



HospiceUK

A Manager's Guide: **Supporting Employees Following Bereavement**



www.hospiceuk.org

The death of a loved one can be one of the most difficult experiences a person can face, and returning to work afterwards can be a complex and emotional process. This guide offers compassionate, practical advice to help managers support employees with understanding, sensitivity, and confidence as they navigate their return to the workplace.

The reality of returning to work after a bereavement:

43%

of employees feel pressured to return before they are emotionally ready*

58%

of employees felt their performance was affected by grief months after bereavement*

54%

of employees worried taking time off after a bereavement would affect their job security*

These figures highlight just how challenging the transition back to work can be. This resource has been created to help managers understand the difficulties employees may face following a bereavement and to provide a simple, supportive conversation frameworks.

* Stats in this document provided by Marie Curie. Respecting and supporting grief at work: how employers can better support their staff through personal loss. Marie Curie; [2021]

Guidance for Employers and Line managers

Employers play a critical role in supporting an employee returning to work after bereavement. Acknowledging the loss and the significant impact it may have had on an employee's life is crucial in those early days.

These conversation guides have been created to support you have a compassionate and supportive conversation both immediately following a death, before a member of staff officially returns to work, or on their first day back.

We advise that you send this document in advance to allow the employee to think about what information they would like to share, and empower them to have some control over the support they need in returning.



Email template when a bereavement has just occurred

Dear X,

I am so sorry to hear about the death of your (mother/father/sister/friend/cousin)

I wanted to get in touch to share some information and outline the support we can offer over the coming weeks.

Please take the time you need over the coming days. We understand that everyone requires different support and time away following a bereavement, so we will follow your lead regarding what you need. I would like to suggest we check in towards the end of the week or early next week to see how you're feeling and to touch base, let me know which day and time would best suit you?

We know that work can feel overwhelming, so we want to ensure your workload is not something you need to worry about during your time off. Please let me know if there are any urgent or high priority tasks that I can take off your plate for now.

I would also like to ask if, and how, you would like this news to be shared with the wider team. We want to make sure you feel appropriately supported on your return. If you would like me to communicate this on your behalf, please let me know. Additionally, it would be helpful if you could share whether, and how, you would prefer to be contacted by colleagues during this time.

We would like to send something to you and your family during this difficult period. We can arrange flowers, or if you would prefer something like a meal box or a donation to a charity, we are very happy to do that. Please let me know the best address to send this to.

I also want to remind you of the support available through work via (EAP service information / Compassionate Employers membership details). You may also find [this resource](#) helpful for guidance and support around grief.

When you feel ready, we can talk about your return to work and what we can do to support you. For now, please focus on what matters most to you, and know that we are here whenever you are ready.

Take care,
Name

Conversation Template: Supporting an Employee Returning After Bereavement

Returning to work after a bereavement can be incredibly difficult. As managers, it's our responsibility to create an environment where employees feel safe and supported as they return, even when everything may feel different for them. This conversation guide is designed to help you structure a return to work meeting. We encourage you to hold this meeting before the employee's first day back so you can discuss the support available and agree on a plan together.



Before the Meeting

SHARE THIS GUIDE,
or an outline of the questions
you plan to discuss, in advance so
the employee has time to prepare.

CONSIDER THE LOCATION.
If appropriate, ask the employee
whether they would prefer to meet
in person, perhaps in a wellbeing
room or a quiet coffee shop.

If the meeting takes place virtually or
by phone, make sure you choose a
PRIVATE, QUIET SETTING
where you won't be overheard.

ALLOCATE UNINTERRUPTED TIME
for the conversation and minimise
all possible distractions.

Sometimes getting started can be the
hardest part, you can download our
“Talking to someone grieving” resource [here](#):

RESOURCE
Talking to someone grieving

Start with compassion and acknowledgement:

“Thank you for meeting with me. I want to start
by saying how sorry I am for your loss / the death
of your (mother/father/sister/friend/cousin)
I appreciate you taking the time to talk about how
we can support you as you return to work.”

Top tip: Try to mirror language that the bereaved
employee is using, for example: if they are saying
“my dad died” they might prefer you to use the
term “died” over “loss”. The right language is
different for everyone, so actively paying attention
to the language they are using will help you find the
words that feel right for them.

Key Questions to Ask

We want to create space for colleagues to share how they are truly feeling following a loss. This helps you identify any additional support they may need in the coming weeks and months.

“How are you feeling about returning to work?”

“Is there anything that would make this transition easier for you?”

Some people worry about returning to work because they fear they won't be able to keep up with their workload or perform as they usually would. Asking about possible adjustments can help them recognise what support might be helpful. We also recommend explaining any workload that has been reallocated during their absence and opening a conversation about how they would like this to be managed on their return.

“I recognise that work can feel overwhelming while you're navigating grief. Do you feel ready to resume your usual responsibilities, or would a phased return or reduced workload be more manageable?”

“Would temporary adjustments to your duties or hours be helpful?”

For many people, flexibility is essential, especially when they are dealing with the administrative tasks that often follow a bereavement. This may include adapting working hours, location, or responsibilities, or simply offering trust and space to take personal calls or attend appointments during the working day. Understanding what flexible arrangements are available can help employees feel more comfortable about returning to work.

“Are there any upcoming appointments or personal tasks you'll need time for?”

“Would flexible working arrangements support you during this time? For example, home working, fewer meetings, or a phased return?”

It's important that bereaved employees have ownership and autonomy over their experience. Clear communication about what the team knows, and agreeing a plan for how colleagues can offer support, can help prevent awkward or uncomfortable interactions for everyone involved.

“Would you like me to share any information with the team about your return to work?”

“How would you prefer colleagues to approach and support you?”

Grief doesn't end when someone returns to work. One of the most meaningful forms of support is ongoing recognition and regular check-ins. It's important to follow the employee's lead, some may prefer to seek support outside of work, while others may value the care and understanding offered by their manager and colleagues.

“How would you like me to check in with you, for example, regular meetings, emails, or something else?”

“Are there any important dates you'd like to share so we can be mindful of them throughout the year? For example, anniversaries or birthdays.”

“If you feel comfortable, we could complete a 'get to know me' form together to help me better understand how to support you.”*



Practical Information to Share

Outline internal bereavement leave entitlements and any relevant policies (e.g., Compassionate Leave, Flexible Working, Reasonable Adjustments).

Explain the support services available, such as the Employee Assistance Programme, Compassionate Employers membership benefits, or counselling options.

Confirm the next steps, including any agreed adjustments or a phased return plan.

Closing the Conversation:

“Thank you for sharing your thoughts. We'll work together to make this as manageable as possible. I understand that grief is not linear, so we can revisit this conversation and your needs and adapt as we go. Please know you can reach out at any time if things change.”

Follow-Up

- Document the agreed actions, and email with some notes.
- Schedule regular check ins, if requested.
- If needed, outline roles and responsibilities for the first few weeks back, including any workload that was temporarily covered by colleagues during the absence.

Get to know me document*

In 2025 we launched our “Get To Know Me” document. This document offers you the opportunity to share, at your comfort, anything that matters to you with your line manager, and how they can best support you at work. The aim is to identify meaningful ways managers can support you while building a trust based, compassion-led relationship with your manager.

This is a great document to support you during your return to work following a bereavement, but documents like this are often completed once and then forgotten. We encourage you to treat this as a living document, something to be updated as your needs evolve. It’s also a good idea to review it with your manager during annual appraisals to reflect any changes in your circumstances.

We recognise that grief is not linear, and during our working lives many of us will experience the death of someone we care about. In this document you have the opportunity to share dates which are important to you, including those that may relate to an anniversary or birthday of someone who has died. If you have experienced a bereavement and are seeking guidance or support, please take a moment to explore this resource on [how to cope with grief](#).

DOWNLOAD
Your copy here

What you need to know as a manager:

It’s important for anyone supporting people through bereavement to understand the legal rights that employees have when they lose someone close to them. Under the Employment Rights Act 2025, all employees are entitled to five days of unpaid bereavement leave from their very first day in a job. This entitlement also applies in situations where someone experiences a miscarriage before 24 weeks, recognising the emotional impact this can have.

There is also a separate entitlement known as Parental Bereavement Leave. This provides two weeks of paid leave for parents who experience the loss of a child under the age of 18, or when a pregnancy ends after 24 weeks.

These legal rights are designed to give people the space and time they need during an incredibly difficult period, and they form the foundation of compassionate and supportive practice in any workplace.

We also advise familiarising yourself with any people policies that may support an employee following a bereavement, such as Compassionate Leave policies, Flexible Working policies, or reasonable adjustments. If you are unsure where to find these, speak to your HR team.

Flexibility is vital, and everyone grieves differently. While some may wish to return to work quickly for a sense of normality, others may need more time. Employers should offer options such as extended leave, phased returns, or temporary adjustments to duties where possible.

Ways in which employees may be impacted in the weeks and months following a bereavement include:

Brain fog

Many employees experience significant brain fog that can feel like confusion or lethargy. Tasks that once felt manageable and straightforward may suddenly feel complicated and time consuming. People may struggle to prioritise their workload or meet deadlines.

Identity changes

Many people also struggle with their sense of identity after a bereavement. This can be especially challenging for those in management or leadership roles, who may worry about how their vulnerability or reduced capacity affects their team. Navigating work responsibilities while adjusting to a “new normal” can feel overwhelming as individuals try to understand who they are in the midst of grief.

Emotional reactions

The emotional impact of grief cannot be switched off between the hours of nine and five. Certain tasks, conversations, or situations may trigger strong emotions during the working day. Grief often comes in waves: someone may feel they are regaining capacity and stability, only to be suddenly knocked off balance again.

Distraction

Some people return to work quickly because they find comfort in routine and distraction. This can be helpful initially, but it’s important to recognise that grief may resurface weeks or months later. Regular check-ins help ensure employees feel safe to express how they are coping over time.

Anxiety

Many employees experience heightened anxiety after a death, even if the loss was anticipated. Bereavement can challenge our sense of mortality—our own and that of those around us. The finality of death can be difficult to process, and increased anxiety may persist for weeks, months, or even years.

Physical side effects

Physical symptoms of grief are common but often overlooked. Employees may experience sleep disturbances, weight loss or gain, aches and pains, IBS, headaches, or simply feel physically run down and more prone to illness.

Sadmin

This term is often used to describe the administrative tasks that follow a death, such as closing bank accounts, contacting utility companies, liaising with housing associations, or clearing a home. Many people are unprepared for the volume and complexity of this work. Much of it must be done during working hours, which can add pressure and emotional strain.

Religious and Cultural Considerations

People experience bereavement differently, and cultural or religious beliefs can shape how someone grieves, the rituals they follow, and the time they may need away from work. Grief can also change a person’s relationship with their faith, some may lean into religious practices, while others may step back for a while. As a manager, staying open, respectful, and avoiding assumptions helps create a supportive space. If an employee chooses to share their cultural or religious mourning processes, listening carefully and making appropriate considerations can make a real difference.

Special note for sudden death and suicide:

In cases of unexpected death or suicide, the administrative process can look very different. There may be an inquest or formal enquiry, which can take months. This can significantly affect an employee’s ability to return to work or maintain consistency. It is important to understand the specific challenges each individual may face so that support can be tailored appropriately during the early months following the loss.



The Compassionate Employers Programme at Hospice UK

Compassionate Employers is the UK's leading workplace wellbeing programme, dedicated to supporting employees through life's most difficult moments; including grief, caring and serious illness.

Delivered by **Hospice UK**, the national charity for hospice care. The programme blends leadership training and consultancy with accreditation to help organisations embed compassion into leadership, culture and people policies.

Find out more today - <https://www.hospiceuk.org/compassionate-employers>

About Hospice UK

Hospice care eases the physical and emotional pain of death and dying. Letting people focus on living, right until the end.

But too many people miss out on this essential care. Hospice UK fights for hospice care for all who need it, for now and forever.

www.hospiceuk.org 020 7520 8200

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