

How Employers, Supervisors, and Human Resource Staff Can Support Newly Bereaved People



The death of a child is a life-altering event. Individuals who interact with bereaved parents, siblings, caregivers, and other family members in the aftermath of tragedy have a unique opportunity to provide meaningful support during this crucial time. This fact sheet provides tips for employers, supervisors, and human resource (HR) staff when connecting with newly bereaved families.



Employers Can Make All the Difference

Bereavement can have broad and long-lasting effects on an employee's health and well-being. Most employees who need time away from work to grieve and cope after the death of a child have no legal right to take leave. Employers can support employees by providing them time to grieve their loss, handle administrative affairs, and adjust to a new set of needs and responsibilities. Many employers voluntarily offer a few days of bereavement leave to arrange and attend a funeral or address personal affairs, but for bereaved parents and caregivers, adjusting to the death of a child takes much longer—often years.

Practical Tips

- 1. Say the child's name.** Using the child's name in conversation acknowledges the importance of their life. Don't worry about reminding bereaved parents and caregivers of their child; they are thinking about them constantly. Confirm with the family that you are saying the name correctly and ask if there is another name they would prefer you use (i.e., a nickname or other term of endearment).
- 2. Offer a clear bereavement policy.** Bereavement policies can be structured in a variety of ways depending on the size and values of an organization. The employee handbook should have a bereavement policy that clearly defines the length of leave, the parameters on when leave must be taken, the types of relationships that fall under that leave (e.g., close friends or pets), what documentation is required, and whether wages will be replaced.
- 3. Commemorate the child's life.** With the consent of the newly bereaved family, finding ways to commemorate the child's life may be welcomed. This could include planting a tree, supporting a school garden, or establishing a scholarship. Tailor commemorations to honor the child who has died.
- 4. Honor cultural and religious traditions.** Always be responsive to how cultural and religious practices might influence the grieving and mourning process.
- 5. Educate all individuals who are in a supervisory or HR role.** Immediate supervisors often have the most contact with a newly bereaved employee and the greatest visibility into employee performance. Supervisors and HR staff should receive basic training on the impact of grief on employee performance and morale. Temporarily adjusting productivity expectations and the frequency of check-ins can provide relief for bereaved employees.

6. **Plan for their return to work.** If allowable, discuss the employee's return with them prior to their expected return date and ask how they would like their colleagues to acknowledge (or not) their loss. You can also offer the newly bereaved family the opportunity to provide a written letter to colleagues sharing their story and how they would like to interact with their peers. This allows the family to set the narrative and guide engagements with fellow staff members. Consider reaching out to your Employee Assistance Program for assistance with employee returns and providing sensitivity training for colleagues and supervisors.
7. **Consider new work arrangements.** Even if only temporarily, provide flexibility whenever possible, including options for remote or hybrid work or shifting to a part-time or condensed schedule. Understand that transitioning fully back to work may take significant time, and newly bereaved employees may require additional time off for mental health or unexpected family needs that arise after the death of a child.
8. **Provide a list of resources.** Supervisors or human resources staff should reach out to employees to ensure they are connected to and aware of how their employee benefits can support them after the death of a child. Many employee benefit plans include access to therapists, social workers, and financial resources that may be helpful to families, bereaved parents, and caregivers.

Other Things to Keep in Mind

There are a variety of ways to offer compassion, dignity, and respect for bereaved parents, caregivers, and families. Here are a few more tips:

- **Comprehension may be impaired.** Grief, particularly traumatic grief such as the death of a child, significantly affects the ability for the brain to function normally. Newly bereaved individuals are not just sad; their ability to understand, process, and comprehend information is impaired.
- **How many children do you have?** One of the most difficult questions a newly bereaved parent or caregiver will be asked is, "How many children do you have?" There is no right answer, but be prepared for them to include all of their children, whether living or dead.
- **Simple questions can be hurtful.** Common questions like, "How are you doing?" can be reframed as, "How are you coping?" to acknowledge the challenge of losing a child. It may be helpful to ask, "Could I bring you dinner this week?" or simply say, "I have been thinking of you."
- **There are no stages of grief.** The stages of grief are a common misconception.
- **Don't ask how the child died.** What's important is that the child died, not how they died. Asking how they died may lead parents and caregivers to relive the most painful experience of their life.
- **All deaths are not created equal.** Resist the urge to share your experience with death. If you are a bereaved parent, you may offer a time to visit with them privately, but be sensitive to the possible impact on the family and on you when sharing your experience.

Resources

- **988: Free Mental Health Hotline.** If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text 988 to be connected to crisis intervention and suicide prevention resources. Learn more at 988lifeline.org/get-help/.
- **Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)** provides tools and resources for employers, visit shrm.org to learn more.
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)** offers information on coping with bereavement and grief, visit samhsa.gov/communities/coping-bereavement-grief.
- **Evermore** is dedicated to improving the lives of bereaved people. For more information, visit evermore.org. To access a national free Grief Support Directory, visit evermore.org/grief-support-directory.