**To Support a Team Member who has suffered a Bereavement**

Guidance for Managers

Bereavement is one of the most difficult things any of us will ever go through. Whether this a partner, child, parent, close friend, colleague, family member or pet. For many managers, it can be difficult to know how to respond when a team member is bereaved or if a team member dies. The aim of this guidance is to provide information and resources to help managers support their teams.

If you've experienced personal loss, you'll know just how painful it can be. Naturally, when events like these happen, emotions tend to take over and your priorities can change. Work is often the last thing you may want to think about.

As a manager, managing a grieving team member has its challenges. It can be difficult to know what to do for the best. Should you act like nothing has happened? Or, should you talk to them about it? But, what if you say the wrong thing? How do you respond if they get angry or upset?

There are also practicalities to consider. How will their grief affect their work? Will they need to take time off? Will their workload need to be reduced? Will you need to arrange cover?

The guidance note will explore what grief is and how it can affect people and also look at strategies that you can use to ease the burden of work when someone in your team experiences personal loss.

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**What is Grief?**

It is important to understand the different emotions that an individual maybe going through as part of grieving. There are five stages of grief that an individual may go through. Some of these may happen before the person comes back to work.

* **Denial:** refusing to accept that the loss has occurred.
* **Anger:** feeling angry or frustrated with everyday tasks or work.
* **Bargaining:** believing that changing something will reverse the loss.
* **Depression:** feeling unmotivated, disengaged and discouraged.
* **Acceptance:** coming to terms with the loss and feeling more emotionally stable.

**Acknowledge the loss?**

People are often unsure of the best way to react to an individual who has suffered a bereavement and it can often make for uncomfortable conversations for everyone. The way that people in your team react to a colleague's personal loss can mean the difference between making them feel supported, or making them feel alone.

One of the most common reactions is avoidance. Failure by colleagues to acknowledge a personal loss can leave people feeling isolated and depressed.

People may also trivialize a loss. For instance, if someone's beloved pet dies, they might not see it as a "big deal," even if – to them – it is. Others may misunderstand loss. For example, someone might grieve the loss of a "sisterly" relationship when a sibling transitions to a new gender, but others may not consider this to be a "real" loss.

For these reasons, it's vital that you address the issue directly, but sensitively. Show compassion and give the person who is experiencing the loss an opportunity to discuss their feelings with you.

What’s your role as a manager?

You have an important role to play in ensuring that the individual is supported when they are off work and also when they return to work. However, you also have a responsibility to ensure that other team members are also supported and able to cover where necessary.

Simple things like keeping in touch regularly with the individual, facilitating their return to work, reviewing workloads and providing them with support and information.

Individuals returning to work

When a member of your team is ready to return to work after a bereavement, arrange a meeting in person or via the telephone and discuss with them what their return to work plan might look like. You should consider that an individual’s resilience and capacity to function at their normal level may be impacted by their bereavement and their workload may need to be adjusted accordingly. If in doubt, ask them. When they do come back, check in regularly to see how they are getting on. Remember, grief is a process. Some days will be much more difficult, than others.

The University has produced a leaflet for staff which provides information and links where staff can get more support. Human Resources can also provide support to you as a line manager via email or telephone. You can discuss where a referral to Occupational Health may be appropriate and discuss if appropriate.

**How to approach a sensitive conversation**

The easier you make it for someone to open up to you, the easier it will be to identify the support they might need. It can be very daunting talking to someone who has suffered a bereavement.

It is important to set the right tone when opening a conversation about any sensitive issue. But try not to worry too much – being over sensitive will stop you from doing or saying anything.

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| **Choose an appropriate place** | Be discrete and choose somewhere private and quiet to meet. Switch off phones and ensure colleagues will not walk in and interrupt. |
| **Encourage them to talk** | Ask simple, open and non-judgemental questions and let the employee explain in their own words how they are feeling. Maintain good eye contact, speak calmly and avoid patronising responses. |
| **Ensure confidentiality** | You should treat any disclosure with sensitivity and respect for confidentiality. If they want information to be shared, consent must be explicit. All conversations should remain confidential unless otherwise agreed. When returning to work, ask what information can be shared with the team |
| **Don’t make assumptions** | Do not try to guess how they might be feeling on a particular day and how this might affect their ability to do their job. Many people are able to perform their role to a high standard but may require support measures when experiencing a difficult period. It will be easier for employees to talk openly, if you avoid making assumptions. |
| **Listen actively and carefully** | Focus on the person, not the situation. Listen to be able to understand how they feel, what factors are contributing to this and what you may be able to do to help to support them. Adapt your support to suit their needs and involve them as much as possible in finding solutions to any work-related difficulties they are experiencing. |
| **Respond appropriately and flexibly** | As bereavement affects people in different ways and at different times, you may need to be flexible and adapt any support provided at different times. |
| **Encourage them to seek advice and support** | * It could be useful for them to speak with their GP if they are struggling to cope. * The University’s [Employee Assistance Programme](https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/hr/workingattheUniversity/healthandwellbeing/Pages/Employee%20Assistance%20Programme.aspx) is a counselling service that is available 24/7 to provide confidential advice and support. * It may be appropriate to seek a referral to [Occupational Health](https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/hr/workingattheUniversity/healthandwellbeing/Pages/OccupationalHealth.aspx) for advice about how best to support them. |
| **Reassure them** | Reassure the employee that they are not alone and that you are there to help and support them. People may not always be ready to talk straight away. It is therefore important that you outline what support is available and tell them your door is always open. |
| **Keep a note** | Follow up in writing with them, especially agreed actions or support. Revisit as appropriate. |
| **Seek advice and support yourself** | If you are still unsure how best to support the employee, you should seek advice from the HR team. |

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| **Types of questions to ask** |
| * How are you doing? * Is there anything that I can do to help? * What would you like to happen? How? * What support do you think might help? * Have you spoken with your GP or looked for support elsewhere? |

Support and resources

The University has produced a leaflet for staff which provides information and links where staff can get more support. Human Resources can also provide support to you as a line manager via email or telephone. You can discuss where a referral to Occupational Health may be appropriate and discuss if appropriate.

University support and resources

Managers should familiarise themselves with the University’s Compassionate Leave provision

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| Human Resources | Human Resources (HR) can provide support and advice. Call the team on x3344 or email [HumanResources@napier.ac.uk](mailto:HumanResources@napier.ac.uk) |
| [University's Health & Wellbeing Intranet Page](https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/hr/workingattheUniversity/healthandwellbeing/Pages/MentalHealthandWellbeing.aspx) | The University’s Health and Wellbeing Intranet Page contains a number of resources to support the wellbeing of staff. |
| [Employee Assistance Programme](https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/hr/workingattheUniversity/healthandwellbeing/Pages/Employee%20Assistance%20Programme.aspx) | Free, external and confidential wellbeing service that provides emotional, practical and physical support across a wide range of areas for all employees to access. |
| [Occupational Health](https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/hr/workingattheUniversity/healthandwellbeing/Pages/OccupationalHealth.aspx) | Provides information about potential support measures to support an employee in the workplace. |
| [Stress Risk Assessment](https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/hr/HRDocuments/Pages/Forms.aspx) | Can help to facilitate the identification of potential/actual sources of stress and appropriate actions to mitigate/reduce impact and address any areas of concern. |
| Togetherall | Provides 24/7 peer-to-peer and professional support from experienced clinicians who are online at all times, plus a range of courses and tools to help people self-manage their wellbeing. The service is safe, anonymous and free. University staff can sign up under ‘Join Us’ and ‘Organisation’ with their staff email address. |