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**GLOBAL**

# GRIEF IN THE WORKPLACE FROM BEREAVEMENT

*A research report into how workplaces are supporting  
employees experiencing grief*

1 February 2024

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This Can Happen Global supports company's mental wellbeing programmes. We provide support for leaders, allies and employees across the globe.

Our conferences, programmes, awards and research are class leading so much so, that in 2023 we welcomed employees from over 460 companies to at least one of our events, allowing us to share our insights, knowledge and good practice.

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## Introduction

We are delighted to share with you our first report into grief in the workplace and how bereavement affects the mental health of employees. We first started looking into this area simply because amongst our own organisation a number of our team suffered a bereavement, and it was evident that work and performance was suffering. We asked ourselves how should we be supporting them and what is the right way to ensure that they were okay?

We initially looked into where we could seek advice and there were some excellent resources available. The pieces that were missing were how are staff who have been bereaved being supported by their employer (good practice) and were employees aware that support was available to them. From a mental health perspective, we discovered there is little data on the impact of loss and this is one area we are aiming to dig deeper into.





## Thanks

Our thanks go out to all the employers and specialist organisations that contributed to this research confidentially, with the shared aim of supporting future employees in their journeys with grief in their workplaces.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank Natwest Group for sponsoring this research. Without their support the knowledge we are sharing would not have been possible.

## About this research

The research has been designed to gain an understanding of how workplaces are looking after employees who are experiencing grief. It was set up in two stages, covering initially workplaces, then employees.

Stage 1 is discussed in this report. We engaged with 15 global workplaces and employers during Summer 2023, with responsibility for a total of over 300,000 employees globally. Our initial focus was the UK, looking at organisations in a range of sectors, with workforces ranging from 250 to 100,000 employees. We would like to thank all those who gave their valuable time and shared their insights and personal experiences with us.

Stage 2 was undertaken in Q4 2023 and we sent out an online questionnaire to employees to ask them about their lived experience. The survey was distributed by a wide variety of companies in many sectors and we received over 600 completed surveys. The analysis of this, is now being done by our team and the report will summarise the key themes that have emerged from the research and our recommendations for workplaces.

It should also be noted that any reference to legislative programmes is correct as of the date of this report and if you would like to know more about this project please contact:

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## What's the current situation in workplaces with regards to grief

- Everyone's journey through grief is unique, so people need different types of support at different times as they move through the stages.
- There was an acknowledgement that grief is a life event that needs support and can lead to mental wellbeing issues in the longer term if not adequately supported.
- Workplaces have a large role to play in supporting employees through their grief and mitigating its consequences.
- Grief comes from a loss. Currently most organisations think of a loss resulting from a death. Some organisations, however, are more open in their approach and use a wider definition of loss, including but not limited to divorce, separation, and baby loss.
- Some organisations classify grief into simple and complex grief, with different specialist support offered for each type.
- There remain taboos around speaking about death and bereavement – not for trained professionals but within wider management.
- All employers we spoke to have an HR-based policy to either manage absence and/or bereavement.
- Some employers have an additional policy to cover other types of loss, and signpost to this with discretion.
- The outcomes of employees not feeling supported can manifest in many ways that ultimately are not positive for the organisation, such as time off, reduced productivity, psychological issues and issues with team dynamics.
- Miscommunication and lack of understanding of grief can put a strain on working relationships, especially if the person who has been bereaved becomes withdrawn, or well-intentioned colleagues say the wrong thing (or worse, say nothing at all).
- Line/people managers key interaction for that first point of contact to make the organisation aware of their situation – key moment of truth.
- The challenge for organisations is to give people in management roles the skills to recognise when team members are struggling with grief, and to respond appropriately.
- Data on the impacts of loss, such as reasons for absence and changes in productivity is limited, so these issues are not well understood.
- Cultural and religious needs are difficult areas to navigate. Nearly all the organisations surveyed had a gap in their approach. Cultural and religious minorities are supported with other inclusivity-based initiatives but not necessarily with a focus on grief.



## The six biggest challenges organisations face:

- How to effectively implement a person-led approach where the approach takes into account the individuals needs, wants and feelings.
- How to upsize a personal approach to support when you are in a large multinational organisation.
- How to make it acceptable to access support, even with an Employee Assistance Programme in place without stigma.
- How to set up a supported bereavement structure and make it a safe, accessible, and equitable space.
- How to understand and manage different cultural and religious needs and practices – in general these are not widely understood.
- HR/people partners/managers tend to be specialist-trained, but line managers in general are not trained apart from Mental Health First Aid training or its equivalent.





## Recommendations for getting grief right in the workplace:

- One approach does not fit all employees.
- Have guidance/policy/policies for supporting bereavement in place.
- Think about flexibility in implementation of the guidance/policy for bereavement.
- Clearly communicate what these policies are and how they are implemented.
- Think about reviewing your other policies through a bereavement lens such as leave policy.
- Talk about grief in the workplace to raise awareness.
- Try to avoid time-bound initiatives.
- Think about asking the employee what they need and record this for ongoing transfer of information, to avoid repetition.
- Think about the definition of loss for your business and how this is supported.
- Clearly signpost resources that are available internally and externally.
- Better recognition of the effects of grief in the short, medium, and longer term.
- Create a compassionate and supportive environment for employees experiencing loss that is right for your organisation.



- Ask employees and colleagues what support they need and when.
- Create regular check-in opportunities over the longer term.
- Upskill managers to have difficult conversations.
- Collect data about the impact of loss on your people to support ongoing resource allocation.
- Get senior management to sponsor initiatives.

## Solutions and ideas for you to implement:

- Thinking about the skill sets of the organisation and whether the line manager is the right person to have the conversation.
- The best workplace schemes have been created organically or employee-led, for example grief cafes, campaigns of remembrance, talk and lunch, coffee chats.
- Look at what a member of staff needs to do their job. How can their work be adjusted to accommodate where they are at.
- Think about consistency – a passport approach that documents an outline of what has been experienced. This can enable an employee moving between teams or projects to outline how and when they would like support.
- A line manager taking the time to speak to the bereaved employee, to offer condolences (and send gifts or cards where appropriate), to see how things were going during any time off, to establish whether and what a bereaved employee wants colleagues to know about their loss, and checking in regularly once the person affected is back in the workplace.
- Involve a psychologist to explain how to set up bereavement support and ongoing structural support/signposting.
- Specialist grief training workshops to raise awareness.
- A team or individual to offer support in the event of a death within the business – to offer emotional, practical, and financial help and advice to the deceased person's family and colleagues.
- Check your bereavement policy to include the loss of a child.
- Consider a multi-layered support offering. For example, line manager support, peer support, HR, staff counselling and support with psychological wellbeing.
- Plan for unforeseen eventualities by offering critical incident support which should be immediate and appropriate, for example in the event of a death in the team.
- "Top tips" guides for line managers and colleagues.
- As always, senior management sponsorship and open communications in events and activities.





## What employers said:



How do you put the human into the bereavement policy?



Following a bereavement, we look at what the member of staff needs to do their job. How can their work be adjusted to accommodate where they are at, and how we can get to the right place at the right time? This is all to support students – and this is all about self-care. We don't use models of grief or bereavement, as people might not fit into this. We are person-centred.



There is often a mismatch between what staff are able to do, and what they are confident to do. They might be doing it already – but training will really help. It allows staff to talk about how they feel about something. Most staff weren't sure what to say in these situations – they don't want to say something that would upset them.



If someone is going to come back after a bereavement, they need to know that support is there. They need to know that they aren't going to be judged. People want you to be OK so that they don't have to deal with it.



We need to get away from the fences of policies.



We need to remove the rail guards of policy that allow people to hide behind them.



We need to keep the heart in our policy like a small business as we grow.

## Detailed summary

This report looks at the employed experience of grief, loss, and bereavement. It is not intended to cover people in all circumstances, such as the self-employed and unemployed.

Bereavement is a common experience. Sue Ryder report (2022) stated that: “Nearly a quarter of working-age adults knew someone who has died over the last year – this equates to 7.9 million employees.” This data was sourced in 2020 and did not consider the impact of the pandemic.

From experts that have spoken to us, we know that bereavement can have longer-term consequences for a person’s mental and physical health if not supported correctly and adequately processed. Whilst this was not within the remit of the research, it is acknowledged that the workplace plays an important role in a person’s journey with grief, based on the amount of time they spend at work.

We wanted to understand what data organisations hold on the impacts of loss. Within the organisations that we spoke to, the tracking of absence data was standard but the detailed reasons for this, such as “absence due to bereavement” were not a standard metric. Organisations were also using different policies to allow employees to have additional time off over and above the leave initially offered – making it harder still to collate this information completely.

Therefore, it can be hard for an organisation to quantify the impact of bereavement in real terms. Once an employee has returned, there is no guarantee that they will be able to fulfil the role as they did previously, leading to costs from “presenteeism” (being at work but unable to function effectively”).





For an employer, therefore, the combination of absenteeism and presenteeism due to a bereavement will vary according to each individual, but bereavement has significant impacts on employer revenue and profit.

Marie Curie (2020) found that 58% of employees felt their performance was still affected by their grief months after the death of a loved one. And it is estimated that presenteeism following bereavements costs the UK economy £16 billion per year.

Everyone's journey through grief is unique, so people may need different types of support.

We understand that support can come in many forms, from many sources. Outside the workplace friends and family have a primary role in providing support, although local communities, workplaces, virtual or actual forums where those grieving can share their experiences, professional counselling or group therapy can also make a big difference.

In talking with organisations there was sometimes a feeling that they wanted to "fix" the situation. There needs to be a recognition that no matter what an employee's circumstances, the support offered by their employer will not bring their loved one back, nor protect them entirely from all the damaging effects. Providing employees with a compassionate and supportive environment is essential.

Even with policies in place, the implementation of them varied by manager and leadership style.

It is also essential that the overall policies in place are shared openly, discussed, and reviewed regularly so that everyone is aware of what is in place – this was not always the case.

## What does this mean practically?

We asked about policies in place, and the time off varied by employer, from statutory minimum to discretionary. In practice, this can lead to inequalities, with policies implemented unevenly even within an organisation and potentially within a department. A great deal of flexibility and understanding is needed. From the research the localised approaches seemed to have been the most successful, but how can organisations scale these up while keeping the personal approach?

There was a feeling from smaller organisations that it is easier to support an individual when they are well known to the senior team, and this can change as an organisation grows. One HR leader who was managing a growing team said: "The challenge is thinking about how I can keep the heart of our business in our policy implementation".

We had lovely examples where organisations responded with a truly personal touch to look after employees and their families - ranging from financial support to providing a full Santa stocking for the children of the family.

Sue Ryder (2022): Typically, UK companies offer three to five days compassionate leave for the death of a close relative; except for the loss of a child, which is now two weeks by law. Survey evidence supports the case for more compassionate leave, with 62% of the adult population believing that paid leave following the death of a parent, partner, siblings, or child should be a week or more, and 42% believing it should be two weeks or more. That view changes with age: 24% of 16 to 24-year-olds believe bereavement leave should be two weeks or more, rising to over 55% for those aged 44-54.

Workplaces have a large role to play in supporting employees through their grief and mitigating its consequences. There needs to be a well-thought-through policy on how you have a conversation with somebody about grief and coming back to work after a bereavement, supported with the right training.

Ways organisations offer support include EAP, offering leave and flexibility around workload, communicating effectively about the support available and creating a culture where people are comfortable talking about grief.

The companies we talked to that were doing well in this space talked about giving an employee the time, space and support to come to terms with their loss, carry out the practical tasks that follow a death termed "death duties", and care for loved ones. There was also a feeling that recognition of the wider personal implications for the employee needs to be better - financial changes, caring responsibilities, and living circumstances.

The understanding of the impact of grief varied widely within organisations. There needs to be a better understanding of the effects of grief, which can include difficult and unexpected emotions, ranging from shock or anger to disbelief, guilt, and profound sadness. Grief can lead to loss of sleep, loss of appetite and an inability to think properly, and can trigger mental health conditions such as depression, eating disorders, anxiety, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Such issues need to be addressed in a timely manner, and not interpreted simply as poor performance at work.





However, there remain taboos around speaking about death and bereavement. Not talking about grief and bereavement has many consequences, such as isolation, loneliness, extending the period of grief and mental health impacts.

The fear of saying the wrong thing came through strongly in conversations and there was a recognition that there is a lot to be done to normalise the language and the conversation at all levels.

Sue Ryder (2019) said that 51% of people would fear saying the wrong thing to someone who was recently bereaved, according to A Better Grief.

Hospice UK (2019) report stated that 56% of people would consider leaving their employer if they didn't provide proper bereavement support.

So what support did our organisations offer and want to offer?

It was clear that best practice should be allowing an employee to choose the approach they wish to take following a bereavement, and tailor the approach to the individual. Organisations should recognise that grief is not linear, and that aligning this within the workplace and offering consistency in support can be challenging.

Additionally, how do you address the stages of grief, which will be personal to the individual, in your approach and support?

It was clear that the structure of the team, and the line manager's role, are integral to the experience of the individual.

All organisations recognised how important it is for line managers to have the skills and the confidence to hold the conversation. There was, however, a clear understanding that this was an area of challenge, as line managers are not always equipped to deal with these challenging conversations.



From the research it was clear that the outcome of that initial sharing conversation is really important for employees to feel supported and for conversations to be ongoing. We were given some anecdotal examples from HR leaders of managers who had approached HR for support, saying an employee had called in regarding a bereavement, and they had not really replied, simply saying “I’ll get back to you,” as they felt ill-equipped to manage the conversation.

Managers also talked about feeling the need to make the person feel everything is OK and to move on, to avoid the conversation – which is not what the person needs.

Organisations need to create a working environment where people are comfortable talking about grief. Business leaders have an important role to play in encouraging conversations about grief in the workplace. Having the courage to talk openly about personal experiences of death and grief or providing time and space for employees to discuss it can help normalise conversations and raise awareness about resources available to staff internally and externally. Key skills line managers need include effective listening, empathy, compassion, and sensitivity.

Some organisations told us about employee-led groups that have been established because of employees bringing their lived experience back into the workplace to support others. We heard about employee-led resources groups, grief cafes, chat and lunch groups, sponsored stars to remember loved ones and “hugs in a box” with practical and emotional support items, to name just a few initiatives. So many inspirational individuals are making a big difference in their organisations through bravely sharing their experiences and creating change.

Some organisations have put in specialist resources, sometimes in response to an event within the business, driven by support from senior management or in response to requests from employees. This is often in addition to internal EAPs. There was, however, a ubiquitous understanding that more needed to be done. The challenge is deciding the “what” and the “how” amidst competing needs and working with limited resources.

There was also a theme that the religious and cultural needs of individuals needed better awareness and support at all levels. Employees often had to tell organisations what they needed at a time when they need support, not additional tasks to attend to. Apart from a couple of organisations there was a gap in meeting the detailed needs of different groups of employees.

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### References:

- Sue Ryder (2002) Grief in the workplace – How employers can provide better bereavement support
- Hospice UK (2019) Hospice UK launches new programme to create more compassionate workplaces and better support employees
- Marie Curie (2020) The Sonnet Report



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