

Leading during bereavement and complex grief

Specific resources and guidance to help you navigate leading your teams in the wake of grief

Facing bereavement at any time personally and professionally is difficult to say the least. It is much more so in our current environment of incredibly high demands, little to no down time, social distancing and a steady stream of anxiety-provoking media. We recognise members of our teams will have family, friends and colleagues in critical care, with some recovering and others not. Losing someone close to us can be devastating. The emotions relating to grief can also emerge without bereavement, in periods of significant change as we are in now. We know we will see many colleagues suffering the aftermath of traumatic experiences over the coming months.

Good leadership is at the heart of how you support people in the face of bereavement. In particular, the advent of COVID-19 has brought ideas of compassionate leadership to the fore. In a recent [article for the King's Fund](#), Suzie Bailey and Michael West suggest that compassionate leadership is one of the most potent ways in which people can deal with what feel frightening and overwhelming.

In particular, this means paying attention to staff, truly listening to them and hearing the anxieties, stresses, and grief associated with bereavement. This is also about modelling good adaptive leadership when you're working with uncertainty and complexity, and where you need to support and enable other people, facilitating actions and modelling leadership as something that can be practised by anyone, whatever their role or grade. Exceptional leadership for exceptional times summarises what this leadership can look like in practice.

A death from COVID-19 means we have little time to prepare, may not have been able to have spent time with them due to infection risks, were unable to say goodbye, may need to continue working or may be ill ourselves (Sudden 2020). Consider some of the 'do's and don'ts' for leading and managing your teams after a bereavement (Oskarkilo 2020).

Do's

Take your time: when calling on a vulnerable person or the bereaved give the time needed to demonstrate care.

Listen to the story: talking is important for the distressed, use active listening to show you understand.

Provide information: make sure you have relevant written information and guidance to share.

Be creative: although there are strict rules on not spreading infection, be personal and innovate.

Show respect: people may have strong religious or other beliefs. Be respectful of what matters to them.

Accept the depth of their sorrow: grief for some is worse than physical pain, acknowledge the pain they experience.

Have patience: distress makes it difficult for people to think straight, be patient and allow time for answers.

Don'ts

Make assumptions: everyone behaves differently when distressed, there is no normal response to grief or Covid-19.

Blame you or others for failing: hear them out, and accept what is true and recognise this response as frustration.

Make promises you cannot keep: be realistic in what you can offer.

Dismiss values and beliefs: people may express harmful thoughts or behaviours, check if they are at risk of suicide.

Don't forget the children: make sure that children are involved and their needs to understand are met.

Put yourself or your colleagues at risk: make sure you balance compassionate leadership with maintain safety standards and procedures

Expect to make things better: recognise you cannot stop the pain, but you can help reduce it a little.

Employers should consider that everyone deals with death (and grief) differently, and each employee's needs will be different. Supporting an employee can help them feel valued, reduce their stress or anxiety, avoid or reduce sick leave, keep a good working relationship and keep the workplace productive (Acas 2020). Here are some resources and simple steps to enable you, as a leader, to support your staff amidst your own complex grief (Acas 2020).

When an employee tells you about a death of someone close to them it's good practice to:

- offer your condolences
- assure them they do not need to come to work if they do not want to, and make it clear that work should come second
- ask how they'd like to keep in touch
- ask if there's any important work they need someone else to cover, if appropriate

If someone is upset they might not be able to talk for long, or someone else might contact you on their behalf. If this happens, it can help to follow up with an email, or call them a few days later. Communicating in a calm, empathetic way can help employees feel supported, and help ease their anxiety about work. Speak to your HR team to ensure that time off is in accordance with policy. In the first few days after a death it is important to communicate with them.

When you get in touch, it's good practice to ask:

- how they are
- how they'd like to be in contact while they're off, for example by phone or email, and how often
- if they want you to let others know about the death
- if they want to be contacted by others from work, for example to offer their support or condolences
- if they need any information or support from you, and signpost to any support that's available to them
- if they've thought about returning to work, if appropriate

When someone at work dies from COVID-19 it is good practice to:

- arrange letters from the Chief Executive to both the family and the team/service
- tell others at work the person has died, in a sensitive and personal way
- contact the health and wellbeing lead for specific support for the team leader, team and yourself
- offer support to staff affected by the death, some links are provided below (Cruse, Sudden and Acas offer specific guidance and support for COVID-19 and suicide related deaths)
- contact the person's family or next of kin to offer condolences
- let staff know how they can give their condolences
- share details of any memorial, if staff have been invited (also see [guidance on memorials during social distancing](#))
- notify HR to ensure all procedures are followed for pay, contracts, [pensions](#) and other arrangements
- ensure all COVID-19 deaths are reported appropriately
- talk about the death with the team in a safe space enabling all to share their emotions – recognising they may be complex and prefer 1-1 or group spaces. Consider arranging for qualified/trained facilitation.

Where you don't already have a **bereavement policy**, you may decide to publish one. Here is a [template](#).

Many organisations are also looking at Schwartz rounds, learning circles, debriefing conversations and other group conversations to support staff because talking things through is important for all. We would be very grateful if you would share examples, resources and learning with us at nhsi.sehwb@nhs.net or in our private Facebook group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/NHSSECOVID19HWB/>.

Where you are concerned about a colleague at risk of suicide:

There is a tragic reality that some of us will have concerns about colleagues at risk of harming themselves. Flags to be aware of include communicating that they are feeling much worse, would 'rather not be here', have considered suicide or have ideas about how they would kill themselves or they stop taking your calls (Sudden 2020). It can also be more subtle including appearing restless and agitated, not wanting to be with people, or not coping with everyday tasks (Samaritans 2020). It is important to remain calm and not panic.

- If you are worried about someone **may be in immediate danger call the emergency services**.
- If you are worried about the person but do not think they are in immediate danger **encourage them to talk about their feelings and to seek help**.
- Asking **simple, direct questions** can help. This includes asking someone whether they are having suicidal thoughts. Ask open questions, give them time and try not to judge.
- **Suggest they call the confidential staff helpline** in blue below. You can also call on their behalf.
- **Make sure you get support as well**. Caring for someone else who is suicidal can be very emotionally draining. You are not alone.

Leadership amidst bereavement and grief

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Maya Angelou

Bailey and West King’s Fund (2020) Why compassionate leadership is vital during COVID-19 and simple things leaders can do. <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2020/03/covid-19-crisis-compassionate-leadership>

Berinato (2020) How leaders confront complex grief including response to change, anticipatory grief and anxiety. <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/manage-grieving-team-member.htm>

Mindtools (2020) Practical advice on leading grieving team members, including acknowledging feelings, showing empathy, avoiding giving prescriptive advice and ensuring, as far as possible, that people’s workloads don’t become overwhelming. <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/manage-grieving-team-member.htm>

Oskarkilo (2020) Resources on the psychological impact of dealing with death and bereavement on police officers, staff and emergency services workers (easily accessible and applicable to anyone working in health and care). Practical advice, alongside ‘do’s and don’ts’ for leaders and managers. Oscarkilo.org.uk

More curated bereavement specific resources for staff

Confidential staff support line, one-stop shop operated by the Samaritans and free to access (7am to 11pm seven days per week).

Call 0300 131 7000 or text FRONTLINE to 85258 (24/7).

Includes coaching, bereavement, mental health, housing, family, legal, benefits and debt help.

Acas 2020: Time off for bereavement. Support and guidance for policy around bereavement from the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas). Offers guidance on good practice in managing leave, suggested processes for when a member of staff dies and offers a template bereavement policy. <https://www.acas.org.uk/time-off-for-bereavement>

BPS 2015: Early intervention for trauma. Evidence-based recommendations on early interventions for trauma. This includes the benefits and guidance on debriefing taken from RCTs and NICE guidance based on experience debriefing after traumatic events. https://232fe0d6-f8f4-43eb-bc5d-6aa50ee47dc5.filesusr.com/ugd/360df8_7b5a5170107c488cb2dac2568d76d6b4.pdf

Cruse Bereavement Care offers face-to-face, telephone, email and online support for anyone who has experienced a loss. <https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help> 0808 808 1677

- **BEAD (Bereaved through Alcohol and Drugs)** – provides information and support for anyone bereaved through drug or alcohol use.
- **Child Bereavement UK** - provides support for anyone who has lost a child, and for children themselves who are bereaved. 0800 028 8840
- **Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Charity (SANDS)** – provides information and support for anybody affected by the death of a baby.
- **The Compassionate Friends** – offers a range of services supporting bereaved parents and their families. 0345 123 2304

Direct.gov. Guidance on practical elements of bereavement including applying for probate, registering a death, informing DVLA, benefits, support and tax. <https://www.gov.uk/browse/births-deaths-marriages/death>

Dying Matters. Coalition of individual and organisational members across England and Wales, aiming to help people talk more openly about dying, death and bereavement, and to make plans for the end of life dyingmatters.org

Mind 2019: Bereavement. Understanding grief and bereavement (including from suicide), how to manage and where to get help. <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/bereavement/about-bereavement/>

Staying Safe offers compassion, kindness and easy ways to help keep people safer from thoughts of harm and suicide, seek support and discover hope of recovery through powerful videos from people with personal experience. <http://www.stayingsafe.net/>

Sudden 2020: COVID-19 bereavement. COVID specific guidance on experienced grief and supporting yourself or someone else, particularly during social distancing. Advice where you are thinking about suicide or worried about someone else. Memorialising someone during social distancing.

<http://www.suddendeath.org/covid-19-bereavement/help-after-covid-19-bereavement>

Suicide – If you're worried about someone else (Samaritans). Guidance including what to look for, what to do, how to have the difficult conversation and general support during coronavirus.

<https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/support-and-information/worried-about-someone-else/>

Suicide – Supporting someone who feels suicidal (Mind). Includes who may be most at risk, how to help, talking about feelings, making a support plan and useful links. <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helping-someone-else/supporting-someone-who-feels-suicidal/about-suicidal-feelings/>

Suicidal feelings (Mind 2020). This includes what they are, possible causes and how you can learn to cope immediately and in the longer term. <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/suicidal-feelings/about-suicidal-feelings/>

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS) offer support for people who have been bereaved by suicide. They have a dedicated helpline, local support groups and many more practical resources.

<https://uksobs.org/>

Widowed and Young offers support to people under 50 who have lost a partner.

<https://www.widowedandyoung.org.uk/>