



# Support for the Bereaved Coworker

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This is a guide for members working with a co-worker who is coping with grief and loss. After suffering a profound loss, returning to work is a difficult adjustment. It can feel a bit daunting as to how best to offer support. We are often afraid that we will say or do the wrong thing and yet we truly wish to provide comfort and condolences.



When a co-worker is returning to work after a loss, there are some very practical and meaningful things that you can do to assist them. The information shared in this guide is supported by the lived experiences of those who have been bereaved.

Acknowledge their loss, (unless they have specifically asked colleagues not to). Regardless of how close you personally are to the individual returning to work, it is important to acknowledge their loss. You may feel like you don't know what to say so you end up saying nothing. The problem with this approach is that it leaves the individual feeling invisible and uncared for. Your words don't have to be profound or elegant. A simple, "*I'm so sorry for your loss*" is sufficient. Keep it simple but do it.

Avoid platitudes! "*They're in a better place*" or "*they're not in pain anymore*" are **NOT** statements that are in any way helpful to someone suffering loss. Don't do it. If you don't know what to say, you can sincerely express that to the individual, followed by stating that you care about them. It is our human reaction to wish to fix things for others. In the case of grief, this is not possible.

Be present for them. It may be tempting to avoid a grieving person because you don't know what to do or say but this is not helpful. When a grieving colleague comes into the staffroom or a meeting room and everyone finds anywhere else to sit other than beside them, it is isolating, not to mention hurtful. Sit with them, especially if that was something you would have done before. You don't have to say a lot. Just be present. In fact, active listening is one of the greatest gifts you can give a grieving person. Let them guide any conversation that they want to have with you.

It's okay to ask them how they are doing or if they need anything, however, the way we ask matters. It is best to be specific by asking how they are coping that day, or how they are managing with a certain aspect of work. Often people who are grieving can't articulate their needs so it can help to provide them with concrete suggestions. *"Can I get that photocopying done for you?" "I would love to bring you lunch this week, so you don't have to worry about it."*

Let them talk about the loved one they have lost. If you are reading this and have suffered loss, you will know how true this is. There is a need to keep the memory of a loved one alive by talking about them. So, just let the stories they share about their loved one be a natural part of your conversation.

If you are not sure what the grieving person needs or wants, ask them. Don't decide for them. Don't make decisions for them about what parts of their job they can or can't do or if they are ready to be invited to events or not. Ask them and let them decide.

Accept the way that they grieve. Everyone is an individual and all grieve differently. There is no right or wrong way. Be sensitive to the cultural and religious needs of the individual.

There will be certain times of the year that a bereaved colleague will have difficulty coping. Special occasions, birth dates, the anniversary of the death of their loved one are examples of these times.

The experience of grief is a lifelong process, changing over time in the way that it is felt and expressed. It is not a temporary condition that an individual will get over in time. It is tempting to expect the bereaved to eventually go back to the way they were before. Depending on the circumstances this may not be possible, so be accepting of the changes that may occur.

Refrain from providing advice about the grieving process.

