



Helping a bereaved employee

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families



HELPING A BEREAVED EMPLOYEE

after the death of their child

This leaflet has been written to help employers understand how an employee may be affected when their child dies. For both the bereaved employee and his or her work colleagues, awareness of the effects of such a traumatic event will be helpful to everyone in the workplace.

All deaths bring sadness and grief, none more so perhaps than that of our child. We expect our parents to die before us. As we grow older we wonder about our spouse or partner. Who will go first? How will the other cope? We never think that our child will die before we do. Even those whose child has a terminal illness hope against hope for a new drug or miracle cure.

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a support group composed entirely of parents – or close relatives – bereaved of a child or children. A ‘child’ can be anything from an unborn baby to an adult. All members of TCF have lost children and can remember their initial helplessness and the need to talk about their loss. They are there to help and befriend any bereaved parent, and above all to listen to them as they try to work their way through their grief.

One simple way to help a bereaved parent in your organisation is to ensure that they have heard of TCF’s work. A phone call to our **Helpline (0345 1 23 23 04)**, by you or them, will put them in touch with all of our services, provided at no cost to bereaved parents.

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We try not to give specific dos and don’ts in our leaflets: no bereaved parent is the same as another. Some want to let their emotions spill out; some wish to keep them bottled up. Even though the last century has seen a lessening of the ‘stiff upper lip’ attitude thought suitable for men, vestiges of it still remain. For many, a return to work is an opportunity to drive out grief by immersion in familiar routines.

A return to work is an ordeal for bereaved parents, and a perplexing time for employers and work colleagues. It is important to know the way in which the child has died; if the death was sudden and violent there will be media interest, an inquest and perhaps a trial. These often take place many weeks or months after the death, re-awakening the parent's intense grief.

We are conscious that all employers in this situation will be torn between wanting to help, yet having to get the work done and control costs. Here, then, are a few *suggestions* that may be useful:

On first hearing of the death

- A short hand-written note or card and flowers sent, or preferably taken, to the home with assurances that the employee need not worry about his or her job: that is being looked after in their absence.
- Make sure that their work *is* being taken care of, possibly for a protracted period.
- Offer help with any legal or suchlike matters that may need attention.

The funeral

- Some of your staff may wish to attend in a personal capacity. If you or a senior member of the organisation are unable to attend, perhaps ask someone to represent you at the ceremony. Guidance concerning flowers or donations is nowadays usually given.
- Take the opportunity to assure the bereaved employee that they should not concern themselves with an immediate return to work.
- Your organisation may have access to a benevolent fund which may be very welcome if your employee finds that the sudden expense of a funeral is too much. If help is there, or somewhere else, make the employee feel at ease in applying for it.

Prior to a return to work

- Ensure that any communications about sickness or compassionate leave entitlements are accompanied by a personal note.
- You, or a colleague, may wish to arrange to visit your employee to discuss how they feel about returning to work. Is flexi- or part-time work feasible? If their work is dealing with the public, would a temporary change of department to a more sheltered environment be possible?

Preparing the other employees

You are a caring employer – you are reading this leaflet. It may surprise you, however, what an ordeal your employee is facing. They may be wondering how they will stand up to returning to the ‘outside’ world, will they burst into tears and embarrass their colleagues? How are they going to cope, physically and mentally, with their job? Sadly, some of our parents have experienced what they describe as ‘bullying in the workplace’ after their return to work. It is essential to give them as much support as you can.

You may wish therefore to hold a short meeting with those who work alongside the returning employee to discuss the points outlined in this leaflet:

- Encourage them not to ignore the subject when first greeting the returning parent. A short “I am so sorry. How are you feeling?” may give the bereaved employee the opportunity to express their feelings to their colleagues.
- Warn them that there could be unexpected tears and occasional outbursts of anger at seemingly trivial things.
- Ask them to limit mentions of their own children and grandchildren in conversation.
- Warn them to try to avoid trite clichés such as ‘Time heals’ (*it’s a permanent loss, not a flesh wound*), ‘You’ve moved on’ (*where to?*), ‘Are you better now?’ (*They’ve not been ill*).

When the employee returns

You may have established that it is best if your employee works part- or flexi-time for a while. Give them the freedom to make that choice. They may still be suffering from physical effects of bereavement: problems of concentration and memory, fatigue and increased vulnerability to illness. This can lead to short-term loss of confidence, efficiency, effectiveness and performance. But, with time and sympathetic support, they will return to take their place in the team again.

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A range of leaflets and articles on many different aspects of grief is also available from TCF they may help you understand better the trauma that bereaved parents may suffer. Thank you for showing your concern by reading this one.

The Compassionate Friends

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www.tcf.org.uk info@tcf.org.uk

TCF Postal Library

Tel: 0345 120 3785

Email: library@tcf.org.uk

TCF

14 New King Street, Deptford, London SE8 3HS

Office 0345 120 3785

www.tcf.org.uk info@tcf.org.uk

UK Helpline 0345 1 23 23 04

Northern Ireland Helpline 0288 77 88 016

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