

Grief in the workplace

Grief strikes the workplace in many ways: the death of a family member, close friend or workmate, divorce or relationship breakdown, an unwanted job change or redundancy, or a serious medical diagnosis.

In 2020, we learned how the global pandemic impacted on the mental health of workers where job losses, uncertainty, new ways of working, lockdowns and separation from family, friends and colleagues became part of the “new normal” that we had to live with.

Here are some things to know and ways to help your colleagues:

- Watch for common grief reactions: These are normal reactions and could include disbelief, crying, anger, sadness, depression, frustration, guilt ... and associated physical reactions such as tiredness, not eating or sleeping, irritability, and generally feeling overwhelmed and out of sorts.
- There can be on-going behaviour changes and mood swings: attitude, motivation, energy levels, relationships with colleagues, productivity and general job performance can all be affected. It may even make them less attentive and more accident-prone. They might have a short fuse with customers, be forgetful and make mistakes.
- Some workers might withdraw from social interaction – they’ll avoid office functions and even making small talk can be too much effort.
- Others might throw themselves into their job, keeping busy, busy, busy which might be a way to avoid what’s happened and how to deal with it.
- Try talking about what happened. Often colleagues don’t know what to say so they say nothing –or worse, avoid the person and ignore the loss. This can make you feel isolated and alone. Try finding time for a coffee or some activity together like a round of golf. This can be the ideal time to ask how they’re doing and how things are going at home. Then just be there to listen. No advice is necessary! Just let them tell their story.
- Avoid minimising their story by saying “It can’t be that bad” or “Everything will be OK”. These platitudes show you haven’t listened and understood the problem.
- You don’t need to solve their problems or fix their grief – as tempting as it might be. Your empathy will be far more welcome and reassuring. Try saying something like:
 - “I can understand why you’re feeling like that.”
 - “I can see why your world’s been turned upside down.”
- Consider workplace adjustments: These may be temporary or permanent. For example, if the person has lost a partner and now has to care for children, changes to starting and finishing times might be needed until new childcare arrangements are made. Shift changes, over-time and additional responsibilities may need to be reviewed. Don’t make changes without first consulting the employee. The aim is to assist them to adapt to the new situation – not to impose more stress or embarrassment on them even if it is well intended.
- Ensure employees know they have your support. Let them know that seeing a counsellor is a good idea. Many people struggle to ask for help and feel awkward and embarrassed when they are competent in their job role but they feel out of their depth when they are faced with personal problems.