

## How can managers help?

Some people may welcome the distraction of being back at work and want to dive straight in. Others may not be able to handle more than the lightest of duties. Either way, you can expect people who have been bereaved to not be performing to the best of their abilities for a while. You may find they are distant in meetings, have difficulty concentrating, or are less organised than normal. Be gentle with them and make allowances. Here are some things that can help:

- Reducing their workload – discuss with them whether this is something they'd find helpful. Are there some duties you can take or delegate to other colleagues?
- Staging their return – find out what suits them and offer the chance to adjust back to work a day at a time.
- Allowing them space – grief can surface at any time. Give them permission to take time out of the office or duck out of meetings if they need to, no questions asked.
- Avoid pressure – businesses need their staff to be working, but pressuring someone can add to their anxieties and in the end be counterproductive.
- Check in with them – without pressuring them to come back to work, stay in contact while they're off, and find out how much or little they want colleagues to know about their situation. Meet them when they come back to work, maybe taking them aside for a quiet tea or coffee.
- Be mindful that things can change over time – some people may feel able to return to work initially and then find that they need time off later on.
- Be aware that grief often has an impact on someone's physical health, and they may need to take time off as a result.

## Remember...

The process of grieving is not linear, fading away to nothing over time. It can surface even long after the bereavement has happened.

Everyone grieves differently. Take your lead from the person themselves. Many people will be glad to hear the person who's died being remembered, but if they ask you not to mention them, don't bring them up. If they don't want to talk, don't try to make them. But acknowledge their loss. Don't ignore them or their grief.

If you need to offload your own thoughts and feelings, speak to someone else, not to the bereaved person themselves.

### Find Out More

There are some areas where it can be helpful to seek further advice, such as creating a formal bereavement policy or understanding the legal requirements around death and bereavement.

The Good Life Good Death Good Grief website offers a "Bereavement Friendly Workplaces Toolkit" with support for managers and staff on dealing with a bereavement.

[www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk/  
content/workplace\\_home/](http://www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk/content/workplace_home/)



Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief brings together people and organisations that are interested in improving people's experiences of death, dying and bereavement in Scotland.

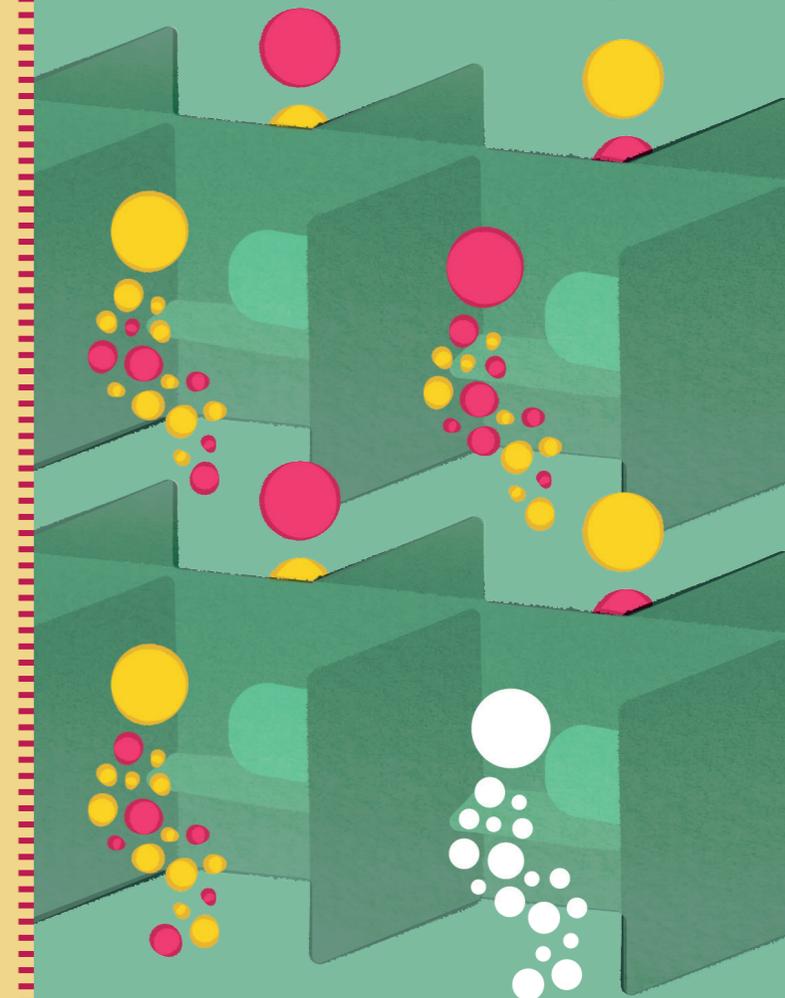
We are particularly focused on enabling communities and individuals to support each other through the hard times that can come with death, dying and bereavement.

We believe it is important to be prepared for illness and death – there are some practical steps that everyone can take to increase their chances of receiving the support they'd hope for towards the end of life.

Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief is an alliance, and anyone who shares our vision can join free of charge.

Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief is an initiative of the Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care.

**To find out how to get more help  
visit [www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk](http://www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk)  
or call 0131 272 2735**



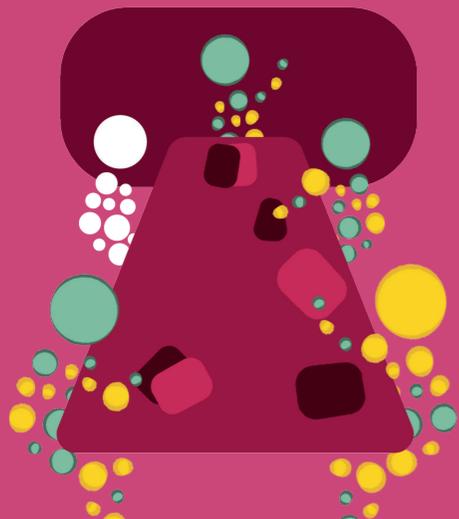
**#12**  
**What to do  
when a colleague  
has been bereaved**

## Being there for colleagues

When a colleague has been bereaved, it may be difficult to know what to do or say. Losing someone we love is the hardest thing many of us have to go through. Naturally, you want to be supportive of your colleague without saying or doing the wrong thing.

With a little guidance and courage, we can all be supportive colleagues. There is no magic spell to make things better, but sometimes simply being there can be helpful. It isn't usually a good idea to try to avoid the situation. This leaflet will help you think through some ways you might be able to show support.

*"It was clear a few colleagues didn't know how to approach me or engage with me and I felt shunned. I could sense their embarrassment and discomfort. Equally, there were colleagues who said, 'I can't imagine what this feels like as I've never experienced anything like this, but if you need a coffee, or walk, or chat, please just say'. That was lovely, and I took some of them up on their offer, if only to talk about what we had watched on TV the night before!"*



## What can you say?

Nothing you can say can heal your colleague's pain. But saying nothing doesn't usually help either. Imagine how isolating it can feel if everyone falls silent when you walk into a room, simply for fear of saying the wrong thing.

People may worry they will upset a colleague who is bereaved by "reminding" them of their loss. You can't remind someone of a loss; they won't have forgotten. They may, on the other hand, be glad to have their loss acknowledged.

Perhaps you worry that you'll feel uncomfortable, or that you won't know how to respond to comfort your colleague. Try to put your discomfort out of mind. Focus on them, not yourself.

You could try:

### Simple acknowledgement

- "I just wanted to say I'm thinking of you, and I'm sorry that this has happened to you."
- "I heard about your sister. I'm thinking about you."

### Opening up space to talk

- "Any time if you want to talk, I'm happy to listen. We could go for a walk or a coffee if you like."
- "It's good to see you. How are you finding being back at work?"

### Reassurance

- "Take as long as you need."
- "If you need to step out of the office, just do so."

### Offers of specific, practical help

- "Would it help if I took on this account for now?"
- "Would you prefer to work from home for a while? We can get that set up for you."

## What shouldn't you say?

Supportive and non-judgemental is the way to go when talking to someone who has been bereaved. Even if you have been bereaved yourself, try to remember that grief is individual and people experience it differently.

### Don't tell the person how to feel or predict what will happen.

- "It's time you moved on."
- "You'll get over it. Time's a great healer."

### Don't bring your personal beliefs into conversation, especially if you're unsure if they are shared by the person you are talking to.

- "He's in a better place now."
- "When you're gone, you're gone. Nothing you can do about it."

### Don't make assumptions about the person who has died.

- "She had a good innings."
- "It's what they would have wanted."

### Don't imply that the level of grief someone's feeling is somehow affected by the 'type' of bereavement they've experienced.

- For example, don't assume that someone will feel less grief for someone old than for someone young, or for a friend than a member of their family.

### Don't make assumptions about your colleague's relationship with the deceased.

- Families can be complex and secrets can be hidden. Even a seemingly close relationship may have had tensions you weren't aware of.
- "She'd be so proud of you."
- "He loved you so much."

### Don't use pressurising language. People need time to deal with their grief.

- "We need you back at work."
- "When are you coming back?"

## Being sensitive

Certain times and situations may cause grief to be felt more keenly. Be sensitive to potential triggers.

### Death of a baby or child

Are other staff pregnant? Is someone bringing their baby to meet colleagues? If in the future the bereaved parent becomes pregnant again, be mindful that they will still be grieving the loss of the baby that died. And be aware that this affects fathers as well as mothers.

### Death of a parent

Parental loss is a common bereavement and can be especially felt around Mother's Day and Father's Day or when colleagues are discussing family activities.

### Anniversaries

A birthday can change from a happy occasion to a sad landmark: "This is my first birthday without Mum." You can't know all the dates that matter to someone, but if a colleague seems out-of-sorts, be aware this might be the cause. Be particularly mindful around the anniversary of someone's death.

### Festivities

Christmas and other social, spiritual and cultural festivals are usually portrayed as happy times, and for many people they are. For others, though, they can be a reminder of those who won't be with them this year. Don't pressure people into social gatherings and parties.

### Physical reminders

Maybe your colleague's delivery round passes the hospital where their father died. Maybe there's a customer that reminds them of their late sister. Things can be raw in the aftermath of a bereavement.