

Returning to work



what to do

For many, it is a financial necessity to return to work while for others it is a means of keeping occupied and creating a break from what has been an all-consuming grief. The workplace may be the only part of life that seems normal and routine.

But for many who have experienced a recent loss, returning to work can be difficult. Some postpone returning to their job concerned about the additional stress created by work.

Returning to work can be a difficult time for a person bereaved by suicide and a troubling time for employers and work colleagues. At first the bereaved person may be in a state of shock, overwhelmed by grief. In addition to sadness, reactions can include problems with concentration and memory, fatigue and loss of confidence. These reactions vary in intensity and not everyone will experience each of them.

Grief comes in waves and is unpredictable; each person grieves at their own pace and intense grief cannot be confined to non-working hours. So grief following suicide can lead to a short-term loss of efficiency, effectiveness and performance. With time, and with support, the employee will recover to take his or her place in the workplace again.

Many employers are compassionate and offer encouragement and understanding. However, others have an unrealistic view of how long it takes to "get over" a significant bereavement and may not be tolerant of the impact of grief. Unrealistic expectations from an employer are particularly unhelpful as they create significant stress and may result in a valued employee leaving the workplace. It's also good to keep in mind that there

may be an inquest and this can take place many months or even years after the death, re-awakening the intense grief.

How can the employer help?

Ideally, the bereaved employee should return to work only when he or she feels able to cope; you may be able to discuss with them the possibility of working part-time for a period.

- Your employee may be receiving counselling; it can help to be given time away from work for appointments.
- You could ask the bereaved person how their grief is affecting them, what they would like their colleagues to be told in relation to the death, and how they feel they could best be supported at this time.
- You could invite the bereaved employee to a morning tea or lunch a couple of days before they return to work. This would enable them to meet with their colleagues and share stories, photos etc and let their colleagues know what they need in terms of support. This would also benefit your team in handling their concerns about not knowing what to do or say when their colleague returns to work.
- It is also helpful when an employer provides information to fellow employees about suicide and bereavement, and perhaps invites a counsellor to speak with them creating a greater ease about offering support.

How can work colleagues help?

Work colleagues react to bereavement in different ways. Some feel awkward and avoid the bereaved person or make no reference to the death. The circumstances of some deaths are particularly difficult and

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for many, suicide presents a particular challenge for people about what to say.

It makes it easier if colleagues can mention the death, however uncomfortable they may feel. Just a few words, such as "I was so sorry to hear about your daughter / son / partner", will be helpful. Not everyone will want to talk about their situation in depth, especially when first returning to work. Later, they may appreciate some acknowledgement of the anniversary of the death as the year comes round.

Line managers may be able to consider various options for easing an employee back into work. It helps if colleagues can be sympathetic towards their needs for time off, for example, to go to counselling. Colleagues need to be aware that grief can be erratic and unpredictable, and that its impact lasts far longer than a few weeks.

Face to face with the public

There are added strains when bereaved people work with others who are physically or mentally ill, or when they support people with emotional difficulties. A newly bereaved person is emotionally vulnerable and the problems of others weigh heavily on them, accentuating their grief and perhaps having an impact on their work for a time. Alternatively, the concerns articulated by a patient or client can sometimes seem unimportant in relation to the bereaved person's loss.

What the bereaved person can do

It can be helpful to discuss your limits and concerns with your employer, perhaps arriving at a compromise whereby you work a few hours a day when you first return to the workplace. If you are grieving, you may be dreading the thought of returning to the workplace for several reasons:

- Seeing co-workers for the first time exposes you to "I'm so sorry" comments, and they remind you of your loss. As difficult as these expressions of sympathy may be to hear, they can be better than no acknowledgement at all. A simple "thank you" is all the response that is necessary. You do not owe anyone a story you do not wish to share.
- You may have a high-pressure job with many deadlines and little room for mistakes. You have probably noticed that it is hard to concentrate and retain information in your grief. You may be easily distracted, and errors can occur. It is useful to check everything twice, or ask a co-worker or supervisor to review what you have done. Let your co-workers or supervisor know how difficult things seem at this time and where you need their help.

- You may worry about emotionally breaking down in front of colleagues or in the middle of an important meeting. This can happen, but many people will understand if they know what has occurred in your life. If you need to excuse yourself, do so.

BEFORE returning to work, try some of the following:

- Be sure your workplace knows something about what has happened. Give them as much information as you are comfortable sharing. If people ask too many questions, let them know you are not comfortable going into it right now. Perhaps allow one key person to have enough information to keep speculation at a minimum. Keep him or her informed about funeral arrangements, time away from work, and how you are doing.
- Let your office know if you want to be included in regular e-mail correspondence so you can be kept updated on what is happening.
- You might arrange to go into the office to meet co-workers for lunch, getting past the first encounters. It can make it easier to go back to work at a later date.
- Consider returning for half-days for a week or so, easing your way back into the normal routine.
- Encourage your co-workers to learn more about grief so they can better understand what you are going through. Let them know what is helpful to you when you are having a particularly hard day: allowing you to have some alone time, making you a cup of coffee, or going for a short walk. The more they know what they can do for you, the more comfortable they will be with your grief and the more comfortable you will be in their presence.
- Keep good communication going. Set up regular meetings with your supervisor, colleagues or employees to talk about what is happening. Ask for feedback. Good, clear communication will discourage unhelpful chatter.
- You may need help with certain projects or deadlines. Identify those who you feel able to speak with and ask them for assistance when you need it.

Thinking ahead will make your return to work easier and less painful. Recovering from the suicide of a loved one is a slow process and getting back into a routine can be an important step in the journey.