

Death and bereavement

A guide for managers and human resource professionals

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 their colleagues. 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.

Be prepared

If you are aware that an employee with cancer has a poor prognosis and may not survive, it can be helpful to develop and implement a communications plan to inform their colleagues and the wider organisation. In your plan, consider the form of the communications (written or verbal), what should be included, 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 them to help you to develop the plan, as well as the announcements.

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

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 forget to let any staff on leave know, 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 the day off.
- 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 providing a psychologist to attend the workplace when staff are informed of the death to provide support and debriefing. Consider whether it may be appropriate to organise this service in advance and to have the psychologist on stand-by.
- 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.
- Advise your staff to hold off posting messages of condolence on social media until they are sure that all immediate family members have been told.
- Assure your staff that they can come to you with any questions that may occur to them later.

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Looking after your team

When an employee dies, some of their colleagues may be very distressed. As well as the physical loss of the person, the death may remind colleagues of other loss 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 their response to the death and way of grieving will also be unique.

After the announcement, consider providing a private room so team members can absorb the news, discuss their loss and share memories of their colleague.

Understanding grief

Grief is a natural response to losing someone. 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, relief and acceptance. Sometimes there is a feeling of relief that their colleague is no longer suffering.

People express grief differently. Some people openly display their emotions, while others may show no visible sign of grief. It is common to have difficulty concentrating, have trouble sleeping, feel tired, or even feel physical pain.

There's no right or wrong way to grieve or set amount of time it lasts. Everyone mourns in different ways. It is important that colleagues respect each other's way of grieving.

Many people find that the routine of getting back to work helps 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 they seek professional help.

Call **13 11 20** for a copy of our *Understanding Grief* booklet, or download a digital version from your local Cancer Council website.

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.
- Acknowledge the impact the news will have on close colleagues. Ask your team what the organisation can do to support them. For example, you may make temporary changes to work schedules or projects.
- Give staff time off to attend the funeral and consider organising transport as a group.
- 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.
- 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 acknowledge and deal with your own feelings and ensure you seek out support for yourself as well.
- When it comes time to fill the position of a colleague 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.
- It is important to respect the bereaved family's wishes at all times, especially with regard to privacy and funeral arrangements.

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Ideas for remembering and honouring a colleague who has died

You may want to do something special to honour and acknowledge the life of your colleague after their death. This can help some people cope with the loss.



Send flowers or a condolence card to the family.



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



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



Take a couple of hours out of work to do something with your team, e.g. share a meal or visit a favourite place.



Write a tribute about the person for the organisation's intranet or newsletter.



Spend some time remembering and sharing stories about the person.



Organise a memorial service.



Install a memorial plaque or rename a meeting room.

Practicalities

Your role may require you to address 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
- 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 person's details from the intranet or email address books – decide when the best time is to remove the employee from the system; it can be distressing to staff if the employee's name keeps popping up on things like email distribution lists and Facebook posts
- clearing out the person's work area – let colleagues know when you intend to clean out the work area and consider whether enlisting their help might be appropriate; consider the timing and the possible effects this may have on people
- reallocating work among team members so that essential 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
- arrange the return of company property, such as cars, phones or laptops.

Communications with the family need to be handled sensitively. Be prepared for any special requirements, e.g. you may need an interpreter if the family speaks a language other than English. Your organisation's human resources department can provide guidance.

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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 natural reactions to death.

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

It can 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 Employee Assistance Program or bereavement counselling is available through your workplace, make sure that the employee is aware of the service and knows how to access it.

Remember to respect the privacy of the carer and ask their permission before informing colleagues of the death. Be aware that 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. A bereaved carer requiring more than two days leave, can use other forms of accumulated leave or take unpaid leave as agreed with their employer.

What to say

Many people feel uncomfortable talking to a bereaved colleague 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 colleague, e.g. "You're in my thoughts and prayers" or "I was sorry to hear about your loss". Follow the lead of your bereaved colleague to see how much they want to discuss it.

Where to get help and information

Call **Cancer Council 13 11 20** for more information about cancer in the workplace. You can also ask for free copies of our booklets, or download digital versions of our other workplace fact sheets from your local Cancer Council website.

Cancer Council websites

ACT..... actcancer.org
 NSW cancercouncil.com.au
 NT nt.cancer.org.au
 Queensland..... cancerqld.org.au
 SA..... cancersa.org.au
 Tasmania cancertas.org.au
 Victoria cancervic.org.au
 WA..... cancerwa.asn.au
 Australia cancer.org.au

Acknowledgements

This information was developed with help from a range of legal, financial and health professionals, and people affected by cancer. It was reviewed by: Gabrielle Asprey, Cancer Support Consultant, Cancer Council NSW; Sascha Piggott, People and Change Advisor, Cancer Council Victoria; Carolyn Butcher, Chief People and Development Officer, Thomson Geer, VIC; Sandra Dann, Director, Working Women's Centre SA Inc, SA; Camilla Gunn, Commercial Manager and Strategic Projects, Talent Acquisition, Human Resources, Corporate Affairs and Sustainability, Westpac, NSW; Carmen Heathcote, 13 11 20 Consultant, Cancer Council Queensland; Sara Jorgensen, Breast Care Nurse Consultant, Western Health, VIC; Deborah Lawson, Legal Policy Advisor, McCabe Centre for Law and Cancer, VIC; Gary Power, Consumer; Donna Wilson, Social Work Manager, Hollywood Private Hospital, WA.

Note to reader

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For information and support on cancer-related issues, call **Cancer Council 13 11 20**. This is a confidential service.