



Understanding Bereavement

Guidance and resources for supporting
your colleagues through grief

Introduction

Bereavement is likely to affect us all during our career. Losing someone close to you can be one of the most difficult experiences of your life, no matter the circumstances. As colleagues, we can't change or fix what has happened but having proper support at work can make a big difference.

Talking about death and bereavement is something many of us find difficult and you might struggle to find the words. A study found that:

One in five (21%)

say they would feel uncomfortable talking to a close friend or family member who wanted to discuss their thoughts about death, their grief or bereavement.

Three in five (62%)

of those who have experienced bereavement in the past five years say that someone being happy to listen when they were ready to talk is among the three most useful things someone did for them.

Seven in ten (71%)

agree that if they were bereaved, they would rather someone said the wrong thing than nothing at all.

One in ten (11%)

of those bereaved in the past five years say no one did anything when they were bereaved.

Hospice UK, 'Dying to be heard', 2020

Although it is common to feel uncertain about how to start conversations on bereavement with your colleagues, there is a lot of advice available to help you provide good and sensitive support.

This guide summarises the learnings from the Hospice UK Compassionate Employers Understanding Bereavement workshop and provides useful resources to support both your colleagues and yourself.



Definitions

Bereavement is the term used for the period in time when someone faces the loss, through death, of someone close.

Grief is the reaction to that loss.

Mourning is the process by which people adapt to a loss. This is influenced by cultural customs, rituals and society's rules for coping with loss.

Spot the signs

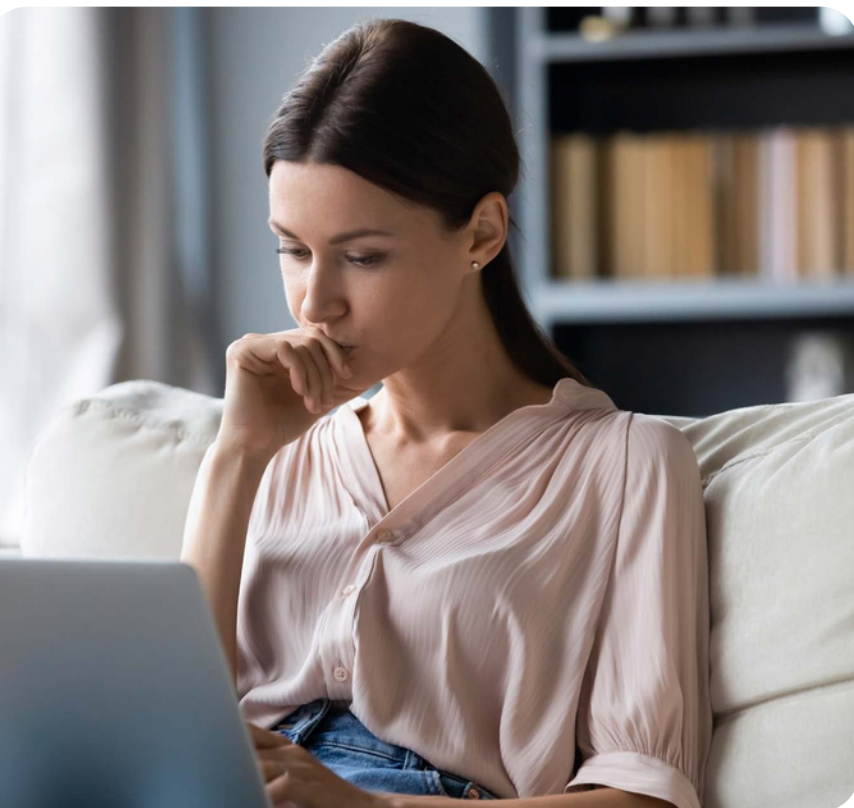
Effects and symptoms of grief

“Bereavement is a darkness impenetrable to the imagination of the unbereaved.” Iris Murdoch (British Novelist and Philosopher, 1919-1999)

Even if you have been bereaved yourself, you cannot always understand how another person is feeling.

Everyone grieves in their own way and at their own pace, and may go through some of the reactions below more than once. Even when someone has reached their new normal, they can be taken by surprise by a sudden burst of grief.

These are some common ways of reacting to the loss of someone close to you:



Emotional: Sadness, anger, fear, depression, anxiety, shock, disbelief, denial, numbness, loneliness, helplessness, guilt, acceptance, relief

Cognitive: Decreased ability to concentrate and process information, difficulty in decision making, forgetfulness

Behavioural: Increased alcohol or drug consumption, crying, withdrawal, irritability

Physical: Sleep disturbance, chest tightness, poor appetite, weight loss/gain, illness

Spiritual: Challenges faith, philosophy of life, meaning of life

Factors that affect grief

Although every loss is unique, there are some factors that are likely to affect how complex someone's grief process is. These factors can either make a person more vulnerable or more resilient to grief. You may find that taking these factors into consideration will help you support your colleague.

However, colleagues should be mindful not to assume a certain reaction to loss based on the factors below. These are simply indications that a person might need more or less support:

- **Attachment** (how close you were to the person who died)
- **Reason for death** (for example, was it a sudden death or an expected one)
- **Previous experiences of loss** (has the person lost other important people in their life, perhaps in close proximity)
- **Personality factors** (do they generally have a positive outlook on life)
- **Social support** (do they have close friends and relatives)
- **Concurrent stresses** (what other pressures are present in their life; such as illness,, child care worries, financial problems)
- **Disenfranchised grief** (is the importance of the relationship not acknowledged by or known to their social circle; for example the loss of an extra-marital partner or the loss of a pet)

Starting a conversation

It may not always be possible to meet your colleague face to face. It's therefore important that you choose a channel of communication that your colleague is comfortable with. Some people might prefer a video call or text messages, whereas others might prefer a phone call.

Make sure that you agree a time that works for your colleague, for example avoiding child care duties and times when they can't be by themselves. It's also important that they know you are in a private space so that they feel able to express themselves without anyone else listening in.



What to say and not to say

It can be difficult to know what to say to someone who has been bereaved. Sometimes it's easy to worry so much about saying the wrong thing that we avoid saying anything at all. Generally, it's better to do or say something rather than nothing, and to acknowledge someone's loss rather than ignore it.

What you could say

Express genuine sympathy:

- "I'm so sorry" and pause
- "[Name], I heard about your dad, I just wanted to check in and say how sorry I am"
- "I don't know what to say but I wanted you to know I'm thinking of you."
- "However you're feeling is okay. I'm here to listen if you want to talk"
- "I'm sorry to hear about ..."
- "You might not be ready to talk about it today, but there's support available once you're ready."

Be careful about saying

Try to avoid clichés and phrases that could make your colleague feel less entitled to express their grief:

- At least you had a chance to say goodbye, it wasn't like they died in an accident
- You're young enough to get married again
- At least you have your other children
- You're young enough to have more children
- It's good that it was quick
- They've gone to a better place
- At least you were prepared
- Everything happens for a reason
- Time is a great healer
- I know how you feel
- Well, they were very old and we all have to go sometime
- They had a good innings

Remember...

Pre-bereavement

If someone has been suffering from an incurable illness, such as dementia or cancer, their loved ones may begin the grieving process long before the actual death takes place. They will need the same sort of consideration and support as they go through this pre-bereavement period as they will later on when the person has died.

Long term support

Bereavement does not stop after a month, a year or even ten years. We simply learn to live with it. It is therefore important to keep checking in with your colleague to ensure they have all the support they need and to be attentive to expressions of grief that appear even long after the death of their loved one.

“The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to.”

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Swiss-American psychiatrist and author (1926-2004)

The trigger could be a sound, a smell or a random memory. Birthdays, anniversaries and holidays can be hard. For someone who lost a baby in pregnancy, the due date can be a stark reminder. If you know a significant date is coming up, try to check in with your colleague to see if there is anything you can do to support.

Supporting yourself

Although your focus is likely to be on supporting your colleague through a difficult time, don't forget to look after your own wellbeing. Supporting someone who has been bereaved could be challenging for you –both as a colleague and as a person.

There might be organisational demands to manage as well as your own emotional response to your colleague's situation. The resources outlined below are there to support your wellbeing as well as that of your colleague.



Signposting to further support

Before you speak to your colleague, take some time to research what support is available to them. This section provides an overview of the support available to your colleague and yourself.

The first part includes support available within your organisation. The second consists of bereavement information and support from Hospice UK as well as public bodies and other charities.

Support available to Anchor employees

Being Well Website

All Anchor wellbeing support is detailed on the Being Well site in the Health section. Visit www.anchorbeingwell.co.uk/health

Colleague Advice Line

A free and confidential service. You can speak to an advisor by telephone, live chat or WhatsApp.

The service is free to all colleagues and staffed by a range of highly experienced consultants, including counsellors, psychotherapists, solicitors and financial experts; all qualified to give you clear, relevant guidance on the challenges you face.

Visit www.AnchorBeingWell.co.uk/health for more information.

Mental Health Support

You can use the Help@hand app to book a 30 minute video appointment.

The service is confidential, free to all colleagues and staffed by trained mental health professionals. Visit www.anchorbeingwell.co.uk/health for more information.

Hospice UK and other bereavement support resources

Anchor is signed up to the Compassionate Employers Programme. This is run by Hospice UK, and gives access to even more guidance and tools to support people experiencing bereavement and grief.

Compassionate Employers hub

For a more comprehensive list of resources, please log in to the Hospice UK Compassionate Employers Member's Hub using the link specifically for Anchor <https://www.hospiceuk.org/anchor>

Compassionate Bereavement Conversations E-Learning Tool

Discover the skills to navigate bereavement conversations in 30 minutes to help you practice having bereavement conversations at work. Accessible through the hub.

Bereavement support resources

Hospice UK's Dying Matters resources offer general advice for adults and children on talking about dying, as well as bereavement support.

www.hospiceuk.org/what-we-offer/dying-matters

Hospices offer support and information to the family and friends of people who were cared for by the hospice – both before and after a death. Some hospices also provide bereavement support services to the wider community, offering support for people not previously connected to the hospice. Find your local hospice to learn more about what is available in your area:

www.hospiceuk.org/about-hospice-care/find-a-hospice

The NHS website includes information about dealing with grief and loss.

www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/dealing-with-grief-and-loss/

Produced by Public Health England, 'Faith at the end of life: a resource for professionals, providers and commissioners working in communities' (2016) outlines the importance of faith at the end of life and after death.

It includes an overview of the main end of life beliefs, practices and rituals relating to the six major faiths in England.

www.gov.uk/government/publications/faith-at-end-of-life-public-health-approach-resource-for-professionals

Cruse Bereavement Care is a national charity, which provides support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies.

www.cruse.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK provides information and support (including a helpline) when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying, and when a child is facing bereavement.

www.childbereavementuk.org/when-someone-is-not-expected-to-live

Practical information and advice after someone has died

Covering how to register the death, notifying government departments and managing financial issues, the UK Government website features a step-by-step guide on what to do after a death. www.gov.uk/when-someone-dies

Local branches of Citizens Advice may also be able to offer information and advice – find out about local services at: www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Helplines and online forums

The Cruse Bereavement Care Freephone National Helpline is staffed by trained bereavement volunteers, who offer emotional support to anyone affected by bereavement.

Telephone number: 0808 808 1677

www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/helpline

This webpage also provides information about local support services, and details of the online CruseChat service.

The Marie Curie Bereavement Service is for people who might want to have ongoing support, from the same person, over the phone. Note that this is not a counselling service.

Telephone number: 0800 090 2309

www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/bereavement



www.hospiceuk.org/compassionate-employers

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