

# Death and bereavement

## A guide for managers and human resource professionals

**Although many people diagnosed with cancer will be successfully treated and live for many years, not everyone will recover. Sometimes an employee who has been diagnosed with cancer may die from the disease. This may affect their co-workers. Similarly, employees who have been caring for someone with cancer may experience death or loss in their personal lives.**

**This fact sheet is a starting point for managers dealing with death and bereavement in their teams.**

### Be prepared

When an employee with cancer has a poor prognosis and it is known that they are going to die, you can plan ahead to prepare staff for what might happen. Start by finding out what the employee would like their co-workers to be told.

With the employee's permission you can develop a communications plan to inform co-workers and the wider workplace. In your plan, outline how you'll communicate (written or verbal), what to include, when to share the news, and who the news should come from.

Sensitively worded communications advising staff of the person's serious illness can help prepare them, reducing their shock when news of the person's death is subsequently communicated. Keep in mind that co-workers who have previously experienced other forms of loss may need extra support. Ensure that the employees's workmates are informed of the situation before advising all staff.

If someone in your workplace is responsible for internal communications, ask them for help developing the plan, as well as any announcements.

While it is not easy to tell staff that a co-worker has died, preparing the announcement in advance may be less stressful than trying to put something together on the spot. It will also give you more time to ensure that any communication is appropriate and sensitive, and that you have included all relevant information, such as what support is available for staff.

### Breaking the news

It can be difficult to know how to tell your team about the death of a co-worker. The following suggestions may be useful:

- Arrange a private place to tell immediate team members about the death as soon as is practical. Keep the communication clear and simple. Remember to let any staff on leave know, preferably by phone rather than email.
- Don't be afraid to admit that you don't know what to say.
- If appropriate, let immediate team members know they can take time off or that they can have some quiet time as needed.
- Let staff members know about any support services available through your workplace, such as counselling via an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and how to access them, or just let them know it is okay to take time to talk to each other. Call Cancer Council 13 11 20 for information about other support and counselling services.
- If your workplace has an EAP, it may offer a critical incident response service, which includes providing a psychologist who can attend the workplace to provide support and debriefing when staff are informed of the death. Consider whether it may be appropriate to organise this service in

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advance and to have the psychologist available on short notice. Let the provider know that they may receive an influx of calls.

- Let your staff know that you'll keep them informed about funeral arrangements or a memorial service, where known and appropriate.
- Notify the wider workplace by email as soon as possible. You can also include external clients or suppliers.
- Advise staff to hold off posting messages of condolence on social media until they are sure that all immediate family members have been told about the death.
- Assure staff that they can come to you with any questions.

### Understanding grief

Grief is a natural response to loss. The process of grieving is one of gradually adjusting to the loss and working out how to live without the person who has died.

Depending on their relationship with the person who died, your team members may experience a range of emotions including sadness, numbness, disbelief, loneliness, guilt, anger, regret and acceptance. Sometimes there is a feeling of relief that their colleague is no longer suffering.

There's no right or wrong way to grieve or set amount of time it lasts. Everyone mourns in their own way and in their own time. It is important that co-workers respect each other's way of grieving.

Grief is not an illness and does not need to be fixed, but it can be a confusing and overwhelming experience and can cause strong emotional and physical reactions. Some people openly display their emotions, while others may show no visible sign of grief. It is common to have difficulty concentrating, have trouble sleeping, feel tired or even feel physical pain.

► See our *Understanding Grief* booklet.

### Looking after your team

When an employee dies, some of their co-workers may be very distressed. As well as the loss of the person, the death may remind co-workers of other loss and sadness they've experienced, and of their own mortality.

Encourage staff to spend time together talking about their co-worker – this could occur in the days and weeks after the death. Be aware that there could be certain triggers at particular times, such as birthdays, team lunches or random emails/letters addressed to the employee who has died.

Regularly follow up with staff directly affected. Remember that for some people, it may take some time for the grief to hit. After the funeral continue to check in on staff as the next stage of grief unfolds.

### Following up

After the initial announcement, some of the following actions may be helpful:

- You might like to arrange a specific time to follow up with your team. This is an opportunity to acknowledge the team's feelings of loss and grief, and to discuss how they might like to remember and honour their colleague (see box on the next page for suggestions). They may prefer to do this privately or as a group.
- Acknowledge the impact the news will have on the employee's workmates and consider what the workplace can do to support them. For example, you may make temporary changes to work schedules or projects.
- Ask the family what information they would like to share, and respect their wishes with regard to privacy and funeral arrangements.
- Give staff time off to attend the funeral. You may want to organise transport as a group.
- Consider organising a psychologist or grief counsellor to visit your workplace so staff members can speak confidentially about how they may be feeling.

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- Try to offer staff members an “open door policy” so they can talk about what has happened. Though many people may not take up the offer, simply knowing that they can approach you may be appreciated.
- Take time to acknowledge and deal with your own feelings and ensure you seek out support for yourself as well.
- Many people find that the routine of getting back to work helps them to deal with the grief. However, if an employee’s sadness does not ease over time and is affecting their ability to function day to day, you could suggest they seek professional help.
- When it comes time to fill the position of an employee who has died, think about the impact on their co-workers and how best to manage the recruitment process.
- Consider reallocating responsibilities among team members and reorganising the work area so that a new employee is not seen as the replacement for the person who died.

### Ways to remember and honour a colleague

You may want to do something special to honour and acknowledge the life of your employee after their death. This can help co-workers cope with the loss.



Send flowers or a condolence card to the family. Or consider other useful items such as a food basket.



Organise a memorial service.

Install a memorial plaque, rename a meeting room or create an annual award.



Write a tribute about the colleague for the workplace’s intranet or newsletter.



As a team, plant a tree or participate in a fundraising event in memory of the colleague who has died.

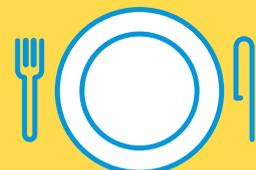


Attend the funeral or send a representative from your workplace, if appropriate.

Make a donation to a charity the colleague was connected to.



Spend some time together remembering and sharing stories about the colleague, e.g. share a meal or visit a favourite place.



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### Practical issues to consider

Your role may require you to deal with the practical aspects of the situation, such as:

- arranging for the redirection of email and phone calls, and changing phone and email out-of-office messages
- responding to any unanswered phone or email messages from clients or suppliers
- checking the employee's work diary so you can reallocate appointments as necessary – depending on their role, it may be necessary to contact people from outside your organisation who worked closely with the employee, such as clients and suppliers, to let them know what has happened
- removing the colleague's details from the intranet or email address books – decide when the best time is to remove the employee from the system; it can be distressing to staff if the employee's name keeps popping up on things like email distribution lists and Facebook posts
- packing up the colleague's work area – let others know when you are cleaning out the work area and consider whether asking close workmates to help might be appropriate; consider the timing and the possible effects this may have on people
- reallocating work among team members so that important deadlines are met
- ensuring that any outstanding payments for wages and superannuation are processed swiftly.

You may also need to contact the person's family to:

- return personal belongings
- settle outstanding financial matters
- arrange the return of company property, such as a mobile phone, laptop or car.

Communications with the family need to be handled sensitively. Ask your workplace's human resources department for guidance, and prepare for any special requirements, e.g. you may need an interpreter if the family speaks a language other than English.

### If an employee is a bereaved carer

A carer of someone who dies may experience a range of emotions, including sadness, shock, anger, loneliness, numbness or guilt. These are natural reactions to death.

Grief can cause emotional and physical reactions. Some employees who are grieving may find it difficult to concentrate and may experience physical symptoms, such as fatigue or pain, which can temporarily affect their performance. Other bereaved employees may find that work is a useful and welcome distraction.

It can be helpful to speak with the bereaved employee to manage their return to work. Consider whether your organisation can provide additional time off or flexible working arrangements. If EAP or bereavement counselling is available through your workplace, let the employee know about the service and how to access it.

Remember to respect the privacy of the carer and ask their permission before informing co-workers of the death. Be aware they may also be affected by the carer's loss.

### Compassionate leave for bereaved carers

Most full-time and part-time permanent employees who are bereaved are entitled to two days of paid compassionate leave, if the person who died is a member of their immediate family or household. Casual employees are entitled to unpaid leave. A bereaved carer requiring more than two days leave can use other forms of accumulated leave or take unpaid leave as agreed with their employer.

#### What to say

Many people feel uncomfortable talking to a bereaved co-worker because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing. Acknowledging that a co-worker has suffered a loss can help ease their sense of isolation. What you say will depend on your relationship with your co-worker, e.g. "You're in my thoughts" or "I was sorry to hear about your loss". Follow the lead of your bereaved co-worker to see how much they want to discuss it.

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## Where to get help and information

- **Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement**  
– [www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)
- **Griefline** – [griefline.org.au](http://griefline.org.au); 1300 845 745
- **Grieflink** – [grieflink.org.au](http://grieflink.org.au)
- **Cancer Council 13 11 20** – Call for more information about cancer in the workplace. You can ask for free copies of our booklets on cancer treatments and side effects, or download digital copies from your local Cancer Council website.

## Cancer Council websites

- ACT..... [actcancer.org](http://actcancer.org)
- NSW ..... [cancercouncil.com.au](http://cancercouncil.com.au)
- NT..... [nt.cancer.org.au](http://nt.cancer.org.au)
- QLD ..... [cancerqld.org.au](http://cancerqld.org.au)
- SA..... [cancersa.org.au](http://cancersa.org.au)
- TAS ..... [cancertas.org.au](http://cancertas.org.au)
- VIC ..... [cancervic.org.au](http://cancervic.org.au)
- WA ..... [cancerwa.asn.au](http://cancerwa.asn.au)
- Australia..... [cancer.org.au](http://cancer.org.au)

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## Note to reader

This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and should not be seen as a substitute for medical, legal or financial advice. You should obtain independent advice relevant to your specific situation from appropriate professionals. Information on cancer, including the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of cancer, is constantly being updated and revised by medical professionals and the research community. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided.



**Cancer Council**  
**13 11 20**

For information and support on cancer-related issues, call **Cancer Council 13 11 20**. This is a confidential service.