

How to support a friend or colleague after a bereavement

It's always hard to know what to say to someone who is bereaved. Sometimes we will talk about any trivia that comes to mind, to avoid saying the wrong thing, sometimes avoid talking at all for the same reason. Both can be distressing for the bereaved person when the most important thing they need to know is that someone cares.

So, what can you say to a friend or colleague who is suffering the pain of losing a loved one? Not talking about the bereavement increases the pain of the loss and leaves them feeling more alone and isolated, it needs to at least be acknowledged and spoken about in a quiet, discreet way. Most people return to work too early in their grief process, perhaps for financial reasons, but many use it as a distraction, a way to occupy their minds and avoid the painful thoughts and feelings.

Saying something like "I was really sorry to learn of your loss, if there's anything I can do for you, please let me know" will help them to feel acknowledged and supported. It may well make them cry too, but they will really appreciate your sentiment. You can maybe help straight away by offering a tissue.

If there are people in other offices or departments who know the person well, ask them to hand write a short note of condolence (not typed or an email), it will go a long way to breaking the ice when they do bump into each other.

Find out if there is an empty room or a quiet space somewhere that can be used if the grief becomes too much at anytime and the bereaved person needs a short time away from the workplace and let them know it is available for them should they need it. If this does happen, check whether they would like to be alone or to have someone with them.

It's ok too, to express your own feelings and do be aware that the bereaved person may react differently on different days or even by the hour. That's how grief is, unpredictable and ever changing. Allowances need to be made, but remaining open, honest and accessible will allow them to feel more comfortable and relaxed with you.

Something else you can do is to make sure they are looking after themselves, eating properly at lunchtimes, going home on time instead of staying on to finish some work. Ask how they are sleeping, grief is a very draining process and eating properly and getting enough sleep are important to boost their emotional stamina.

Bear in mind that in the first year after a death there will be very painful, significant days. Birthday, wedding anniversary, first Christmas without their loved one, and of course the anniversary of the death. If you know when these are, let others know to be especially thoughtful and mindful at those times.