

# Death and bereavement

*A guide for managers and human resources professionals*

---

**Many people with cancer will be successfully treated and live for many years, but not everyone will recover. If an employee dies from cancer, their co-workers may need support. Similarly, you may need to support an employee after a family member or friend has died from cancer. This fact sheet is a starting point for managers dealing with death and bereavement in their teams.**

## Be prepared

When an employee with cancer has a poor prognosis and it is known that they are going to die, you can plan ahead to prepare staff for what might happen. Start by finding out what the employee would like their co-workers to be told. Some employees may wish to keep this information confidential.

With the employee's permission, you can develop a plan to inform co-workers and the wider workplace. In your plan, outline how you'll communicate (written or verbal), what to include, who the news should come from, and when it should be shared.

*“So many people talk about driving home from work and being in tears on the way home, having performed all day as being someone that's doing okay.”* NATHAN, BEREAVEMENT COUNSELLOR

Sensitively worded communications advising staff of the person's serious illness can help prepare their co-workers, reducing their shock when news of the person's death is subsequently communicated. Keep in mind that co-workers who have previously experienced other forms of loss may need extra support. Ensure that the employee's workmates are informed of the situation before advising all staff.

If someone in your workplace is responsible for internal communications, ask them for help developing the plan, as well as any announcements.

While it is not easy to tell staff that a co-worker has died, preparing the announcement in advance may be less stressful than trying to put something together in the hours or days after the death. It will also give you more time to ensure that any communication is appropriate and sensitive, and that you have included all relevant information, such as what support is available for staff.



### Informing the team

It can be difficult to tell your team about the death of a co-worker. The following suggestions may be useful:

- Arrange a private place to tell immediate team members about the death as soon as is practical. Keep the communication clear and simple. Where appropriate, let staff on leave know about the death, preferably by phone rather than email.
- Don't be afraid to admit that you don't know what to say.
- If appropriate, let immediate team members know they can take time off or that they can have some quiet time as needed.
- Let staff members know about any support services available through your workplace, such as counselling via an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), or let them know it is okay to take time to just talk to each other. Call Cancer Council 13 11 20 for details about other services (see page 5).
- If your workplace has an EAP, it may offer a critical incident response service, which can arrange for a psychologist to attend the workplace to provide support when staff are informed of the death.
- Ask staff to refrain from contacting the family of the person who has died at this time; it may be helpful to have one staff member as the point of contact between the organisation and the family.
- Let your staff know that you'll keep them informed about funeral arrangements or a memorial service, where known and appropriate.
- Notify the wider workplace by email as soon as possible. External clients or suppliers may also be notified by email or phone.
- Advise staff to hold off posting messages of condolence on social media until all immediate family members have been told about the death.
- Assure staff that they can come to you with any questions or concerns.

### Looking after your team

When an employee dies, some of their co-workers may be very distressed. As well as the loss of the person, the death may remind co-workers of other loss and sadness, and of their own mortality.

Encourage staff to spend time together talking about their co-worker – this could occur in the days and weeks after the death. Be aware that there

### Understanding grief

Grief is a natural response to loss. The grieving process is one of gradually adjusting to the loss and working out how to live without the person who has died.

Depending on their relationship with the person who died, your team members may experience a range of emotions including sadness, numbness, disbelief, loneliness, guilt, anger, regret and acceptance. Sometimes there is a feeling of relief that their colleague is no longer suffering.

There's no right or wrong way to grieve. Everyone responds to the death of someone close to them in their own way. It is important that co-workers respect one another's way of grieving.

Grief is not an illness and does not need to be fixed, but it can cause strong emotional and physical reactions. It can affect sleep and concentration and some people may even feel physical pain. Some people openly display their emotions, while others may show no visible sign of grief.

► See our *Understanding Grief* booklet.



could be certain triggers at particular times, such as birthdays, team lunches or random emails/letters addressed to the employee who has died.

Regularly follow up with staff directly affected. For some people, it may take some time for the grief to hit. After the funeral or memorial service, continue to check in on staff as the grief unfolds.

### Following up

After the initial announcement, some of the following actions may be helpful:

- You might like to arrange a specific time to follow up with your team. This is an opportunity to acknowledge the team's feelings of loss and grief, and to discuss how they might like to honour and remember their co-worker (see next column). They may prefer to do this privately or as a group.
- Acknowledge the impact the news will have on the employee's team and consider what the workplace can do to support them. For example, you may make temporary changes to work schedules or projects.

### Attending the funeral

- Ask the family what information they would like to share, and respect their wishes with regard to privacy and funeral arrangements.
- Give staff time off to attend the funeral, if they wish to attend. You may want to organise transport as a group.

### Ongoing support

- Consider organising a psychologist or grief counsellor to visit your workplace so staff members can speak confidentially about how they may be feeling.
- Try to adopt an "open door policy" with staff members so they can talk about what has happened. Although many people may not take up the offer, simply knowing that they can approach you may be appreciated.
- Take time to acknowledge and deal with your own feelings and ensure you seek out support for yourself as well.
- Many people find that the routine of getting back to work helps them to deal with the grief. However, if an employee's sadness does not ease over time and is affecting their ability to function day to day, you could suggest that they see their GP.
- When it comes time to fill the position of an employee who has died, think about the impact on their co-workers and how best to manage the recruitment process.
- Consider reallocating responsibilities among team members and reorganising the work area so that a new employee is not seen as the replacement for the person who died.

### Ways to honour and remember a colleague

You may want to do something special to honour and acknowledge the life of your employee after their death. This can help co-workers cope with the loss.



#### Send a gift or card

Send flowers or a condolence card to the family. Or consider other useful items such as a food basket.



#### Organise a memorial

Install a memorial plaque, rename a meeting room or create an annual award, with the permission of the family of the co-worker who has died.



#### Pen a tribute

Write a tribute about the colleague for the workplace's intranet or newsletter.



#### Make a team contribution

As a team, plant a tree or participate in a fundraising event in memory of the co-worker who has died.



#### Attend funeral or service

Attend the funeral or service, or send a representative from your workplace, if appropriate.



#### Make a donation

Organise a donation to a charity the co-worker was connected to. The company and the staff may wish to contribute.



#### Spend time together

Take time to share stories and memories of the co-worker (e.g. share a meal or visit a favourite place).

### Practical issues to consider

Your role may require you to deal with the practical aspects of the situation, such as:

- arranging for the redirection of email and phone calls, and changing phone and email out-of-office messages
- responding to any unanswered phone or email messages from clients or suppliers
- checking the employee's work diary so you can reallocate appointments as necessary – depending on their role, it may be necessary to contact people from outside your organisation who worked closely with the employee, such as clients and suppliers, to let them know what has happened
- removing the employee's details from the intranet or email address books – decide when the best time is to make these changes; it can be distressing to staff if the employee's name keeps popping up on things like email distribution lists and Facebook posts
- considering promotional material – if the employee's photo is on company promotional material, think about how this can be managed
- packing up the employee's work area – let others know when you are cleaning out the work area and consider whether asking close teammates to help might be appropriate; consider the timing and the possible effects this may have on people
- reallocating work among team members so that important deadlines are met
- ensuring that any outstanding payments for wages and superannuation are processed swiftly.

You may also need to contact the person's family to return personal belongings; settle outstanding financial matters; and arrange the return of company property, such as a mobile phone, laptop or car.

Communications with the family need to be handled sensitively. If your workplace has a human resources department, ask for guidance, and prepare for any special requirements (e.g. organising an interpreter if the family speaks a language other than English).



Grief Australia's MyGrief app provides information, tools and resources for grieving people and those who support them. Download the free MyGrief app for your smartphone or tablet device.

### If an employee is a bereaved carer

A carer of someone who has died may experience a range of emotions, including sadness, shock, anger, loneliness, numbness or guilt. These are natural reactions to death.

Grief can cause emotional and physical reactions. Some employees who are grieving may find it difficult to concentrate and may experience physical symptoms, such as fatigue or pain, which can temporarily affect their performance. Other bereaved employees may find that work is a useful and welcome distraction.

It can be helpful to speak with the bereaved employee to manage their return to work. Consider whether your organisation can provide additional time off or flexible working arrangements. If EAP or bereavement counselling is available through your workplace, let the employee know about the service and how to access it.

Remember to respect the privacy of the carer and ask their permission before informing co-workers of the death. Be aware they may also be affected by the carer's loss.

### Cultural and religious considerations

Many workplaces are made up of people from a range of cultural and religious backgrounds with various mourning customs. It's important to keep in mind these different responses to grief when supporting employees during a period of bereavement.



For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may mourn the loss of a family member by following traditional practices called Sorry Business. For more information about Sorry Business, visit [fairwork.gov.au/find-help-for/first-nations-people](http://fairwork.gov.au/find-help-for/first-nations-people).

Some organisations may offer additional cultural leave for bereaved staff from diverse backgrounds.

## Compassionate leave for bereaved carers

Most full-time and part-time permanent employees who are bereaved are entitled to 2 days of paid compassionate leave, if the person who died is a member of their immediate family or household. Casual employees are entitled to unpaid leave. A bereaved carer requiring more than 2 days leave can use other forms of accumulated leave or take unpaid leave as agreed with their employer. Some employers may also choose to offer additional leave. For details, visit [fairwork.gov.au/leave/compassionate-and-bereavement-leave](http://fairwork.gov.au/leave/compassionate-and-bereavement-leave).

### What to say

Many people feel uncomfortable talking to a bereaved co-worker because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing. Acknowledging that a co-worker has suffered a loss can help ease their sense of isolation. What you say will depend on your relationship with your co-worker. For example, you may say:

“You’re in my thoughts.”

“I was sorry to hear about your loss.”

“I’m not sure what to say, but I want you to know that I care.”

Follow the lead of the co-worker to see how much they want to talk.



### Where to get help and information

Call Cancer Council 13 11 20 for information and support when managing grief and bereavement in the workplace. You can ask for free copies of our booklets, including *Facing End of Life* and *Understanding Grief*. You can also visit your local Cancer Council website.

ACT	<a href="http://actcancer.org">actcancer.org</a>
NSW	<a href="http://cancercouncil.com.au">cancercouncil.com.au</a>
NT	<a href="http://cancer.org.au/nt">cancer.org.au/nt</a>
QLD	<a href="http://cancerqld.org.au">cancerqld.org.au</a>
SA	<a href="http://cancersa.org.au">cancersa.org.au</a>
TAS	<a href="http://cancer.org.au/tas">cancer.org.au/tas</a>
VIC	<a href="http://cancervic.org.au">cancervic.org.au</a>
WA	<a href="http://cancerwa.asn.au">cancerwa.asn.au</a>
Australia	<a href="http://cancer.org.au">cancer.org.au</a>

### Other useful websites

You can find many useful resources online, but not all websites are reliable. These websites are good sources of support and information about grief.

Grief Australia	<a href="http://www.grief.org.au">www.grief.org.au</a>
Griefline	1300 845 745 <a href="http://griefline.org.au">griefline.org.au</a>
GriefLink	<a href="http://grieflink.org.au">grieflink.org.au</a>

**Workplace fact sheets** – Other online fact sheets, such as *Cancer: an overview*, *Supporting a co-worker with cancer* and *Creating cancer-friendly workplaces*, are available on your local Cancer Council website.

### Acknowledgements

This fact sheet has been developed by Cancer Council NSW on behalf of all other state and territory Cancer Councils as part of a National Cancer Information Subcommittee initiative. We thank the expert and consumer reviewers of this fact sheet and also the experts, consumers and editorial teams who have worked on current and previous versions of this information.

[See our full list of expert and consumer reviewers.](#)

### Note to reader

This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and should not be seen as a substitute for medical, legal or financial advice. You should obtain independent advice relevant to your specific situation from appropriate professionals. Information on cancer, including the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of cancer, is constantly being updated and revised by medical professionals and the research community. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided in this fact sheet.

This fact sheet is funded through the generosity of the people of Australia. To support Cancer Council, call your local Cancer Council or visit your local website.



Cancer Council acknowledges Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders past, present and emerging.

