



How to be a Compassionate Employer

Supporting grieving employees following the death of a loved one

Over the past 35 years The Compassionate Friends Victoria has been providing peer support to bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents along with educating the community on the impacts of grief. They have heard a wide variety of accounts from bereaved individuals relating to how they were treated by their employer following the death of a loved one. Whilst some individuals felt well-supported in their work environment, others recounted particularly negative experiences, to the extent that some felt the only possible solution was to leave their workplace altogether.

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, as the largest provider of grief and bereavement education in Australia, works to build the capacity of individuals, organisations and communities in order to enhance wellbeing following adverse life events. The Centre is funded by the Victorian Department of Health as the statewide specialist bereavement service.

In an effort to better educate and support workplaces in the area of grief and bereavement, The Compassionate Friends Victoria, in partnership with the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, have developed the following suggestions based on employee's lived experience of what they have found helpful to help guide and support employers in the development of compassionate policy and practice within organisations.

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Guidelines to being a Compassionate Employer

1

Understand Bereavement

“Grief has to be lived through every day. It’s not something one ‘gets over’ like a cold or the flu. The ongoing care and support of my employer helps in easing the pain of losing our daughter.”

What is grief? How long does it last? Does everyone grieve in the same way? What supports are available?

Everyone, at some point in their lives, will experience the death of someone close to them. Based on this knowledge, it would be a fair assumption that at some point, one of your employees will experience bereavement.

You don’t need to be an expert in the bereavement field, however it is good practice for employers and management staff to have some understanding around the subject. You may like to consider:

- Arranging some basic bereavement professional development for your management team
- Have some understanding around things that may be inappropriate to do/say (See Guideline 8: Be Respectful)
- Compile a bank of resources and useful links for staff to review and access when needed.

2

Develop a Bereavement Policy

“I was given the opportunity to take extended time off work well beyond the normal number of bereaved days without the pressure of providing a certificate. There was no pressure placed on me to return to work.”

Preparing a bereavement policy is no different to a grievance or workplace accidents policy - whilst we hope we never have to use them, the reality is that these things do happen, and we need to be prepared for them.

In preparing a bereavement policy you might like to consider the following:

- What can you, and are you prepared to, offer a bereaved employee?
- What arrangements are currently in place with regard to compassionate leave?
- Can employees utilise other forms of leave (e.g. sick, annual, long-service, unpaid) if required?
- Can you be flexible in your approach? Can colleagues donate leave to a bereaved colleague?
- Can you make provisions for extended leave at the organisation’s/manager’s discretion?
- Is the policy written in a clear and accessible way for staff?
- In what ways could you meet the practical needs of bereaved staff?
- Do you offer an EAP program?

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After the Death

Following the death of a loved one, many employers feel hesitant to ‘intrude’ in the immediate days that follow; however acknowledgement of the loss, and the offer of support and understanding at this time is very important.

While it may not be immediately obvious, even brief contact is appreciated and remembered by the bereaved, and letting your employee know straight away that there is no pressure or expectations from you, gives them one less thing to worry about.

There are a range of things you can do immediately following a death that can be helpful and supportive to employees:

- Send flowers and a card on behalf of the organisation.
- Call them, express your sadness for their loss and reassure them that there is no pressure to return to work until they are ready.
- Attend the funeral if appropriate. If you are unsure, ask them.
- Assure them that their workload will be taken care of in their absence.
- Call them every couple of days simply to check in and offer support.
- If other employees are affected by the bereavement, it is important to extend support to them.

“That night (of my daughter’s death) I received a phone call from the National HR Manager to offer more support and see what I needed.”

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Returning to Work

Returning to work following a bereavement can be difficult for an employee, as they often carry a range of fears with them, for example:

- What if everyone expects me to just ‘get over it’?
- What if I can’t control my emotions?
- What if people ask questions I can’t answer?
- I’ll be so far behind in my work, what if I can’t catch up?
- What if I can’t make it through the day?

There are many measures employers can take to reassure employees and ensure that their transition back into the work environment is supported, realistic and workable, for example:

- Ask your employee what you can do that will help them get through their first day back.
- Issue an email to staff advising them that their colleague is returning, and to be mindful of being sensitive, supportive and not overloading them.
- Offer them flexibility around their work hours wherever possible.
- Offer a return to work plan, that is gradual and offers flexibility
- Be realistic in your expectations. Try to put yourself in their shoes.
- Ease them back into their workload, so that it doesn’t become overwhelming.
- Be present and available.

“I was placed on a return to work program which included reduced hours, reduced work load and the opportunity to leave work on days when I did not feel strong enough. Regular meetings were organised with the assistant director and my manager to check my progress.”

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Communication

Communication is an essential part of any business environment, and when it comes to interacting with bereaved employees, it is absolutely vital to maintain open and honest lines of communication.

It may help to consider the following points around communication:

- Keep in touch while the employee is on leave.
- Nominate a staff member or manager as the direct point of contact for your employee
- Ensure that all communications are delivered through one person. Consistency will mean that there is no confusion or miscommunication for the bereaved employee.
- Upon return to work, maintain thoughtful and honest communication.
- Be careful not to make assumptions about their needs – ask them how you can help and what you can do to make their transition back into work smooth, comfortable and supportive.
- Reassure them that they can ease back into their workload at their own pace.
- Reassure them that no one has any expectations around their output at this point in time.
- Communicate to their colleagues that they can support them and cover some of their workload if necessary.
- Check in regularly with them to see how they are progressing and if there is anything you can do to further support them.

“My employer acknowledged the loss that we had suffered and also ensured that we were coping by regularly taking the time to speak with us.”

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Be a Good Listener

When someone is grieving, often the greatest supports you can offer is time, and the ability to listen.

Some things to consider:

- Let your employee know that your door is always open to them, for however long they need it.
- Be prepared to listen to and accept strong emotions.
- Unless they ask for it, don't feel that you have offer any advice. They aren't asking you to 'fix' things for them. No one can take away the pain and sadness felt by the bereaved, but having the support and understanding of an employer can be a great comfort.
- If your employee would prefer to talk to a different colleague, give them and their colleague permission to take time out of their day-to-day schedule to do this.
- Provide those in your team who are providing support with an avenue to talk and debrief if they need it.
- Consider giving all employees access to an EAP program and/or bereavement support service if they feel they need additional external support.

“It is the kindness and empathy of my workmates, from senior management down who simply sat and listened, left me in my own space or just knew when a pat on the shoulder was needed, that I will remember.”

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Be Compassionate

With compassion and understanding, the bereaved can better transition back into the workplace. Indeed, alongside the support of friends and family, the workplace has an equally important role in the support network and caring community of the grieving employee.

Some things to consider:

“Through my manager, my employer has shown fantastic compassion, set aside time to find out my needs and hear my story and provided practical assistance to help me provide for my family.”

- Try to foster a culture of compassion and understanding within the workplace.
- Maintaining empathy beyond the first few weeks can require a conscious effort.
- Remind employees along the way that their colleague requires ongoing compassion and support from them.
- Keep in mind that you cannot provide effective support if you do not look after yourself as well. Self-care is important in order to avoid compassion fatigue.
- Make sure that you communicate to the importance of self-care to the rest of your team.

8

Be Respectful

When interacting with employees who have lost a loved one, it is important to be respectful of their needs, their grieving style and of their situation. Being respectful, sensitive and accepting of your employee will make the world of difference as they transition back into the workplace.

The following points may be helpful in maintaining respectful support:

“After my daughter died, I felt very nurtured and was treated with dignity, compassion and gentleness I felt my privacy and my pain were respected which was important to me.”

- Give them the space to grieve in their own way and their own time.
- Be respectful of their privacy
- Try not to say things like “I know” or “I understand” unless you really do. Alternative responses might be ‘I can’t even imagine what you are going through’ or ‘it must be so hard for you’.
- Don’t make assumptions as to how they are feeling or what they need. Ask them.
- Listen to their needs, and try to assist in whatever ways you can.
- Appreciate that various cultures grieve and mourn in different ways – try not to impose your own views and beliefs.
- Don’t avoid them. While there are no words that can heal their pain, to hear no words and to feel isolated is far worse.
- Offer to spend time with them, but don’t commit to or suggest support that you are unable or unwilling to follow through with.
- Avoid use of platitudes such as ‘They had a good innings’, ‘It was God’s will’ or ‘It could be worse’
- Don’t take anger or strong emotions personally. Grief is an emotional rollercoaster, and the reactions of the bereaved are not a personal attack on you.
- Avoid comparing their loss to other losses. Grief is as individual as a fingerprint, and no loss is ever ‘the same’ as someone else’s.

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Be as Flexible as Possible

Offering flexibility in working arrangements to a bereaved employee can make a huge difference in their transition back into the workplace. Suggestions around flexibility may include:

“My employer arranged other staff to work with me on my return. They arranged a slow return to normal duties reducing my work hours for six months and were very understanding of my performance at work at this time.”

- Giving them unrestricted time to return to work i.e. ‘you can return when you are ready’.
- Allowing flexibility in hours e.g. altering start and finish times, temporarily reducing hours.
- Helping to manage leave arrangements.
- Being understanding if they need to take time off at short notice.
- Arranging a ‘return to work plan’ that provides structure, but allows for reduced working capacity.
- Arrange for other staff members to assist with their duties until they are ready to reclaim them.

10

Be Supportive

Being supportive in the aftermath of a death is important, and being supportive in the long-term is absolutely essential. Grief doesn’t have a set timeline. Your employee won’t just wake up one morning and be ‘over it’. They are adjusting to a changed world, one without their loved one in it, and learning to live with this new reality will take time.

“My employer was unbelievably understanding during such a difficult time. As I look back I can see that I wasn’t 100% effective, however my fellow management team supported me 100% with flexible deadlines and were genuinely interested in what my family and I were going through.”

Some things to consider when supporting a grieving employee:

- Try to be encouraging on a day-to-day basis. For a bereaved individual, even walking through the door can be a huge effort.
- Acknowledge, and encourage them in their efforts to readjust to the working environment.
- Provide ongoing support as an employer and encourage their workmates to do the same.
- It takes a strong and understanding team to support a grieving colleague, make sure you support each other as well, along the way.

Your Support Matters

Below is a selection of quotes from bereaved employees whose experience in the workplace following the death of a loved one was supportive and compassionate:



- *"My manager's response helped my confidence no end and reinforced to me that I was returning to a supportive workplace."*
- *"My colleagues volunteered to take my classes for me and cover my workload, even offering to drive me home, if necessary."*
- *"When I did return to work, I was supported immensely by those around me."*
- *"Even now 12 months on work colleagues have never said 'haven't you got over it yet', they continue to show empathy understanding and support."*
- *"On contacting my employers to advice of my son's death they immediately sent one of my co-workers who had been through a similar situation to the hospital to comfort me."*
- *"My manager was there to talk to at the times when I felt like talking."*
- *When my husband arrived, (to tell me of my brother's death) a colleague helped me pack up my things and told me to go and she would look after everything"*
- *"The CEO asked permission to call in a few days to find out how I was."*
- *"My manager and I would talk about planning my return to work."*
- *"My manager has arranged to meet with me each week to check in with how I'm going generally and how I am going with the work."*
- *"My manager simply gave me my time and space and when I felt I was ready, I returned to work."*
- *"When I did return to work I was able to put photos on my desk of my son."*
- *"The organisation showed great sensitivity to my need to be sometimes left alone, but at the same time to have contact with people who could accept my need to talk about my daughter after her death."*
- *"I received cards, gifts and phone calls from several staff members."*
- *"Each of my team members also contacted me personally in the days following the death and made genuine offers of assistance."*
- *"My manager has called me regularly and met for coffee to talk about my daughter and how my husband and I are journeying since her sudden and tragic death."*
- *"When my son died interstate I let my Manager know that we would be travelling the next morning. When we arrived at the airport my manager was there to meet us. Thinking we would be on the first flight out, he had been there since 5 am and simply waited until we came which was not until 10 am. This is one of his kindnesses that I will not forget."*
- *"They asked us if it would be OK for staff and management to attend the funeral."*
- *"Through my manager, my employer has shown fantastic compassion, set aside time to find out my needs and hear my story and practical assistance to help me provide for my family needs to help recover from the deep grief."*



- *“When I returned to work my Executive Manager issued a considerate memo to staff advising them not to overload me with work being mindful of recent pressures.”*
- *“Over the few weeks I was away, I had regular contact with my manager and she only ever expressed concern for me and my family.”*
- *“My employer acknowledged the loss that we had suffered and also ensured that we were coping by regularly taking the time to speak with us.”*
- *“My managers kept in contact to make sure how I was going.”*
- *“My manager kept in constant contact when I was off work, offering both financial support and especially the more important emotional support for me and my wife.”*
- *“My director, assistant director and manager maintained continuous personal contact.”*
- *“The organisation had a counselling service that they offered me and my husband in which we took up. At that time we were in a daze and to have support was an absolute blessing.”*
- *“They provided and encouraged us to seek counselling and not only paid for us to attend but also allowed us flexibility with our work hours where required to attend.”*
- *“I was provided information on different support in the community and allowed time off to attend support groups and counselling.”*
- *“Without the compassion and support over the past 3 years I would have definitely had to resign from my job which I love – this would have been financially devastating.”*
- *“Attendance by colleagues at the funeral was overwhelming, sharing our difficult time.”*
- *“In the aftermath, the company collated a booklet of tributes, photos memories of my husband, giving us immense pride in our humble quiet achiever, whose life was taken before his time.”*
- *“The immediate shock, disbelief and deep overwhelming sorrow of death of our eldest daughter were beyond telling. How fortunate we had work colleagues who formed an instant strong support.”*
- *“Support was received from all quarters, from staff arranging meal rosters & delivering them or organising fundraising nights to support the charities that were supporting us”*
- *“The company organised a grief counselling session for all staff”*
- *“The employer inserted a death notice in the newspaper.”*
- *“The team gave me a beautiful native plant and a leather journal.”*
- *“As soon as the company heard that my son had died, it sent a beautiful flower arrangement.”*
- *“A memorial seat was built and revealed to the family on a special day to remember. Clients, colleagues & family were present and each released a red balloon in memory.”*
- *“I buried myself in my work and probably continued to be quite productive, but I also knew that any mistake on my part would be understood.”*
- *“My work colleagues were deeply shocked at my news and management enable a reflection to be held that afternoon to support them as well.”*

Source of Quotes: 2004–2013 Compassionate Employer Recognition Award Nominators Submissions.