

#ACTNOW

# How to have difficult conversations: talking about bereavement

It can be difficult to know what to say or do when a team member is grieving. Despite your best intentions, you may feel wary of intruding or saying the wrong thing. However, don't let discomfort put you off from reaching out to someone who is going through loss – they need you more than ever right now.

This resource aims to help you talk to someone at work who has just experienced the loss of a family member, pregnancy, friend, colleague, patient or pet in an empathetic, genuine and open way so that they feel supported, valued and less anxious about work commitments.

**Acknowledge > Support > Listen > Understand**

## Acknowledge the death.



Avoiding recognising the death could make your colleague feel isolated in their grief. Unless you are told otherwise, oftentimes the bereaved will need others to acknowledge the death too. Something simple like 'I'm sorry you are going through this' can help

them to know they're not alone. If you are their manager, as well as offering your condolences, at this point you could also assure them that work is not the priority and ask them how they would like to keep in touch (if they are taking compassionate leave).

## Offer support.

It's important to recognise what support network someone has, and where your support falls into this network. This could be emotional support or practical support or both.

Sometimes you may need to be a shoulder to cry on, other times your colleague may want to share memories or simply talk about their recent loss. They may ask for support with letting colleagues know about the death, or more personal practical assistance such as funeral arrangements.

Often when in crisis, we might not know or be able to articulate the type of support we need. Instead of putting the onus on them to reach out, you could make it easier for them by asking pre-emptive questions such as 'I'm in the mood for some fresh air, would you like to take a short stroll with me?' or 'I'm making lasagne this evening, what time shall I drop some off for you?'

If you are a manager, delicately ask the person who is grieving what support they need from you/your organisation and inform them of what support you/your organisation can offer. .... You will need to deal with practicalities (such as important work cover and your organisation's compassionate leave policy if applicable) in a timely manner and when it is appropriate.

# Listen with intent.

If the person who is grieving expresses what sort of support they need, listen, respect their choices and make sure you follow through.

Once you have offered your condolences and support, take your cues from them about if and what they are willing to talk about. Simply offering compassion by listening can be a source of great comfort. You don't need to have all the answers or even give advice.

Instead of being worried about what to say, it could be a good idea to turn the focus to how you can be attentive and present for the person.

Another good tip is to ask: 'How are you feeling today?'. This acknowledges that grief isn't circular, and they will have up and down days. It also allows you to listen and act on any new types of support they may need.

# Understand their grief.



Everyone experiences death differently and your support will need to respond to an individual's needs. Some people may need immediate support, others may need support when they return to work, and others may need long-term support, such as on the anniversary of a death.

Remember that the pain of losing a loved one may never fully heal. Even if they look fine on the outside, the bereaved person may still

be suffering for months or years after a loss. Once the initial shock of the death has passed, providing ongoing support and a listening ear could be more valuable than ever.

Look out for signs of depression and encourage the bereaved to seek professional help. They may be eligible for our free and confidential Counselling service. [More information and the self-referral form are on our website.](#)

# Things to avoid saying.

Try to avoid clichés such as 'stay strong' as they can put pressure on the bereaved, minimise their loss and simply sound insincere. Phrases around time, such as 'just give it time', could also imply there is a deadline to grief.

It's also important to be mindful of someone's religious or cultural beliefs. For example, saying 'they're in a better place' may not be helpful if the bereaved isn't religious.

Finally, don't make comparisons to your own experience of loss or make assumptions about what they are going through – doing so takes the focus off their own grief.

If you make a mistake don't be afraid to acknowledge it and try again with something like... 'I'm sorry I said the wrong thing. I just want you to know that I'm here for you.'



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