

Grief at work during COVID-19

Supporting Staff Bereaved during COVID-19



Grieving during COVID-19

Grieving can be challenging at the best of times but the COVID-19 pandemic has made things more difficult for those employees whose loved ones or friends have died.

With public health and social distancing restrictions people may not have been able to:

- visit their loved one when they were sick.
- be with them when they died.
- see the body of their loved one before burial.
- have a traditional funeral service.
- experience physical comfort and support to/ from family and friends.

In addition, they may be sick themselves and/ or have to self-isolate. They may also be worried about infecting others. Employees may also be working from home making it more difficult to avail of the spontaneous support of colleagues.

These realities can make the experience of grieving more challenging for the employee.

Regardless of when a death occurs, and whether it is from COVID-19 or something else, for that employee, their world stops. Death is no longer a statistic – it's their family member, friend or colleague.

How to respond - compassion trumps policy and procedure

We know from research (See Note 1) that what employees value most from their employer when they're grieving is to be treated with compassion.

Policies around leave entitlements and flexible working are also important at these times, but being treated with compassion is what matters most.

A marathon not just a sprint

Grieving is a process which will take a long time as the employee adjusts to the new reality of life without the person who has died. This will take time and patience and is more of a marathon than a sprint. However, there are things that can be done now which will make the process of adjustment less difficult for the employee in the long run. We call these **Bereavement First Aid**.



Bereavement First Aid – Acknowledge, Validate, Support/ Signpost (AVS)

Acknowledge

It's very important to acknowledge what has happened i.e. the death of this individual person, and to offer your sympathies. This is particularly valuable when done sensitively by an employer. Don't worry too much about finding the perfect words – just be genuine and be yourself. Try to think of what you would say if it was a friend whose loved one had died.

For example: *“Jim, I am very sorry to hear about your father.”*

Wait a moment – allow the person to take in what you're saying.

Then: *“My sincere sympathy to you and your family.”*

If you cannot speak to the employee in person, write a note or send a text/email. It's important for the employer to be proactive, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and to take the initiative to reach out to an employee who is bereaved.

Validate

When someone close to us dies, we can experience a range of emotions including sadness, anger, disbelief, numbness, despair, etc. During COVID-19 restrictions, employees may also feel disconnected and isolated. It's important to validate these emotions as a normal part of grieving.

For example: *“It's very understandable that you would feel that way given what has happened.”*

or

“I understand this is a difficult time for you.”

Support/Signpost

One of the most helpful things for an employee who is bereaved, is good support from their line manager. This involves understanding and



compassion. It is about a human response to a human situation. Work comes second. Don't worry about trying to find the right thing to say or do. Just be yourself and be caring and compassionate.

For example: *“Jim, I want to assure you of my support at this time, can you tell me how I might do this?”*

Or

“Jim, I want to support you, what would help you at the moment?”

Let the employee know the organisation is also supporting them at this difficult time and what it has in place to do this.

For example, if your organisation has any of the following listed below, give this information to the employee who is bereaved (don't assume they know already):

- company bereavement policy.
- bereavement leave entitlements.
- flexible work options that can be applied to bereavement.
- knowledge of local/national bereavement supports (See Useful Resource).
- Employee Assistance Programme.

A good way to do this is to give the person a hard copy of the information and include a personal note (so they can read it in their own time). If this isn't possible, use email, and again express your sympathies.

You can make a difference

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we work and how we can support each other when we are grieving. This is particularly the case for organisations wanting to support their employees who are bereaved at this time.

You can make a difference. There are things managers and human resource professionals can do that will make a difference to employees who experience grief at this difficult time.

- Be proactive – reach out.
- Be compassionate - ask what might help, listen carefully.
- Remember Bereavement First Aid – Acknowledge, Validate, Support/Signpost (AVS).

Note 1: Grief in the Workplace Research (Dec 2018)

Key Findings:

1. What do Irish employees want most from their employer when they are bereaved?:
 - a) to be treated with compassion (75%),
 - b) extra leave entitlements (61%),
 - c) flexible work policies around location and work (57%),
 - d) acknowledgement of their loss by the organisation and colleagues (41%), and
 - e) respecting their privacy (34%).
2. Only 3 in 10 Irish adults said their employer has a bereavement policy.

For support, advice and training on Grief in the Workplace breffni.mcguinness@hospicefoundation.ie

Useful Resources

Phonelines

Irish Hospice Foundation Bereavement Support Line 1800 80 70 77 (Mon -Fri 10am – 1pm)

Barnardos Bereavement Helpline (Children) (01) 473 2110 (Mon -Thu 10am – 12pm)

Websites

- **Irish Hospice Foundation COVID-19 Care & Inform**
<https://hospicefoundation.ie/i-need-help/i-care-for-someone/covid19-care-and-inform/>
- **Bereaved.ie**
- **Grief at Work**
www.griefatwork.ie
- **Irish Childhood Bereavement Network**
www.childhoodbereavement.ie
- **HSE Coronavirus Hub**
<https://www2.hse.ie/coronavirus>
- **Coping with Bereavement During COVID-19**
<https://www.cseas.per.gov.ie/covid-19-bereavement-support/#>
- **Bereavement, loss and grief in a time of COVID-19 -IBEC**
<https://www.ibec.ie/employer-hub/covid-19/bereavement-loss-and-grief-in-a-time-of-covid>



Irish Hospice Foundation
**Bereavement
Support Line**
1800 80 70 77