

We are here to help you.

Supporting a team member who has experienced the loss of a loved one



As the number of those contracting coronavirus continues to increase at a steady rate, it's likely to spark fears, worry and anxiety for our colleagues. When we say this, we know this isn't just the fear of getting ill ourselves, but the worry for others including friends, loved ones and family members or those that potentially carry higher risks because they are more vulnerable.

Sadly, it is an all too stark reality that some of our colleagues will sadly experience the loss of a loved one, family member or friend throughout these difficult times. This may be Covid-19 related or due to other illnesses or conditions. Also, for those with someone close who is experiencing ongoing treatment during these tough times it is particularly hard being unable to see visit them and knowing the additional risks posed by being exposed to Covid-19.

The loss of someone close is painful, but with the current measures in place surrounding Covid-19, it means that our people likely face further trauma. This may be due to being unable to be with loved ones in their final moments or to potentially say their goodbyes. Another factor may be the inability to seek comfort through others in the same way as usual. All of this may have a profound and potentially significant impact for them.

Your support as a people leader will be more important than ever during these times. Through this guide we will provide you with some pointers on how to navigate these difficult conversations in the sad event that you need to have them.

First and foremost, it's likely that your team member is experiencing a range of emotions including shock, disbelief or anger. You'll want to be there to support them and do the right thing during these difficult times.

The first step on this journey is being told the news:

- Providing empathy and compassion goes a long way. It can be hard to know what to say and do, but start by acknowledging their loss and offering your condolences.
- You might find the first call is short as the person is in shock.
- It might be that someone rings on behalf of your team member to let you know the news. If this occurs, take on board the news and ask them to ask the individual to call you when they feel ready and able.
- Make it clear that you are there to support them through this tough time and ask if they have some support outside of work.
- Take away any questions you receive and agree when you'll aim to get back to them. If you agree to respond at a certain date or time, stick to this. If you haven't got an answer, reassure them you'll provide one as soon as you can.
- You may wish to discuss them taking a day off to come to terms with the loss in the same way as they would attend a funeral.
- Stay connected - take the cue from the person in terms of the mechanisms for staying in touch and when you might potentially catch up (this may be driven by any questions you receive).



The Next Steps

Supporting your colleague with their experience of loss from a distance:

Although you can't currently see your team member face-to-face, there's still ways to show your support:

- You'll want to send a condolence card and gift. Managers will often send flowers or potentially the family may wish for a donation to be made to a local charity/the NHS.
- If the team member's health is impacted or they take time off sick check for guidance and further support.
- You may find that the individual is keen to try and continue to do some work quite quickly afterwards as a means of distraction - particularly in the current circumstances where they are unable to see family or get outside much.
- If this is the case, keep an eye on them and the hours that they're working and ensure that they recognise that they may not be able to do a full day's work and may need to ease themselves back into working.
- Make it clear that you can support them with how they're coping with working.
- If your team member is taking time away from work, you may wish to contact them more often than you usually would if they were unwell, especially if the individual that they've lost is a member of their household. Seeing the individual's belongings on a daily basis and not being able to spend long periods away from home could make the loss even harder to deal with.

Breaking the news to colleagues:

- It may be that colleagues and team members are already aware of the news as the individual may have reached out to them. If not, establish with the individual whether they'd like you to let the team know. Everybody is different, some may wish to do it themselves but for others they will not be in a position to do this and want you share the news for them.
- It's likely that colleagues will experience a range of emotion in relation to the news. Whether they knew their colleagues' loved one or family member or not. It may be the trigger that brings the reality of the impact of the current situation to life and makes them think about losing their own loved ones during these difficult times and may invoke fresh fear or angst.
- It may be that close colleagues would have potentially attended the funeral to offer their support, that won't be possible given the current situation so be mindful that this may be upsetting and create further emotion such as sadness or anger when the funeral takes place. Be supportive and try to help the colleague by thinking of other ways they can show their support to their team member.

Later down the line

Supporting your colleagues at a distance:

- Offer your support to the team and particularly those who are struggling due to being personally close to the team member and/or the individual who has passed away.
- If you're struggling to process the information, talk to your manager or a trusted colleague
- You may wish to consider a virtual team get together to discuss, reflect and provide an avenue for people to talk about what has happened amongst colleagues.
- This can be particularly helpful for some, but may not work for everyone so if someone declines this, that's fine too (everybody deals with grief in a different way) - it may be that you check in individually with those people.
- Arrange regular catch ups with colleagues. Be mindful of those you know may have had particularly close relationships with the person and those who may be vulnerable themselves at present. For those individuals the current circumstances are likely to be particularly tough.
- Remember to take time for yourself, talking to team members about grief and loss can be draining for you too so be self-aware of any triggers that your wellbeing is being affected in the process.

Returning to work after the loss:

- Returning to work after this difficult period may be difficult for the impacted person and the team as a whole - it may trigger emotions and additional support may be needed.
- It may be that in time, you consider offering to organise something special as a commemoration of the person's life as an offer of support and gesture for your team member - this could be as simple as having a meal together when social distancing measures are lifted or something else that is agreed. Ask the person when the time feels right if it's something they'd be comfortable with (it may be some time before it feels right to approach this - use your judgement).



Guidance for Managers

As the number of those contracting the virus and losing their lives continues to increase at a steady rate, it's likely to spark fears, worry and anxiety for our colleagues.

Whilst it's a call that none of us hope to ever to take, we know there is the potential reality for us to lose sadly colleagues through pre-existing illness or by contracting Covid-19.

If you take that call, you'll want to do everything you can to support the loved one of your team members and your role as a people leader will be more important than ever during these times as you have to deal with the devastation of the loss of a colleague.

We don't underestimate how hard this will be for you. That's why, through this article we'll provide you with guidance on how to navigate these difficult conversations in the sad event that you need to have them.

Firstly, we are so sorry, we appreciate you will be reading this from a place of sadness and it's likely that both you and your team may be experiencing a range of emotions now including shock, disbelief and potentially anger.

It's important to know that support is available for you, but let us help you by first talking you through some of the steps you can take, should you be contacted by a family member regarding the sad passing of a colleague.

The first step on the journey is being told the news

- Providing empathy and compassion goes a long way. It can be hard to know what to say and do but start by acknowledging their loss and offering your condolences
- It's likely that first contact will be about trying to obtain some information sensitively so you may want to grab a pen and paper to help you capture this. Try to establish the circumstances of the death.
- You might find the first call is short as the person is in shock and hasn't previously spoken with their loved one's employer.
- You may be familiar with the person who has called, for instance, if it is a partner, but, if you aren't sure who it is you are speaking to, take a note of their name, relationship to the person and contact details.
- Check with them if they are likely to continue to be the contact for the family and, if not, are they able to let you know who it will be.
- Ask if there is anything we can do to support them at this time. Often small gestures and potentially just being on the end of the line when needed. Helping the family navigate some of the difficult practical questions they have will take remove some of their immediate worries.
- Take away any questions you receive and agree when you'll aim to respond. If you agree to go back at a certain date or time, stick to this. If you haven't got an answer, reassure them you'll provide one as soon as you can.
- If applicable, check with them if they would like your assistance with telling close friends or family who work for the company, or if for specific individuals they will be sharing the news themselves given their close relationship with the colleague.
- Agree when you might speak again but be guided by the person you are talking to.

The Next Steps

Breaking the news to colleagues:

- Since this loss is so close to home, take some time for yourself to feel comfortable with sharing the news with your team. It's likely a lot of questions will be raised so you will need to be in a position to answer these and to be able to provide support for your team members' reactions to the loss.
- Some colleagues and team members may already be aware of the news but, if not, discuss with a manager on how best to advise colleagues as soon as possible. Also think about any key contacts that you may need, or wish, to inform.
- Think about the most appropriate way to break the news - if you are a small team would a short call be suitable or would an individual call work better?

Dealing with emotion:

- It's likely that colleagues will experience different kinds of emotion in relation to the news. Not only are they likely to be dealing with the grief and sadness of the loss of a colleague and friend, it may be the trigger that brings the reality of the impact of the virus or loss of a loved one during these difficult times closer to home and may invoke fresh fear or angst.
- It can be useful to think about how you might manage the conversation differently with those that you know may find the news extremely distressing.
- It's likely that you and colleagues would have attended the funeral but that won't be possible given the current situation so be mindful that this may be upsetting and create further emotion such as sadness or anger when the funeral takes place. You could discuss taking collective time to say your goodbyes, whether through arranging a team call for this specific purpose or blocking time out in everyone's diary to step away from work and reflect.
- You may also wish to suggest to those who were particularly close to the individual to take a day (or longer) compassionate leave in place of a day to attend the funeral.
- Don't forget that if you're struggling too to discuss this with your manager and to take some time away yourself.

Adjusting to the loss:

- It may be that when you move through the cycle of grief as a team, you consider organising something special as a commemoration of the person's life. It may provide the team with something more positive as things will be very raw to begin with.
- Don't avoid talking about your colleague, if you're working on something or a member of your team is doing work that would have previously been done by the employee who has passed, don't ignore this, discuss it. Sometimes, talking about an individual can help you and others come to terms with a loss and remember the happy times.
- In time, some colleagues may ask you what will happen to the colleague's workload or if you're going to change the way the team works or recruit. We recognise that this will be something particularly hard to cope with and address, speak with your manager for further guidance and inform your team when you have more clarity.
- Returning to the office to see an empty seat or a colleague's personal belongings may trigger emotion - it may be that additional support is needed.
- When the time is appropriate, talk to the family or next of kin regarding any arrangements for the return of any company property e.g. car, laptop and personal belongings. Given the practicalities and difficulties at present it may be that this is something that is delayed although it may be part of the steps the family need to take as part of the grieving process.

External Resources:

There's a number of charities that can offer support via their helplines and online services:

- [The Compassionate Friends](#)
- [Cruse Bereavement Care](#)
- Loss of a child: [Child Bereavement UK](#)
- Loss of a partner: [WAY Widowed & Young](#)

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