

Returning to work

For many people impacted by suicide, returning to work is a financial necessity, while for others it is a means of keeping occupied and creating a break from what has been an all-consuming grief. The workplace may be the only part of life that seems normal. Returning to work can be difficult. Some bereaved people postpone returning to their job as they are concerned about the additional stress created by work and it can be a difficult time. It can also be a troubling time for employers and work colleagues as they struggle with how to help.

Grief following suicide can lead to a short-term loss of efficiency, effectiveness and performance. **This is temporary and varies with individuals.** In addition to mood changes and sadness, reactions can include problems with concentration and memory, fatigue and loss of confidence. These reactions vary in intensity and not everyone will experience each of them. Grief comes in waves and is unpredictable; each person grieves at their own pace and intense grief cannot be confined to non-working hours. With time and support, a grieving person will recover to take his or her place in the workplace again.

Before returning to work, try some of the following:

Be sure your workplace knows something about what has happened (perhaps a family member or friend may need to do this for you). This could be by phone, text or by email. Give them as much information as you are comfortable sharing. Perhaps allow one key person at your workplace to have enough information to keep speculation at a minimum. Keep him or her informed about funeral arrangements, time away from work, and how you are doing.

The time required before someone returns to work can vary. Ensure you find out what options are available to you, for instance, sick leave, compassionate leave, annual leave. You could access an Employee Assistance Program (if your workplace has one).

In general, it is recommended that you be honest and factual without being explicit as gossip and speculation about the deceased person can be hurtful and damaging to you.

Let your office know if you want to be included in regular correspondence so you can be kept updated about what is happening.

Good communication with your Manager or Supervisor will ensure that they continue to understand how grief is impacting on you and on your work.

You may worry about emotionally breaking down in front of colleagues or in the middle of an important meeting. This can happen, but many people will understand if they know what has occurred in your life. If you need to excuse yourself, do so.

You might arrange to go into the office to meet co-workers for lunch. It can make it easier to go back to work at a later date.

Consider returning for partial days for a week or so, easing your way back into the normal routine.

Your Manager may be able to consider various options for easing you back into work.

You may return to work only to find that it was too early – you may need more time off.

Let people know what you are OK to talk about eg. your grief but not the death.

Let your co-workers know what is helpful to you when you are having a particularly hard day: allowing you to have some alone time, making you a cup of coffee, or going for a short walk. The more they know what they can do for you, the more comfortable you and they will be.

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You may like to give a copy of this to your employer.



Adapted from The American Hospice Foundation, The Bereaved Employee: Returning to Work by Helen Fitzgerald and Anglicare's Living Beyond Suicide brochure, Helping an Employee Return to Work. <http://www.supportaftersuicide.org.au/what-to-do/returning-to-work>
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