

# Helping the Bereaved at Work

Bereavement is certain to affect all of us at some point in our lives. Bereavement can be experienced in the workplace in a number of ways; employees can be bereaved through the death of a family member or close friend; a staff member may die, leaving work colleagues shocked and numb; former colleagues may pass away. Death by tragic circumstances e.g. suicide or road traffic accident can also occur.

A supportive workplace can help a bereaved person on his/her return to work and assist those affected by a workplace death.

## Supporting bereaved colleagues

- Sympathise with the bereaved person.
- Attendance at funeral ceremonies may be appropriate, if it can be facilitated.
- Acknowledge his/her return to the workplace. Talk about the death and funeral.
- Allow the bereaved person to talk. Repetition of details of events around the death and funeral are common and perfectly normal. Some people prefer not to talk. Just let your colleague know that you are there to support.
- Do not be surprised by tears, repeated conversations and/or sudden outbursts of weeping or anger.
- Allow the bereaved time to adjust.
- The nature of the death plays a big part in grieving. Sudden death e.g. heart attack, road accident, violent death, suicide and murder can take a long time to be really accepted. In the case of a long illness, some anticipatory grief may have been experienced.
- Offer support and sympathy. Grieving is normal, can be extremely painful and, in some cases, protracted. How long an individual may grieve can vary, depending on the relationship to the deceased and the personal needs of the individual.
- A colleague as a parent, aunt, uncle, grandparent, sibling etc. may be bereaved through the death of a child. This can be a particularly difficult time.
- If in doubt about what to say, empathise by saying "I am very sorry for your loss".
- Do not expect invitations to be accepted in the early stages of a bereavement, or imagine that social occasions are in the best interest of the bereaved person. Often these outings put pressure on the person to behave and conform to what is 'normal'. Gentle inclusion should be made, but no offence or annoyance shown if invitations are rejected.
- Try to remember how you would treat a colleague returning to work after major illness or surgery. Great consideration would be given to their physical ability to cope with work and social events. Bereavement can be akin to surgery of the emotions and needs equal patience and understanding in helping the bereaved person to come to terms with and cope with the loss.
- Let your colleague know if there have been any changes/developments at work.
- Bereavement can often change lifestyles in many ways. Apart from the loss and pain caused by the death, domestic and financial situations can be altered considerably, causing further distress those bereaved. They may have to re-organise their lives depending on their relationship to the deceased.
- If your attempts to help are rebuffed, do not take it personally.
- Be patient and supportive.

## When a work colleague dies

### Guidance for Managers

- It is important that line managers take a proactive approach when a staff member dies.
- Ensure that all colleagues are made aware of the death.
- How colleagues are informed will vary. The news may trickle from one to another depending on how the news first breaks. It may be appropriate to bring co-workers together to inform them.
- Allow co-workers to gather together to talk about what has happened, share their loss and support each other.
- Seek support from the CSEAS.
- It may be appropriate to have an Employee Assistance Officer (EAO) on-site to provide support to staff – discuss this with the CSEAS.
- Be aware that the death may impact on some, more than others depending on their relationship with the deceased, their own personal circumstances and the nature of the death.
- Inform local HR Division and PeoplePoint.
- Make contact with the family of the deceased as appropriate.
- Consider contacting the CSEAS to see how best to offer CSEAS support to the family of the deceased in the aftermath of the death.
- Where appropriate, attendance of some staff at funeral ceremonies might be considered.
- In the aftermath, check in with staff members to see how they are.
- Facilitate the family of the deceased in collecting personal belongings from the workplace.
- Remember that a gap is left when a co-worker dies. A sensitive approach is best when a new employee is assigned.
- Remember too, that you may also be affected by the death – look after yourself and seek support.

### Guidance for Colleagues

- Remember that each person's reaction to a death is unique to him/her and may be quite different to yours.
- Allow others to talk and be available to listen.
- Talk to your manager/colleagues about attendance at funeral ceremonies, if possible.
- Support your colleagues.
- Grieve in your own way.
- Be aware of your own reaction.
- Seek support if you are finding it difficult to cope with the death. This support might be from your own personal resources such as a partner, family member or friend, or, in the workplace, from colleagues, managers or the CSEAS.
- Should a new employee be appointed, welcoming him/her to the division is important. He/she may not be aware of the death of your colleague.

### Useful Resources

- Civil Service Employee Assistance Service  
[www.cseas.per.gov.ie](http://www.cseas.per.gov.ie)
- Bereavement Counselling Service  
[www.bereavementireland.com](http://www.bereavementireland.com)
- Irish Hospice Foundation  
[www.hospice-foundation.ie](http://www.hospice-foundation.ie)
- Bernardos– Bereavement support for children and young people  
[www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)
- Rainbows Ireland – peer support for children  
[www.rainbowsireland.com](http://www.rainbowsireland.com)
- AnamCara Supporting Parents after Bereavement  
[www.anamcara.ie](http://www.anamcara.ie)
- Bereaved.ie Supporting those who have been bereaved  
[www.bereaved.ie](http://www.bereaved.ie)