Grief in the Workplace
Supporting a colleague

Supporting a bereaved colleague

You can play an important role, along with family, friends and your employer, in helping a bereaved colleague find their way through the grieving process. Support from colleagues and the workplace can make a difficult situation less painful.

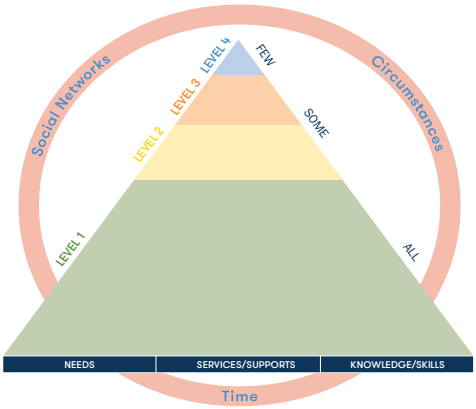
Each person's grief is unique and people deal with their losses in different ways. Some want to talk to their colleagues about what has happened while others are more private. It is important to respect this and be sensitive to the person's needs.

Health and safety

Grief can affect concentration and energy levels. If the bereaved person's job involves activities where safety is an issue, it is important to discuss this with the person and where appropriate, to seek health and safety advice.

Types of bereavement support

People who are grieving may need different types of support. These can be explained using the pyramid of bereavement support opposite.



Pyramid of Bereavement Support

Level 1

Grief is normal after bereavement and most people manage without professional intervention. At this level, people do need information on what to expect in the grieving process, practical help with tasks and social support. A good Level 1 support is our IHF National Bereavement Support Line 1800 80 70 77.

Level 2

Some people may require a more formal opportunity to review and reflect on their loss experience. Volunteer bereavement support workers/befrienders, self-help groups, faith groups and community groups will provide much of the support at this level.

Level 3 & Level 4

A minority of people will require specialist interventions. These can include psychotherapy, counselling, psychological and medical services.

The role of the workplace in providing bereavement

What is helpful:

- **Acknowledge the person's loss** - even though you may feel uncomfortable and might not know exactly what to say, it is much better to acknowledge your colleague's loss than to say nothing. Phrases such as 'I'm so sorry for your loss' or I can't find the words to tell you how sorry I am' are better. More important than words are your concern and compassion.
- **Let the bereaved person be your guide** – even though you may think you know what they are going through. It is better to check first and allow them to tell you.
- **Ask** the person who is bereaved how best you can be of support to them.

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To die and grieve well wherever the place

- **Listen** – very often it's hard to know what you can do for a colleague who is grieving, but one thing that really makes a difference is making time to listen to them.
- **Practical help** – ask your colleague if there are things you can do that would help, such as sharing their workload, picking up their children after school or going with them for a coffee.
- **Find out** – what other bereavement supports (Levels 2, 3 & 4) are available in your workplace or locally and if the bereaved person asks about these, gently inform them of what is available.

What isn't helpful:

- Avoiding the bereaved person and acting as if nothing has happened – something has happened and it is better to be open about this.
- Minimising the loss – phrases such as 'he had a good innings' or 'it's a happy release' do not help the person who is grieving. You don't know the significance of the loss for the person and it is better not to assume.
- Making a fuss – most bereaved people want to be treated as normally as possible at work and do not want to stand out. Be sensitive and respect their wishes.
- Expecting the person to be back to normal – people never go 'back to normal' because normal included the person who has died. In time they adapt to a 'new normal'.

Useful Resources

Irish Hospice Foundation Youtube Channel
www.youtube.com/irishhospice

Understanding Grief & Loss with
Breffni McGuinness

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Our Bereavement & Loss Hub contains a host of information on supporting bereaved colleagues and training with our Grief in the Workplace Programme.
www.hospicefoundation.ie

Further suggested reading is available via Irish Hospice Foundation's Thérèse Brady Library
library@hospicefoundation.ie

Bereavement Support Line
Freephone 1800 80 70 77. Available Monday to Friday, 10am-1pm. In partnership with the HSE

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