



The
**Compassionate
Friends**

Back to work

**A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents
and their families offering support after a child dies.**

Back to work

After the death of our child our whole life changes, radically and forever.

Our grief for our beloved child may have left us exhausted physically and mentally. Home is our place to feel safe. Hopefully we receive the care and support of a partner, if we have one, or other family members. Their concern may be a blanket that shields us in some respects from the demands of daily life, which is needed as we may not have our usual energy or motivation to take care of everything we used to do.

The workplace is a very different environment. Unlike our home, it has carried on without us. When we return to work, we will have to rejoin a world that has continued on regardless of our loss. We will have responsibilities and work to take care of, and people to interact with, no matter how much we are grieving. In some respects, this might offer a welcome respite or distraction from our grief, but many of us bereaved parents struggle with a return to work. If we are self-employed, we may have to focus back on our work quite soon, whether we feel ready or not.

Going back to work

“I had no choice but to return to work before I felt ready. By the time I got in the car to drive home, I was exhausted from ‘wearing a mask’. Finally, in the privacy of the car, I could let the tears flow.”

“I returned after a relatively short time. It suited me as I work part time, and I love everything about my job. It was one aspect of my life where I still retained some control.”

The decision about when to return to work may not be entirely up to us. Circumstances may require us to go back relatively soon, whereas others can stay off work for months or even years. The timing of our return can depend on a number of factors, such as:

- responsibilities at work
- financial necessity
- fear of losing our job
- the expectations of our employer
- our concerns for the extra workload on our colleagues who are covering for us.

On the other hand, some of us might actually wish to return to work earlier. Being in the workplace will give us a change of scenery and some company. It may help our sense of worth and add some meaning to our days. Depending on our role, our work may be an area where we feel we are taking some control over our life again. By concentrating on our work, we may gain some temporary relief from our grief.

Whether we are returning to work sooner or later, whether it is entirely our choice or not, what can make a difference is preparation.

Please see the information on pages 10-11 regarding legal rights for time off following bereavement.

Preparing for our return as an employee

“It was a long time before I made it back in to work. It was frightening to leave the security of home and face my colleagues, but it actually wasn’t as bad as I had imagined.”

Before we return to the workplace, we might find it helpful to talk about our concerns and needs with our manager, or the Human Resources department if it is a larger workplace. We may want to discuss what other employees are to be told about the death of our child, and whether we would prefer for them to mention our tragedy, or to respectfully leave us be.

Preparation beforehand may help. For instance, it may be possible for us to make a short visit to work, perhaps to do some less demanding job, before we make a full return. Perhaps we could work alongside a close colleague. Part-time or flexible hours could also help to ease us back into work, although this may not be a possibility for everyone.

The first day back can be challenging. No matter how much time has passed, we may be acutely anxious about how we will be received and how we will cope. As we struggle to adjust to a life without our child, we naturally turn to those closest to us, such as family or friends, for emotional support and understanding. Our workmates and managers will not be there for us in the same way. We may encounter some awkwardness and silence, but we may also be greeted with kindness and friendship.

It may be useful to identify a place near work, such as a park, a church or some other quiet place, where we can go for a short break and time to be alone during the working day. Having a safe place to withdraw to could be very helpful if the day becomes difficult.

Going forward, it is hoped that employers will be supportive if we need time off to attend an inquest, or to attend counselling or medical appointments.

Issues for the self-employed

Much of the above applies to those of us who are employed in organisations large enough to supply back-up support and alternative part-time work. Many of us, however, work alone or run our own small businesses, perhaps employing a few people. If we work for ourselves, taking time off can mean that our income ceases. Our customers may be sympathetic, but they will take their business elsewhere if made to wait too long. We may have suppliers and employees to be paid. We know that years of hard work can be destroyed by a few weeks of neglect. This can mean that whether we feel ready or not, we may need to start work sooner rather than later.

It is important that we act as our own managers, protecting ourselves from being overwhelmed. We may want to limit the amount of new work we take on during the weeks and months that follow the death of our child.

Isolation can also be a problem for those of us who work alone, so it is important to find ways of interacting with other people regularly, such as through voluntary work, clubs, social media or support groups.

How colleagues may react

“There was an awkward silence during the first days, but gradually conversations became more natural.”

Most of us have found that it helps if those we work with have been told about our child's death. It can be very upsetting if someone casually asks why we have been off work or assumes we have been away on holiday.

We may want people to acknowledge our child's death or we may prefer to be left to get on with our work. We may want to try to leave our grief at the door of our workplace, shutting down everything to do with what has happened and wishing no comment or sympathy from others. This can work for some of us, for a time anyway.

On the other hand, if our bereavement is ignored, we could feel resentful or hurt. Silence on the part of workmates is often due to them struggling to find words, perhaps because the mere thought of losing a child is too terrible to contemplate. It is hard when our colleagues retreat into silence, and it may be up to us to make the first move in bringing up the subject.

We should be aware that employers or colleagues may react differently depending upon the age of our child. There may be less understanding or empathy if our child was an adult. The way our child died can also affect people's reactions. If there has been media coverage about the death, such as if it was due to suicide, a traffic incident, or other sudden event, there may be curiosity as well as embarrassment, with everybody feeling uncomfortable. Again, perhaps a lead from us, or from a sympathetic colleague, can help to lessen the awkwardness. Hopefully this subject has already been discussed with our manager or Human Resources department.

As time goes by, we hope others will take their cues from us. When we manage to smile and chat again (although we may be putting on a pretence for a while), they will feel more comfortable and will react in a more natural way than when we first returned. Tolerance and understanding shown to us can lessen the stress considerably.

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) leaflet ***Helping a bereaved employee*** shows a number of ways in which we can be supported at this difficult time. Perhaps a copy could be passed amongst our workmates for them to get a better understanding.

Relationships in the workplace

“I worked together with a close colleague. I felt really supported – it was exactly the right way for me to return to work.”

Most of us find that relationships with our work colleagues change when we first return to work. We feel alienated and they feel awkward. The usual trivial conversations which are part of most workplaces may irritate or distress us, and we may have trouble relating to things that seem important to others. We may not wish to join them for social occasions outside work. If we are asked and refuse too often, they may stop asking.

It is also difficult if people make insensitive remarks, such as unfortunate comparisons with the death of a pet or other loss that feel insignificant compared to the loss of our child. We feel annoyed by this thoughtlessness but have no easy way to show how hurt we are without making everyone even more uncomfortable. We may be able to avoid resentment building against people for their insensitivity by communicating openly with them, or, if necessary, with our line manager.

Our grief may make us more vulnerable, which in turn could make us a target for workplace bullying, such as an attempt to undermine our position in the organisation. We may consider discussing the matter with our manager or Human Resources in the first place. If we are not satisfied with the action taken, we may then have to seek help from outside. The Citizens' Advice Bureau or a Trade Union representative may be able to advise.

Fortunately, many of us do find that our work colleagues offer us kindness and companionship. In fact, the building of friendships and the encouragement to keep going can sometimes be crucial in helping us back on our feet again.

How grief may affect our working life

“I was surprised at first, but I actually found it okay putting on my suit and driving to a meeting. My life had been in such a state of complete upheaval. This now felt like a touch of normality. I was back.”

Some of us find a sense of relief going back to work. It can help give our daily life structure and routine. Sometimes, just putting on our usual work clothes,

the semblance of normality, can give us enough impetus to start each day. “Putting on the uniform” may help to give our emotions a sort of camouflage, where we can put everything on hold for a few hours. On the other hand, keeping up a front like this can be exhausting emotionally. If we’re “playing a role” at work, we will need to find other places and people where we just can be ourselves.

Our work output may change. This can be a cause of frustration or discouragement, but it is actually quite common amongst the bereaved. We are enduring deep grief for our dear child. Grief can cause fatigue, both mental and physical. We may struggle to concentrate. At times we may find we have less patience and tolerance for others. We may lack self-confidence when making decisions. If we are working for ourselves, we may find it difficult to complete projects.

Some of us find working in a public-facing role to be particularly tough, especially in the early days. We cannot predict the comments or situations we will face. No matter what arises, we will have to keep our own emotions hidden. If we struggle to manage this, we will need to discuss it with our employer. They might be able to find us work that does not involve direct contact with the public.

Some of us return to work only to find that it is too much to cope with, or we may initially manage, but then face increasing difficulty as time passes. We may need to take a longer break. If we cannot manage, we could discuss our situation with our employer and/or our GP.

Difficult times

In the course of each year there will be time periods when we feel more vulnerable. There will be difficult dates such as birthdays and anniversaries. We may consider taking time off for our own well-being on some occasions.

Public holidays can be challenging. It may seem that everyone is in a party mood preparing for Christmas or other festivals, whilst we feel bleak and miserable. We may have to explain that this is a very painful time of year for us and that we find it impossible to join in the usual festivities.

Holidays can also be problematic. We will have had more time on our own. Upon our return, we may be in a more fragile state than before and need to renew our initial return-to-work efforts.

Unavoidable events such as an inquest for our child, which may happen months or even years after our bereavement, will also need explanation and support, and probably time off work.

The future

As time passes, colleagues may not realise that our acute grief is continuing. They may not understand that grief is a rollercoaster, and there is no time frame. We may find that, as the months pass, those we work with expect us to be “over it” or “better” and that we should no longer be showing signs of our grief and distress. When we feel strong enough, we may find it helpful to explain to our colleagues how to be supportive, such as the type of comments we find reassuring and constructive, and those that make us sad.

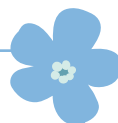
Grief is unpredictable and can surface at unexpected and inappropriate times. We need to be gentle with ourselves, not demanding more than we can give at any given time. We will eventually develop our own ways of coping and learn to be more resilient. However, at times we might still need to reassess how we are managing. Some of us who quite successfully managed an early return to work might find that sometime later we are physically, emotionally and mentally exhausted. That may be the time to consider a break or early retirement, if this is a possibility for us.

Many of us may question the meaning and importance of our work in the face of our loss. The world seems a different place. The way we view life and the things we now value might have changed. We may decide that our present line of work will not offer us the fulfilment that it did previously and that a change might help us. We may take extended leave to think about our future or resign from that particular job and look for another one that we think will offer us more satisfaction. On the other hand, we may decide to stay in the same job, feeling that its familiarity gives us stability and comfort. It takes time and thought to decide how we see our future working life.

Many of us discover that going to work, whether in our existing job or some new employment, reduces our sense of isolation. It can help as we struggle to adjust to our new life. We may find satisfaction and meaning in our work-related accomplishments, which helps rebuild our sense of self-worth. All of this is so important as we struggle to find a way forward without our precious child.

Remember you are not alone

Whatever you are going through, you are not alone. Join in a support group organised by The Compassionate Friends (TCF) online, in person or on social media. Speaking with other bereaved parents and hearing about their experiences can help you navigate your own working life. See more details on the back page.



Further reading

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) have published a range of leaflets to support parents who have experienced the death of their child. The following titles could be helpful at this time:

- *Living with grief*
- *Grief of the newly bereaved*
- *Coping with special occasions*
- *Coping with friends, family and social situations*

TCF leaflets can be read and downloaded at this link:

tcf.org.uk/leaflets

Printed copies are available from the office, free of charge for bereaved parents (see contact details on the back page).

Bereavement and employment: legal rights

Legislation often changes. The following is the position at the time of writing (spring 2024). Please visit the recommended web pages to check the current rules.

Two weeks “parental bereavement leave” (“Jack’s Law”)

This entitlement is for parents whose child was under 18 years old when they died, or if they have a stillbirth after 24 weeks of pregnancy.

“Parents” means they were:

- the child’s or baby’s parent - either biological, adoptive or parent of a child born to a surrogate
- the partner of their child’s or baby’s parent.

It does not matter how long they have been at their current job. Provided they are eligible, parents can take 2 weeks’ leave for each child who has died or has been stillborn.

If a parent finds they need additional leave (after all, two weeks is not very long), they may need to discuss their need for additional compassionate leave. (See below.)

Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay

is for those who have been working continuously for their employer for at least 26 weeks and earning a minimum average per week. (If they have been doing agency work, they can still qualify, but the agency must have been deducting PAYE tax and Class 1 National Insurance Contributions from their earnings.)

Please note: *“Employees must ask for statutory parental bereavement pay within 28 days of taking statutory parental bereavement leave, starting from the first day of the week they are claiming the payment for.”*

“The Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay Regulations” came into force in 2020. Visit:

- Government website: **Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay and Leave - gov.uk**
- ACAS website: **If an employee’s child dies - Time off work for bereavement - acas.org.uk**

“Reasonable time off”

for parents whose child died over the age of 18

According to the Employment Rights Act 1996, employees are entitled to a reasonable amount of unpaid time off to handle unforeseen matters involving dependents or immediate family, including attending funerals. If your child was not legally your dependent – for instance, if they were an adult living their own life – they are still **“immediate family”**.

Employers may choose to grant compassionate, bereavement or “special” leave, paid or unpaid, at their own discretion. Some companies may have bereavement leave policies in place.

It is advisable to contact your employer as soon as possible, and then to stay in contact with them about any plans to delay your return to work.

You can find out more here:

- ACAS website: **Leave and pay when someone dies - Time off work for bereavement - [acas.org.uk](https://www.acas.org.uk)**

Sick leave

Some parents find that their mental health is adversely affected by their bereavement to the point that they are unable to return to work within the timeframe that their employer expects. This can be discussed with a GP. The GP may suggest the parent takes sick leave and can provide the necessary report or notes. Visit:

- ACAS website: **When an employee is off sick - Sick leave - [acas.org.uk](https://www.acas.org.uk)**

The self-employed

There is nothing equivalent to “Jack’s Law” for the self-employed. If a parent finds they are unable to continue their self-employment, they may want to look into their eligibility for benefits. Visit:

- Government website: **Benefits - [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk)**



The Compassionate Friends

Call our National Helpline

0345 123 2304

The helpline is open from 10am - 4pm and 7pm - 11pm every day.

Calls are always answered by a parent whose child has died.

Email our National Helpline

helpline@tcf.org.uk

For more information and support visit

tcf.org.uk

Find us on social media

 **@tcf.org.uk**

 **@TCFcharityUK**

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