

## How to support an employee experiencing bereavement during Coronavirus

Losing a loved one is one of the most devastating and stressful experiences many of us will ensure. Grief impacts upon almost every aspect of the bereaved person's life. It can interfere with their thought processes, concentration and sleep patterns at a time when they may need to make important decisions. Fatigue, anxiety and mood swings are common. Responding to bereavement in the workplace can be challenging but taking an effective, compassionate approach combined with management support can make a significant difference to a bereaved member of staff.

At the moment many people are experiencing bereavement under very difficult circumstances. Support networks may be reduced, there are limitations on attending funerals or funerals may be delayed, people may be grieving whilst self-isolating or living alone and they may have been unable to say goodbye to a loved one due to restrictions on visiting. This may increase the level of trauma associated with the bereavement.

Every bereavement is unique and there is no one way that someone will respond. It can take many months for the full impact of a bereavement to be processed and felt.

Managers should be aware of and consider the following:

- Everyone grieves differently. There are [five defined stages of grief](#) but these are not linear – some people may go through all stages several times. Grief can cause people to act differently than they normally would, including at work.
- While people are working from home it may be more difficult to assess the wellbeing of a member of staff who has been bereaved. Aim to contact them on a regular basis to check in with them. Ask them how best to stay in contact – some people may feel that online meetings are overwhelming.
- Work can be a coping mechanism. While your initial reaction might be to encourage a bereaved member of staff to take time off (and this is often appropriate) be aware that some people may welcome the routine of work, even whilst working from home. They may not however, perform at their usual capacity. You may therefore need to adjust their workload or duties on a temporary basis.

# How to guide

- It's important to start a dialogue which will allow discussion around how they are coping, when they might be ready to return to work, and any adjustments that might help with this (e.g. a phased return).
- Be open to revising and reviewing the situation with the individual. Keep the dialogue open.
- Check what the member of staff wants colleagues to be told (if anything).
- Offer flexibility. Allow staff to use take annual leave in addition to compassionate leave if they wish to do so. Allow them to choose the date that they return and remain flexible with regards to hours of work in the early days.
- Be aware that a bereavement of a close family member may also have changed the individual's caring or other responsibilities during this time and they may require additional flexibility to deal with this.
- Remember that there may be differing practical requirements relating to bereavement. For example, a member of staff may be required to organise the funeral or be an executor of a will, which may involve ongoing time commitments.
- Be sensitive and remain compassionate. Check in with the member of staff on their return to work and on a regular basis. Be alert for signs of underlying distress. Ask if any additional support is required.
- Refer staff to the University counseling service if required. The service is currently operating remotely and prioritising urgent cases.

Please also review the University Policy on Special Leave which sets out the leave that is available in the event of bereavement. Additional special leave of up to 14 days is currently available for staff impacted by Coronavirus. Managers should use their discretion on the application of special leave, taking into account the relevant circumstances. Advice is available from HR.

Bereavement Charity Cruse has a range of resources on dealing with bereavement during Coronavirus available [here](#). Their resources also include [information](#) on what to say to someone who is grieving.