



## Employers Guide - Bereaved Parent Return to Work

Each parent will experience coping with loss differently. Some may find returning to the workplace supportive and others may find it relentlessly hard. Consideration for individual needs is important when a bereaved parent returns to the workplace however what is collective in the grief and loss of a bereaved person returning to work is that when employees do receive sensitive and appropriate support, there are numerous benefits to the workplace.

Being an organisation that recognises the impact of bereavement on all concerned and is sensitive to the needs of individuals who are bereaved, will ultimately make a huge difference to individual performance, staff retention and how people feel about your organisation.

Everyone's grief is unique and the way one parent responds to the death of their baby or child may be very different to another. There is no 'right way' to grieve. People do as they must, in their own time. They have lost an entire future with that child and are likely to be struggling with very painful feelings from this untimely death that is entirely against the accepted natural order.

Some forward planning can help ease a bereaved employee's transition back into work, supporting the bereaved parent and minimising disruption in the workplace.

Some practical aspects to consider are:



### When you are told of the loss:

- Ascertain what and how the bereaved employee would like others in the workplace to be told. It is vital bereaved parents have control over this to ensure that any information shared is only that which they are comfortable with others knowing. The circumstances surrounding the death may be very personal to them or particularly traumatic, and not something they want widely known or discussed.
- Understand the cultural and family traditions important to the particular employee and accommodate these as far as possible.
- Provide information about bereavement leave, salary payments etc. This is important as it can help remove another anxiety from the individual. Recognise the need for flexibility as grief is individual and some employees may need longer than the standard bereavement leave provided by your business or organisation.
- Ascertain what the employee needs or would like from the organisation while they are away from work – perhaps periodic emails to inform them of any developments, being invited to any informal gatherings etc. Being proactive in making suggestions can be helpful as, at such a time of crisis, it can be hard for bereaved parents to know what they might want or need.
- Recognise that where a baby has died, seeing other pregnant women in the workplace can be difficult and bereaved parents are often surprised at the strength of feelings they experience in relation to someone else's pregnancy. Letting a bereaved parent know in advance of returning to work if anyone else has become pregnant or is returning from maternity leave after their live birth of their baby, may be preferable to them experiencing the shock of finding out on their return, which can be uncomfortable for both parties.

### Before the Employee Returns to the Workplace:

- Suggest that when the time comes to return to work, the bereaved employee might like to arrange a prior informal visit to the workplace for coffee or lunch to reduce anxiety around seeing everyone for the first time on their first day back at work.
- Offer flexible working hours or a different working pattern for the first few weeks/months to ease the employee back into their normal work routine.
- Offer a place of retreat should the employee need some space to collect their feelings and emotions
- Support other staff by arranging a session for all affected to provide them with an understanding of grief and to allow them to air their concerns and anxieties about when their bereaved colleague returns. Bears of Hope Pregnancy and Infant Loss support can provide this service free of charge.

### When the Employee Returns to the Workplace:

- Encourage the bereaved employee to let others know what will be most helpful to them and what they would like in the way of support from others.
- Help other employees understand that a simple acknowledgement, that they are sorry to hear what has happened, can go a long way. Avoiding the subject altogether is unhelpful, as are colleagues' attempts at 'counselling' or sharing their own experiences.
- Take your lead from the employee in terms of whether they want to discuss what has happened or not.
- Talk to the employee about their workload and establishing strategies for times when they might find they are struggling or falling behind, having a particularly bad day emotionally or becoming overwhelmed with work.



- Consider redistribution of those parts of an employee's workload that are subject to tight deadlines or targets, as eliminating this type of pressure could be supportive, particularly in the early days of returning to work. This may, of course, temporarily lead to an increased strain on other employees which will need to be sensitively managed and monitored. It is always best to include the employee in these decisions as making changes without their input could cause them to feel like they are failing their work.
- Appreciate that for a time the employee is likely to be physically and mentally exhausted, may be distracted or preoccupied and may need to take longer breaks or make more personal calls than usual.
- Understand that the bereaved employee is likely to be unable to work at their usual capacity, for a period of time, and be realistic in your expectations and supportive of them in managing their workload.
- Be flexible by accommodating employees' requests to work from home or take a longer break on an occasional basis.
- Be aware that some employees may return too soon and throw themselves back into work as a means of avoiding their grief and pain, or may overwhelm others with their constant desire to talk about what has happened. If this persists, they may need more formal support in dealing with their feelings about their baby's or child's death. You may then be able to offer access to an employee assistance scheme or provide details of Bears of Hope Pregnancy and Infant Loss Free Counselling.
- Never assume that, just because the bereaved parent may not be mentioning what has happened, they are 'over it'.
- Recognise that a father's grief is no less than a mother's when a child dies and appreciate that there is no hierarchy in grief – the loss of a baby at an early gestation may be every bit as devastating to parents as the loss of an older child. No parent ever expects their child to die before them, no matter what age that child may be.
- Be aware of the significance of the anniversary of the death, the child's birthday, Mother's Day, Father's Day and so on, for the bereaved parent and their likely increased vulnerability around these times.
- Appreciate that when a baby or child has died, bereaved parents are susceptible to heightened concern about the health and wellbeing of any other children they have. A call from school to say a child is unwell is likely to be a much greater cause for alarm than it may otherwise have been. Equally, they may be preoccupied with and concerned about the grief reactions of any other children in the family, and need directing towards some sources of information and help for this.
- Recognise that for someone who has lost a baby or child in the past, being pregnant again will be a particularly stressful time and there will be a requirement for sensitivity towards their increased vulnerability/anxiety.
- Maintain good communication with an open-door policy and regular meetings between the bereaved employee and their line manager to offer support and monitor progress over time.



### **How to support Work Colleagues when a Bereaved Parent returns to the workplace.**

Employers frequently underestimate the strength of workplace relationships and the resultant impact of a death on colleagues of the bereaved employee. The impact of the death of a baby or child is such that the effect on colleagues can be profound. This is unlikely to be confined purely to those who are close to the bereaved parent and, as a result, colleagues may be particularly distressed themselves. Other employees may be pregnant at the time or have children of their own, and such an untimely death can be very disconcerting for everyone who knows the family.

#### **‘What do I say?’**

Colleagues often feel uncomfortable or perhaps uncertain whether or how to approach the person who is bereaved. ‘I don’t know what to say?’ is a frequent comment. Bereaved parents tell us that it is not so much the words that people use, but the fact that people show they care that matters to them. Unsure as to how they should act, colleagues may actually avoid the bereaved employee out of fear of saying something inappropriate and causing them more upset, or reminding the person of something they assume they would rather forget. However, bereaved parents frequently express that lack of acknowledgement of what has happened to them is the most hurtful thing. A simple expression of sorrow regarding what has happened can go a long way. It is important that colleagues take their lead from the bereaved person in terms of how much they want to talk about their child’s death.

#### **‘What is the best way to provide support?’**

Employees often have photographs of their children at their place of work and may feel awkward about this, either in terms of displaying their own child’s photograph or the bereaved colleague keeping a photograph of their child who has died on their desk. It is perfectly natural for bereaved parents to want to keep their child’s photograph with them, and colleagues should not be worried about referring to it. Supporting the bereaved employee to enable them to voice how they would like people to behave around them, and what would help them most, is likely to ease the potential awkwardness of these situations.

#### **‘How do we manage the work?’**

Workload distribution is likely to change for a time around a significant bereavement. It is important to recognise that those working to cover for the bereaved colleague, who might be absent or less productive for a period, may themselves become temporarily stressed and overburdened with their additional workload. Understanding the nature of grief and its impact on a bereaved colleague may help diffuse any growing resentments.

#### **Support for your organisation**

Bears of Hope is a national charity with extensive experience in providing training around grief and bereavement. We have developed training on managing bereavement in the workplace in general, in addition to specific guidance for both employers and employees on the difficult issue of returning to work after the death of a baby or child.

**To enquire about training for your organisation on managing bereavement in the workplace, please contact [support@bearsofhope.org.au](mailto:support@bearsofhope.org.au)**

(Information courtesy of Child Bereavement UK)