

What to do when a loved one dies: Time off and returning to work

Taking Time Off

Work Bereavement Policies

Most large companies and many smaller ones will have a Bereavement Policy in place, or at least a set procedure to cover an employee who has suffered the death of a loved one. You should check this with your manager or HR department.

Unfortunately, this is not a legal requirement, so some companies will make their own decisions for each individual case, however they must still follow the law. You can check this on the government website www.gov.co.uk as there are many variables dependant on your relationship with the deceased and the type of employment.

A good bereavement policy should cover how much time off you are allowed and how much pay you are entitled to, as well as how management will support staff after a death. It should also cover the procedure for returning to work, whether you can stagger your return starting with reduced hours at first to ease you back gently.

You will need to take time off initially of course, but it may be worth some of the time for later, as there are likely to be days when you simply can't face going into work and just need time alone or with your family.

It will be helpful to let your employer know how you would prefer to be contacted, email, phone, etc, or if you would prefer to be contacted through a third party, in which case contact details need to be supplied to anyone that may need to contact you. Also whether you want someone to tell your work colleagues and if you are happy for them to contact you.

Returning to work

If no set date has been agreed it would be good to contact your employer before returning to work to let them know when you will be ready to return, and also if there is anything you are particularly concerned about when you return. If you don't already know, it may be good to ask if the company is part of the EAP (Employees Assistance Programme) for help with Bereavement Counselling sessions, which can often be invaluable, or you could consider arranging this privately.

If you have one or two close friends at work, it is a good idea to speak to them on the phone before you go back. They can let you know if there have been any changes during your absence and they can prepare to help ease you back into your normal work situation.

Your first day back can feel very daunting, expect some unusual reactions from colleagues. Some will try to avoid you, because they don't know what to say and are afraid of saying the wrong thing and upsetting you. Some will talk incessantly about anything and everything, except your grief, for exactly the same reason. Although neither of these are helpful, try not to let it upset you or judge them harshly. It's just their own way of dealing with the situation, they just need a little time to adjust, as you will yourself.

Depending on your work environment, it may be easier to talk to just one or two people you know well at first. You can tell them as much or as little as you feel comfortable with, and they can then help in any awkward conversations that may arise. Don't be afraid to be honest about your feelings and don't be afraid to cry, whether male or female, crying is the most natural thing in the world and nobody will blame you. In fact, crying is scientifically proven to calm you down, so do it as often as you like.

Some people look forward to returning to work as it keeps their mind too busy to think about the grief, other hate going back because it gets in the way of their grief. Either way your own grief process will eventually run its course, ebbing and flowing like the never ending tides of the ocean. So be patient with your family, be patient with your friends, be patient with your colleagues and most of all, be patient with yourself.

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