

BEREAVEMENT IN THE WORKPLACE: SUPPORTING YOU THROUGH LOSS



The loss of a colleague can deeply affect a team. Employers and employees often underestimate the emotional impact that grief can have on the work environment and the challenges that it brings.

In professional settings, we may feel pressure to hide our emotions, to stay composed, or to return to 'normal' quickly. But grief doesn't follow a schedule – and it shouldn't be ignored.

It's important to remember that **grief is a deeply personal experience**, and there is no 'right' way to grieve. Reactions may differ from person to person, and emotions can fluctuate – someone may feel better one day but overwhelmed the next.

Here are some insights into how we react to bereavement and ideas for dealing with grief in the workplace when a colleague passes away.

IMMEDIATE REACTIONS

It helps to understand the different ways in which people react to bereavement and how you can respond to them.

01

CRYING

Tears are a natural and healthy response to loss. Sometimes we may cry without understanding why; sometimes our tears are triggered by a memory or moment. Not everyone expresses grief this way, but for many, crying is a vital part of healing and no one should be ashamed of it. Allow your colleagues space to cry, to be alone if needed, or simply sit with them and be a supportive presence.

02

GUILT

Guilt can quietly accompany grief. Team members may need to take over the tasks of the colleague who passed away, and then feel they've fallen short. Some may feel guilty for laughing or enjoying a moment while others are still grieving. In cases of suicide, feelings of helplessness and guilt may surface with questions like "Why didn't we see it coming?" or "Could I have done more?"

It's important for everyone to know **they are not to blame**. Sudden loss often leaves us wishing we'd had more time – but we have to recognise that what happened was beyond our control. Talking about these feelings with someone caring can help.

03

ANGER

Anger is a valid emotional response. Questions like "Why did this happen?" or "Why wasn't anyone there to help?" often arise, especially when the death is sudden, accidental or due to suicide. Closure may be difficult while questions remain.

Providing employees with **factual, appropriate information** – in line with family wishes and confidentiality – can help bring clarity and healing. Encourage open, respectful conversations with colleagues, HR or a Healthy Company professional.

04

UNCERTAINTY

Some employees may feel uncertain about what to say and how to behave in the professional work environment after a loss. Encourage everyone to be authentic and make the message clear that there is no right or wrong way to react.

There may also be uncertainty around the workspace and personal items of the colleague who passed away. If someone feels comfortable, they can help pack up the belongings. Alternatively, the family can be invited to do so. There's no fixed timeline – take your time and decide together as a team what to do. With the family's consent, it can also be meaningful to keep a small item as a remembrance.

LATER REACTIONS

01

SADNESS

A wave of sadness can hit employees when a replacement is appointed for the colleague who passed away. If you're a manager or team leader, be sensitive. It's important to keep your team informed when a hiring decision has been made. Let them know your intentions and timelines. Try to frame it positively, explaining that a full staff complement will ease the pressure on the team.

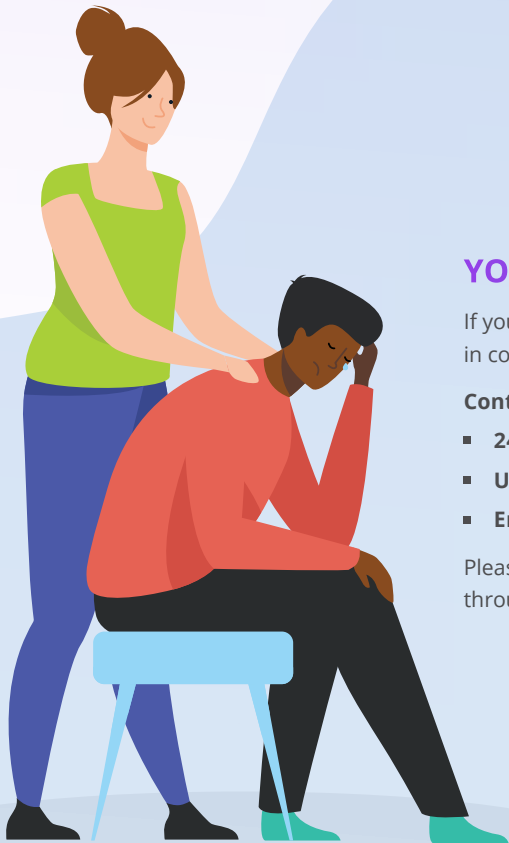
Some staff may struggle to accept the newcomer. They may draw comparisons to the colleague who passed away or be resistant to the change. These are normal responses. Time, support and compassionate communication can ease this transition.

02

ONGOING GRIEF

Reactions to loss may lessen over time, but **grief doesn't follow a linear path**. It's natural for team members to grieve at different paces, and sometimes, this may cause tension. When this happens, take time to connect privately with those who may be struggling.

Grief can resurface unexpectedly, even long after the loss. A one-year anniversary, a birthday, a work milestone, or even a phrase or familiar scene can trigger deep emotion. These moments may pass quickly, but for some, they linger longer. If grief feels overwhelming or prolonged, support from a trained counsellor or Healthy Company services can help process the pain.



YOU'RE NOT ALONE

If you or your colleagues are struggling with grief, we're here for you, anytime, in complete confidence.

Contact Healthy Company for professional support:

- **24/7 toll-free call centre:** 0800 32 04 20
- **USSD call me back (free):** Dial *134*4266#
- **Email:** Send a referral request to healthycompanyurgent@discovery.co.za

Please encourage others in your team to reach out. We can help your staff through a time of bereavement with compassion, respect and care.

