker who is bereaved.

2. Inform work colleagues

Most workers who are bereaved want to be treated as normally as possible when they return to work. Based on your contact with the bereaved employee, inform colleagues about any appropriate information—for example:

- when the person is returning to work
- how they would like to be treated by colleagues
- where colleagues can get support if they need it

3. Check in with the person when they return to work

It can be helpful to check in with the person at some point on their first day back. This should be done sensitively and in a low key way and involve:

- Welcoming the person back to the workplace
- Assuring the person again of your, and the organisation's, support (it can be helpful to have written information about the workers entitlements and the supports available to give to them (see the *Bereavement Information* template leaflet)
- Bring the person up to speed on any relevant changes/developments
- Keeping up good communication by assuring the person that your door is open and they can come and talk to you if they need to.



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As time goes on ...

Grieving will continue long after the return to work

Understanding how grief affects people

1. Grieving takes a long time.

It normally takes 2 years to come to terms with the major aspects of a death.

2. There are different phases in grief.

(see the "How Does Grief Work?" information leaflet)
Initially the person will be in shock and it can be some months later when the full impact of the loss is felt.

3. An employee who is grieving will have good days and bad days.

This does not mean that they are not coping

To reconnect with the person, say something simple and genuine which expresses directly, or indirectly, how you feel, e.g. "I'm very sorry to hear of your loss"

4. Keep in touch

People who are grieving generally do not want to be smothered with attention but neither do they want to be ignored.

It is important to stay in touch with the bereaved person once they return to work. This is because grieving takes a long time—normally two years (see the information sheet "How Does Grief Work?") and it can often be a number of months after the death that the full impact of the loss can hit the worker.

A bereaved worker may appear to be coping well initially but this does not mean that they are "over the death" or that they will always be like this.

Making a point of checking in with the bereaved worker on a regular basis can be helpful. These check-ins should be informal and discreet and look at:

- Reassuring the bereaved worker of your support
- Checking how the bereaved person is managing (workload etc)
- Asking again about ways that the organisation could support the person

Check lists for colleagues when a bereaved person returns to work

Do's

- Acknowledge the loss. Care more about the person than your embarrassment
- Be aware of how bereavement affects people
- Encourage the person to talk if they want to.
- Acknowledge important anniversaries suitably and sensitively (deaths as well as births, weddings etc.)

Dont's

- Pressurise the person to get on with work
- Minimise the impact of the loss (e.g. you will meet someone else)
- Reassure when what is needed is permission to share grief
- Limit the time in which support is given
- Expect bereaved colleagues to be "back to normal" quickly

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