



Caring Support Awareness Education

Fact Sheet 04 – Assisting a Bereaved Employee

Assisting a Bereaved Employee

This fact sheet is written for employers. If you are the one who has lost a loved one to suicide, please don't hesitate to pass this onto your employer. Most employers genuinely want to know how to support you through your loss, and will be grateful for the information. If you feel awkward doing this, then ask a colleague to pass it on. If you prefer, we can send a copy to your employer. Just contact us and let us know you would like us to do this.

Questions for the employer

- As a chief executive officer, manager and/or supervisor how would you relate to a person who has lost someone to suicide.
- Do you expect your employee to 'get over' this grief?
- Do you expect a certain deadline for this 'grief' to end? If so, how long would your timeline be?
- Do you expect your employee to perform his/her tasks with the same efficiency/dedication before suffering from 'grief'?
- Would you provide assimilation back to the employee's particular position within your organisation?
- Do you think it necessary to ask his/her colleagues if they would be willing to offer him/her appropriate support?
- Do you think that it is far better that you or his/her colleagues not mention the person who has died?
- Would you or his/her colleagues treat the employee differently if he/she was bereaved by the suicide death of a loved family member or close friend?
- Would the suicide death of someone you or your employee's colleagues loved affect you or them differently?

- Do you or your employee's colleagues believe that a suicide death is caused by that person's mental illness?
- Would you or your employee's colleagues view the death of a child/sibling/mother/father/partner /friend of the employee in a different way?
- Choose someone whom you love dearly and try and imagine what your life would be without that person.

The following pages provide some understanding or insight into how these questions can be answered.

This Thing Called 'Grief'

What type of employee suffers from this thing called 'grief'? Is it only office workers that mope around for days? Is it the professional who is always confused and cannot make any decisions, let alone the right one? Is it a tradesperson who isn't up to the task? Is it a hospitality employee who cannot seem to stay awake?

First and foremost you need to understand what 'grief' really encompasses. The dictionary describes the word 'grief' as: misery, sorrow, pain, unhappiness, angst and woe. Ask yourself one question: do all these words mean exactly the same thing? Take the definitions of these words as an example:

misery	=	Depression
sorrow	=	Regret
pain	=	Ache
unhappiness	=	Melancholy
angst	=	Agony
woe	=	Sadness

What do the first letters of this last list spell? DRAMAS! One of the definitions of the word 'drama' is TRAGEDY!

When a person suffers from 'grief' its effects on that person depends not only on the particular family/ partner or friend who has died, but also the relationship your employee had with his/her family member/partner or friend. Nonetheless, your employee will still suffer 'grief' no matter who has died nor the circumstances of that death.

Grief is a suffering of the heart, mind and soul body. It is excruciating mental and physical agony. This thing that is 'grief' may manifest itself in the breakdown of a person's immune system; it may subject the bereaved to migraine-like headaches; it may eventuate as longer-term fatigue; it may be a significant contributing factor in the development of depression, a serious and often debilitating condition in itself; it may be driven by some unknown, energetic force that propels the sufferer to 'overload' on work.

On Suicide

Contrary to popular belief, the majority of people who suicide do not actually want to die, it is the person's confused and ambivalent state of mind that precedes the decision to suicide. It is the expectation of that person that suicide is a solution to their particular insurmountable problem. Often an overwhelming sense of hopelessness can trigger depression and at a specific time, a person's despondency may develop suicidal thoughts. Yet it seems the pain of emotional suffering diminishes once the person has made the decision to suicide.

Usually, no matter who or how a person dies, your employee may feel a certain amount of guilt. If, however, that person has suicided, your employee may carry an enormous amount of guilt. They may even be ashamed of the fact that their loved one suicided.

It is also pertinent to remember that just as cancer and AIDS once carried stigma, so even now 'suicide' bears stigma which dates back to when a suicide was regarded as a crime. This is an arcane belief and we should all work toward removing this stigma.

Returning to Work

Returning to work may be difficult and can usually be viewed with apprehension. Questions such as:

- How will I cope?
- How can I remain cheerful all the time?
- Will I cry all the time?
- What will I say?
- How can I say "good morning/good afternoon" on the telephone, to colleagues?
- How will I last a whole day?
- How will I react to what I see as "inconsequential" problems?
- How will I cope with trivial arguments?

The length of time will vary from person to person regarding the 'right time' to return to work. Grief is as unique as a set of fingerprints. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' time to go back to work; it is only 'right' when that person is ready to return to work. Even then, grief may cause both mental and physical fatigue, the bereaved person may suffer lack of concentration. A bereaved person will have 'good' times and 'bad' times. The reality of what has happened comes in waves and when brought to bear, hits with tremendous force. The mind body is in shock. Meanwhile, through all these oscillating emotions, the sufferer is trying to come to terms with his/her grief.

It is unfortunate in a majority of cases for employees, that reasons beyond their control, such as economic necessity or employer's unrealistic expectations, will dictate their return. However, timing can play a crucial role in returning a person to work. For some that have to return to work

a few days or weeks after the death of a loved one, may suffer emotionally for many years, as their grief process has been interrupted. For others, a quick return to work is a salvation, as they use their work as a tool for their road to recovery. It augurs well for employers to gauge the emotional situation of their employee and, if necessary, take action and suggest flexible working hours or offer the bereaved person a special project to keep their mind focused.

Some bereaved persons feel that returning to work definitely helped them. It restored some measure of normalcy for some in performing a daily routine. It helped others by wearing a mask of pretense (smiling, saying 'hello', answering 'fine') that pretense slowly became a reality. Other problems for the bereaved person may seem minuscule in comparison with death and it may be hard for your employee to be objective regarding other people's dilemmas. Be aware anger for the bereaved person is a normal emotion and may vent without fear of criticism. Also that while in the stages of acute grief, your employee may be unable to make rational decisions. Their confidence may also be shattered resulting in low self esteem.

The bereaved person's feelings are greatly heightened in a work environment as it involves a commitment over a specific number of hours each day. It is important to recognize that a bereaved person, at times, might not be able to commit to a full work day.

It is important for both the employer and the employee's colleagues to acknowledge the bereaved person's loved one who has died. It is to be remembered that that person once lived and sharing memories will always validate his/her existence. It is also important to remember not to mouth inanities, such as:

- It was for the best
- You're young and you'll find someone else
- God only bestows trials that He knows that you can cope with
- You can have other children, or
- You're lucky you've got other children.

It is best to simply offer support.

At times it may be difficult for employers and/ or colleagues to know how to handle the situation; and even the bereaved person may be reluctant to speak about his/her feelings for fear of becoming too emotional. It is important to remember that as a society we lack understanding and are 'fearful' regarding the subjects of death and bereavement, and even more so, when it happens to be a suicide. Yet it is important that the bereaved person needs to feel comfortable talking about their loved one's life/death and/or death by suicide.

Persons who are grieving over a loved one's suicide are perhaps more vulnerable.

It is important to understand that the bereaved employee is at risk for future physical, emotional and social problems, especially if they have difficulty in coming to terms with their grief and reinvesting in the future.

As an employer, it is helpful that you discover if the bereaved employee has a close friendship with one or more of his/her colleagues and sees him/her socially. If this is the case, then the bereaved employee's loss of their loved one may also impact on the work environment, as his/her friend may also be in a state of shock, as well as being emotionally fragile.

Work colleagues will also be unprepared for dealing with the bereaved employee if they have not experienced 'grief', they cannot be expected to fully understand the enormity of their colleague's bereavement.

As an employer, to aid all concerned and your organisation as a whole, would you be prepared to provide in-house counselling for the bereaved employee's colleagues, in order that their support may be of greater value?

Counselling can also help to offset the detachment, depression and isolation so often experienced by the bereaved employee. Because of the loneliness associated with bereavement, this work is particularly suited to groups.

As an employer would you be prepared to suggest group counselling for both the bereaved employee and his/her colleagues?

As an employer whose staff is their greatest resource and perhaps their bereaved employee may be one of their best assets, is it not, therefore, prudent to nurture their employee and his/her colleagues in order to hasten a smooth transition back into the workforce?

Recommendations

The Do's

- Do provide your bereaved employee with a forum in which he/she feels free to discuss their thoughts and feelings.
- Do be prepared to listen.
- Do take the initiative by suggesting counselling for your bereaved employee and his/her colleagues.
- Do ensure that at least the bereaved employee's colleagues are counselled.
- Do ascertain whether your bereaved employee is capable of the tasks required and offer some flexibility to them if required.
- Do employ flexible working hours if that helps your bereaved employee.
- Do allow your bereaved employee to cry. It may only be a tear or two or it may be a flood. Whatever the case, it is a necessary release for him/her.
- Do let your bereaved employee talk about the person who has died. If you or his/her colleagues also knew that person, share some memories with him/her.
- Do include these guidelines in your Human Resource Management procedures and policies.

The Don'ts

- Don't place a timeline on the 'grief' your bereaved employee is experiencing.
- Don't expect your bereaved employee to function like he/she did prior to his/her loss immediately on return to work.
- Don't mouth inanities, such as 'I know how you feel'. Remember that all loss and grief is very individual.
- Don't think that death puts a ban on laughter. There is much healing in laughter.
- Don't be judgmental in your relationship with the bereaved employee.

Helplines

QLD Helplines

Standby Brisbane 07 3250 1856

Standby Response Service 0438 150 180

(24 hour mobile crisis response to suicide bereavement.)

Sunshine and Cooloola Coasts 0407 766 961

National Helplines

LifeLine: 13 11 14 (24 hour)

Mensline: 1300 789 978 (24 hour)

Suicide Callback Line: 1300 659 467 (24 hour)

National Hope Line: 1300 467 354 (24 hour bereavement support)

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636

Kids Help Line: 1800 55 1800 (24 hour)

SANE Helpline: 1800 18 SANE (M-F 9am-5pm)

