

Death and bereavement

Although many people diagnosed with cancer will be successfully treated and live for many years, not everyone will recover. Sometimes an employee who has been diagnosed with cancer may die from the disease. This may affect his or her direct colleagues and other people in the organisation.

Similarly, employees who have been caring for someone with cancer may experience death or loss in their personal lives.

This fact sheet is intended to provide a starting point for managers dealing with death and bereavement in their teams.

If an employee dies

Being prepared

If you are aware that an employee with cancer has a very poor prognosis and may not survive, it can be helpful to develop and implement a communications plan to inform his or her colleagues and the wider organisation. In your plan, consider the form of the communications (written or verbal), timing, and who they should come from.

Sensitively worded communications advising staff of the person's serious illness can help prepare them, reducing their shock when news of the person's death is subsequently communicated.

If your organisation has someone responsible for internal communications, enlist him or her to assist you to develop the plan, as well as the announcements.

While it will never be easy or pleasant to have to tell staff that a colleague has died, preparing the announcement in advance may be less stressful than trying to put something together at the time.

In addition, by preparing announcements in advance, you may be able to devote more time to ensuring that any communication is appropriate and sensitive, and that you have included all relevant information, such as what support is available for staff.

Looking after your team

When an employee dies, some of his or her colleagues may be very distressed. As well as the physical loss of the person, the death may remind colleagues of other losses and sadness they've experienced, and of their own mortality.

It is important to remember that people will respond differently to the situation. Each person will have had a unique relationship with the person who died, so his or her response to the death and way of grieving will also be unique.

Breaking the news

It can be difficult to know how to tell your team about the death of one of their colleagues. The following suggestions may be useful:

- Tell immediate colleagues about the death as soon as is practical. Do it in person and in private, if possible, and keep the communication clear and simple.
- Don't be afraid to admit that you don't know what to say.
- Make sure staff members know about any support services available to them through the organisation, such as counselling via an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) service, and how to access them.
- If your organisation has an EAP, it may offer a Critical Incident Response service, which includes provision of a psychologist to attend the workplace when staff are informed of the death to provide support and de-briefing.

- Let your staff know that you'll be following up with them and will keep them informed about funeral arrangements or memorial services, where appropriate.
- Assure your staff that they can come to you with any questions that may occur to them later.

Following up

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

- You might like to arrange a specific time to formally follow up with your team. This provides an opportunity to acknowledge the team's feelings of loss and grief and discuss how they might like to remember and honour their colleague. They may prefer to do this privately and individually, or they may like to do something as a group.

Ideas for remembering and honouring a colleague who has died

- Send flowers or a condolence letter to the family.
 - Attend the funeral or send a representative from your organisation, if appropriate.
 - Take a couple of hours out of work to do something with your team, such as sharing a meal or visiting a favourite place.
 - As a team, plant a tree or participate in a fundraising event in memory of the colleague who has died.
 - Spend some time remembering and sharing stories about the person.
 - Write a tribute to the person for the organisation's intranet or newsletter.
- Ask your team what the organisation can do to support them. For example, you may make temporary changes to work schedules or projects.
 - Try to have an 'open door' to staff members, so they can talk about what has happened. Though many people may not take up the offer, simply knowing that they can approach you may be appreciated.

- Be aware that people express grief differently. Some people may show no visible sign of grief. Others may experience periods of sadness, have difficulty concentrating, feel tired, feel uncharacteristically angry, or even feel physical pain.
- Consider organising a psychologist or grief counsellor to visit your workplace so staff members can speak confidentially about how they may be feeling.
- Take time to deal with your own feelings and ensure you seek out support for yourself as well.

It is important to respect the bereaved family's wishes at all times, especially with regard to privacy and funeral arrangements.

Practicalities

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

- arranging for the redirection of email and phone;
- changing phone and automated email messages;
- responding to any unanswered phone or email messages;
- removing the person's details from intranet or email address books; and
- clearing out the person's work area.

Let co-workers know when you intend to clean out the work area and consider whether enlisting their help might be appropriate.

Depending on the person's role, it may be necessary to contact people from outside your organisation who worked closely with him or her, such as clients and suppliers, to let them know what has happened.

You may also need to get in touch with the person's family to:

- return personal belongings;
- settle outstanding financial matters; or
- arrange the return of company property, such as cars, phones or laptops.

Communications with the family need to be handled sensitively. Refer to your organisation's Human Resources department for guidance.

If an employee is a bereaved carer

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

The grieving process is unique for each person and there is no right or wrong way to grieve, or predictable timeframe to work through grief. Some people openly display their emotions, while others may show no outward reaction.

Grief can sometimes be disorienting. An employee who is grieving may find it difficult to concentrate or experience physical symptoms, such as fatigue or pain, which may temporarily impact their performance. On the other hand, others may find that work is a useful and welcome distraction.

It may be helpful to speak with the bereaved employee to manage the transition back to work. Consider whether your organisation can provide additional time off or flexible working arrangements. If an EAP or bereavement counselling is available through your workplace, make sure that the employee is aware of these services and knows how to access them.

Remember to respect the privacy of the employee. Ask his or her permission if you want to speak with colleagues about the death, and be aware that some colleagues may also be affected by the carer's loss.

Compassionate leave for bereaved carers

Most full-time and part-time permanent employees who are bereaved are entitled to two 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.

We acknowledge Macmillan Cancer Support as an information source about some of the practical aspects of an employee's death.

Further information

- Cancer Council website
www.cancercouncil.com.au
- Cancer Council Helpline **13 11 20**
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
www.grief.org.au