

# Employers: Helping Your Employees Cope With Loss

Grief is a normal part of life that touches all of us at some point. When an employee is grieving the loss of a loved one or co-worker, the entire workplace feels the effect.

The Family Centre, an Edmonton organization that provides employee assistance programs, notes that

- 75% of mourners say their reduced ability to concentrate affected them well beyond their bereavement leave
- 50% of trades people affected by a death reported a higher incidence of injury in the days and weeks following the death

Grieving employees often become classic examples of presenteeism—they turn up for work but are unable to perform. As a result of their emotional distress, these employees may

- make poor decisions
- supervise ineffectively
- put workplace safety at risk

Like other employee assistance programs, an effective bereavement policy is proactive. Offering support to grieving employees is not only compassionate and appropriate, it will also save time and resources.

## Understanding the grieving process

The standard bereavement leave in many workplaces is one to three days. Bereavement leave allows employees time to express their immediate grief and tend to other details, such as funeral arrangements, but it may not give employees enough time to deal with their grief in the longer term. Several days after the loss, they may still be in shock and unable to accept the reality of their situation. Grieving is a process that may take weeks, months or even years.

Grieving employees may be dealing with a range of physical, psychological and social symptoms, such as

- trouble concentrating
- lack of motivation
- lower productivity
- confusion, memory lapses
- anxiety, crying or other emotional responses
- social withdrawal
- more frequent illness
- higher injury rate

You can support employees by acknowledging their grief and offering an effective bereavement policy.

## Developing a bereavement policy

An effective bereavement policy includes the following supports:

### 1. Paid leave

- Figure out how much paid leave you can offer. A full week is a realistic choice.
- Decide whether the leave can be modified in specific situations, such as an employee needing to travel to a funeral.
- Take into account the relationship of the deceased to the bereaved employee. Recognize that the death of a loved one outside the immediate family may be equally upsetting, e.g. the loss of a grandparent.
- Respect cultural differences. Depending on the culture, the traditions around mourning (the public expression of grief) may take more time.

### 2. Unpaid leave

- Offer extended unpaid leave.
- Provide job guarantees for employees who take an extended leave.

**3. Vacation leave**

- o Make it easy for grieving employees to add vacation leave to their bereavement leave.
- o Allow co-workers to give vacation days to bereaved colleagues.

**4. An emergency loan program**

- o Offer no-cost loans to employees for death-related expenses, such as travel or funerals.

**5. Official recognition of loss**

- o Acknowledge the loss with an official gesture, such as a memorial event at work, a floral arrangement for the funeral or a charitable donation.

**6. Grief counselling**

- o Offer grief counselling through an employee assistance program or a community organization, such as a hospice.

**7. Equitable and flexible treatment**

- o Ensure your bereavement policy allows for each employee's needs and treats all employees fairly.

**Acknowledging grief**

As an employer or supervisor, you set the tone. Your response will make a lasting impression not only on bereaved employees but also on their co-workers. The compassion and respect you offer will be returned in the form of employee loyalty and retention.

Support grieving employee while they are on leave:

- Offer your sympathy and ask if there is anything you can do to help.
- Explain your organization's bereavement policy, if there is one.
- Stay in touch. Assure employees that everything is all right at work and that their work is being looked after. Keep them in the loop if it seems appropriate but don't overwhelm them with details.
- Help employees access grief counselling through an employee assistance program or community agency.
- Ask what the employee would like you to say to co-workers about the loss.
- Call a meeting to talk with staff, if appropriate. Include a grief counsellor who can answer questions and provide support. Address any concerns staff may have, such as how to cover a bereaved co-worker's duties.

Continue your support after employees return to work:

- Be patient. Grief has no timeline and people grieve in their own way.
- Offer flexible work arrangements, such as reduced hours, fewer duties, job sharing, telecommuting or time off when necessary.
- Ease up on deadlines where possible or bring in extra help.
- Ensure supervisors understand that bereaved employees may have trouble coping and may need to leave the workplace on short notice. Have supervisors stay in close contact with them, at least for the first few days after their return to work.
- Meet regularly with bereaved employees (and their supervisor, if applicable) to be sure they are getting the support they need.
- Watch for signs that their grief has become self-destructive, such as physical changes, signs of substance abuse, isolation or feelings they can't manage. Step in to offer counselling or other support as appropriate.
- Provide a quiet place where all staff can go to de-stress and re-energize during the work day.

Help co-workers offer support:

- Allow co-workers time off to attend the funeral or memorial service, if appropriate.
- Offer grief support training to supervisors and staff, if appropriate.

- Organize practical help where appropriate: a month of meals, child care, snow shovelling, yard work and so on.
- Co-ordinate offers from co-workers to help with the bereaved's duties.
- Consult with staff about what needs to be done and how to do it.
- Thank co-workers for their efforts to support their bereaved colleague.

Given the depth and complexity of the grieving process, the profound effect it can have on the workplace is understandable. Supporting grieving employees helps to create the kind of environment that ensures productivity, generates loyalty and builds goodwill for your organization. Best of all, it creates the kind of place people want to work in.