Grief at work

Developing a bereavement policy

Breffni Mc Guinness

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Glossary of terms

Loss	A person experiences a loss when they lose someone or something that is of significance to them.
Bereavement	Literally means to be robbed of something. It refers to the loss that one is adjusting to.
Grief	The natural adjustment to loss and change which can involve strong emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual reactions.
Mourning	The outward or public expression of the grief we experience.

In this publication the terms loss, bereavement and grief are used interchangeably.

Abbreviations

BCS	Bereavement Counselling Service
CIPD	The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
EAP	Employee Assistance Programme
HSE	Health Service Executive
IBEC	Irish Business Employers Confederation
ICTU	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
IHF	Irish Hospice Foundation
IMI	Irish Management Institute
ISME	Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association
SIPTU	The Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union

Foreword

One of the difficult certainties of life is that at various times it is touched very deeply by the human sense of loss. The death of a parent, sibling, family members, friends and working colleagues affects us in many different ways. Apart from the grief itself it can create a sense of instability, of worry, concern and unease. These emotions can express themselves in many different forms in the workplace and can have deeply personal and wider impacts.

The Irish Hospice Foundation, and the author of this publication, Breffni McGuinness, have created an acute awareness among the organisations representing the Social Partners of the sense of understanding of the value, esteem and support we must accord our workplace colleagues during a period of bereavement and grief.

The trauma of grief, as the booklet illustrates, has many manifestations and expresses itself in myriad potential reactions – physical, emotional and psychological. We must all learn therefore to cope with and manage the effect such loss brings to our own persons and our workplace environs.

"*Grief at Work - developing a bereavement policy*" provides a practical, sensible and sensitive set of guidelines for those whose work centres on best human resource practice - employers, unions, managers and work colleagues. It is an invaluable asset to our increasing portfolio of "best practice" workplace relations guidelines.

I commend the Irish Hospice Foundation for their innovative approach, their exceptional services and the excellence of the standards they bring to all of their endeavours within the Hospice Community.

Kieran Mulvey
Chief Executive
Labour Relations Commission

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Introduction

"I've nothing against death – I just don't want to be there when it happens!"

Woody Allen

Death is an inevitable and normal part of life and work. It is a painful reality which all of us have to face at some point in our lives, though as Woody Allen highlights – most of us would prefer not to have to deal with it. Death is challenging, especially at work where it can be seen as a taboo topic which is best avoided or at least, dealt with privately.

Death though, is more common that we might expect

Death though, is more common that we might expect. In 2002 there were 29,683 deaths recorded in Ireland[1].

By taking even a conservative estimate of just 10 people being directly affected by each death, this means approximately 300,000 or 1 in 10 of an organisation's workforce[2] could be directly affected each year by bereavement.

Case Study 1 – Brian's story

Brian worked in a small manufacturing company. He was married to Jenny and they had a young daughter Helen. One morning in Spring as Brian was driving to work, he was involved in an accident and was killed instantly. The owner of the company was devastated as were the other workers. The owner himself had some experience of bereavement as both his parents had died a couple of years previously.

He took some time to gather his thoughts and then called a meeting of all the workers. He explained what had happened from the information he had been given and said that the company would facilitate those workers who wished to attend the funeral.

He then asked a trusted colleague if he would accompany him to visit Brian's wife. This was a difficult task but later Brian's wife said that she really appreciated the visit.

All of the workers wanted to attend the funeral so the company closed for that morning. Although the funeral was very sad it allowed the workers to begin to grieve and to express their sympathy to Brian's wife and family.

The owner and some of the workers really missed Brian. They found themselves talking about him and getting upset at times over the following months. As Christmas approached, they decided to make a collection for Brian's child. It was a way of remembering him and also being of practical help to his wife and family.

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[1] Source – Central Statistics Office 2002
[2] CSO 2002 – ((Total deaths = 29.6k x 10) /Population over 15 = 3.1M).

Some months later the anniversary of Brian's death was approaching and the owner asked the workers to think about how they might do something to remember Brian. There were lots of suggestions from memorial football competitions to putting a plaque on the wall of the factory. Eventually they decided to plant a tree at the entrance to the factory. The owner agreed that they would close the factory for an hour on the anniversary of Brian's death and have a small ceremony to plant the tree. He invited Brian's wife and daughter to come along, and they were delighted to be asked.

The memorial ceremony was both painful and healing. It brought up the sadness of Brian's death but also allowed the workers to remember him and to provide support to his wife and daughter and to each other. Planting the tree beside the entrance to the factory, helped the workers to grieve. It meant that Brian was not forgotten but was now being integrated into the continuing life of the workplace in a new way.

Brian's story is an example of how the very tragic situation of an employee dying can be sensitively handled when the owner or manager has some understanding of the grieving process.

In the short-term he facilitated the other workers by giving them accurate information about Brian's death and allowing them to attend the funeral. In the following months while the work continued he was up front about how he missed Brian and how, at times, he felt sad. This gave people permission to do the same if they so wished and normalised the impact of the grief.

In the longer-term, he helped the workers and himself to grieve by organising the memorial to Brian. Encouraging the workers to think of appropriate ways of remembering Brian provided a task focus through which they could do some of their grieving. The memorial itself gave people an opportunity and permission to grieve together, while offering support to Brian's wife and child. It was short and simple, which meant that the workers' grief needs were respected while disruption to work was minimised.

This is an example of good practice in managing a tragic experience of grief in a company. It also shows that you do not have to be an expert on grief to be able to make a positive difference. The owner drew on his own experience, compassion and common sense to help himself and the workers come to terms with the tragic loss of their colleague.

Not all organisations are as fortunate in having someone as sensitive to grief as this owner is. While managers generally try to do their best for their employees around grief, they may not fully understand its impact and how best to respond to those who are grieving. This can often lead to misunderstandings, as in the case of John's story below.

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Case Study 2 - John's story

John received a call while on company business abroad to say that his father had been involved in an accident. The policeman on the other end of the phone was reluctant to give too many details, but recommended that John return home immediately. John felt intuitively that his father was dead. He asked the policeman if this was the case. The policeman did not want to say what the exact situation was over the phone but John insisted. Eventually, the policeman confirmed that John's father was dead.

The rest of that day was a blur. John's line manager who was with him, offered her sympathies, immediately arranged for a flight back, and accompanied John on the journey home. He was met at the airport by relatives who filled him in on what happened. His father had been involved in an accident and there was a possibility of foul play.

The line manager and other senior members of staff from the company attended the funeral rituals for John's father. John had many practical matters to attend to over the next few days due to the suddenness of his father's death. These included meetings with relatives, solicitors, bank and insurance officials, and the coroner. The fact that his father had died in an accident meant that there would have to be an inquest and the death certificate would be delayed.

John returned to work five working days after hearing of his father's death. Although the company policy was to offer three days compassionate leave, the line manager used her discretion in relation to his circumstances. John appreciated the support he received from his line manager and colleagues around the time of his father's death. He also appreciated the acknowledgement of his father's death by other colleagues on his return to work.

Over the next few months John felt like he was in a dream. Work and life carried on but it was almost as if he was watching a film of his life. He felt numb, but also quite emotional at times, and often very tired. Work provided a useful focus and a chance to talk about things other than his father's death, but he found concentrating hard and a lot of the time he felt quite flat.

About six months after his father's death John began to notice that there were a lot of tensions between the remaining members of his family and he was arguing a lot with his siblings. He had hoped to be feeling better at this point but actually things seemed to be getting worse. He began to feel this pressure at work also where he sensed an expectation to be 'over his father's death' and up to speed on meeting targets.

Relations between John and his colleagues deteriorated over the next couple of months– especially with his line manager whom John felt was pushy and unsympathetic. She, in turn found John difficult to deal with. He seemed to be very sensitive and not really focused on the job.

A year after his father's death, John left the company for another job.

This is an example of how things can go wrong when dealing with employee grief. The immediate aftermath of the death is generally handled well, but the need for longer-term support of bereaved employees is not that well understood or provided for.
John's manager handled the immediate time around his father's death very well. It was some months later that the full impact of the loss began to hit John. He did not understand that some of the anger, frustration and sensitivity that he was experiencing was part of his grief. The manager did not appreciate that this was normal and that people who are grieving can have off days and times when they are not able to focus.

This does not mean that grieving employees are not interested in their jobs or cannot be productive, but more that they can feel the pain of grief long after the death has occurred.

These misunderstandings occur most likely because managers and organisations are not aware of how the grieving process affects employees rather than any deliberate oversight.

One way to avoid such misunderstandings happening is to develop a proactive approach to managing employee grief. This has obvious benefits for the bereaved employees but it also makes good business sense.

Supporting bereaved employees makes good business sense

A workplace that proactively supports bereaved employees helps them to come to terms with their loss and:

- supports their return to productivity

- helps to improve morale and commitment

- helps to avoid unnecessary turnover of staff

- may help to reduce sick leave resulting in significant savings*.

*[In a recent IHF survey on bereavement policies and practices (see appendix A page 47) 15 out of 34 organisations (44%) found an increase in sick leave for employees after a bereavement].

The Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) have estimated that employee absenteeism cost approximately €1.5 billion in 2002[3], with minor illness (such as colds, flu etc.) being the main cause of short term absences.

Returning to work can help the bereaved employee to begin adjusting to their loss and returning to productivity. This requires a workplace that supports bereaved employees through good practice and policies. In such an environment the need to take sick leave around bereavement could be reduced.

Key point | *For each day that bereaved employees can work and not take sick leave there could be a saving of €14.4[4] million per year.*

As the Work Foundation point out:

"Employees who feel supported by an understanding manager will maintain better working relationships, and are less likely to lose motivation or productivity."[5]

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[3] Coughlan, A., in IBEC, 2004, Employee Absenteeism – A Guide to Managing Absence, Dublin: IBEC

[4] IBEC 2004 and CSO 2002 – ((Total cost of absenteeism = 1.5 Billion/ Percentage of employees affected by bereavement = 7.5)

* (1/Average no. of days per employee = 7.8))

[5] The Work Foundation (2002) Training Pack – Bereavement Issues in the Workplace, London: The Work Foundation

Taking the first step

Developing an organisational bereavement policy is the first step in proactively managing employee grief and the basis on which a supportive work environment can be built.

An organisational bereavement policy will:

- Set out a basic standard of key issues and entitlements which apply to all employees and help to ensure a consistent approach.

- Provide a reference for managers and staff which can help them to have confidence in dealing with what is a difficult and challenging workplace issue.

- Show that the organisation takes the reality of grief at work seriously, and provide an important foundation on which a supportive response to grieving employees can be developed.

This publication is designed to help organisations develop a bereavement policy. It is in six sections and begins by looking at how grief can impact on employees. Practical suggestions for supporting bereaved employees are provided in Chapter 2. The key elements to consider in developing a bereavement policy are outlined in Chapter 3 which provides sample policy text which can be adapted to the needs of individual organisations.

Practical considerations in interpreting and implementing a policy are outlined in Chapter 4 and a list of useful bereavement resources is provided in Chapter 5. Finally, a summary of a recent Irish Hospice Foundation survey of current bereavement policy and practice is provided in Appendix A.

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Chapter 1

Understanding grief at work

Employees most commonly experience the impact of grief through the death of someone close to them. However, other significant losses such as separation, divorce or illness can also give rise to grief reactions.

Grief is a normal, though difficult, part of life. Work is also a normal part of life and the workplace along with family, friends etc. has an important role in helping employees to adjust to the losses that they encounter in their working lives.

How grief affects employees

Grief reactions

Grief is not an illness and it does not need 'to be fixed'. It is a process of adjustment which the grieving employee has to negotiate.

Grief affects people in a number of ways including physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually.

Some of what we know to be normal reactions for any person who may be grieving include:

Physical

We may feel grief in our bodies through pains, aches and fatigue. These reactions can persist for a long time after the death. Other physical aspects of grief include:

- Tiredness
- Sleep disturbances
- Appetite disturbances
- Crying
- Weakness in muscles
- Feeling flat and lacking enthusiasm
- Breathlessness

Emotional

Emotionally grief can be like waves washing on a beach. It ebbs and flows. Sometimes the waves are small and manageable and at other times the grieving person can feel overwhelmed by them. Emotions to be expected when grieving include:

- Sadness
- Anger
- Guilt and self-reproach
- Relief
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Helplessness
- Numbness

Psychological

Grief can affect us when we least expect it. Thoughts about the person who has died can suddenly come in to our minds or a smell or song might trigger memories. Grief is not easy to control. Psychological reactions that may occur when grieving include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Preoccupation with the person who has died
- Dreaming of the deceased person

Spiritual

Death can bring up important questions of meaning for people. Why did this happen? What is the meaning of my life now without this person? Why me? This type of questioning is not uncommon when grieving. Spiritual grief reactions include:

- Trying to make sense of what has happened
- Hostility towards God
- Searching for meaning
- Questioning

The grieving process

Acknowledging a person's loss

Death and suffering are difficult topics which make most of us feel uncomfortable. It is normal to be unsure of what to say or do. However, one of the most helpful things we can do for a bereaved employee is to acknowledge their loss. Something simple and straightforward such as "I'm sorry to hear of your mother's death" helps the employee to know that their loss is recognised.

> **Key point**
>
> *Accept that you may feel awkward around a bereaved employee but don't let this stop you acknowledging their loss.*

Grieving takes time

Grief takes longer than we may think. Two years[6] is a good rule of thumb for someone to come to terms with the major aspects of the death of someone close to them.

While it is important to support people around the immediate time of the loss, it can often be some time later (6 – 24 months) before the full impact of the loss begins to sink in and some of what we know to be normal feelings, behaviours and reactions come to the surface.

> **Key point**
>
> *The grieving process takes longer than we may think. It may take some time before the full impact of the loss is felt by the employee.*

A 'new normal'

The bereaved employee has to deal with the reality that they are never going back to the 'normal' that existed before the loss. This is because that 'normal' included the person who has died. The employee now has to deal with a 'new normal' which is one without this person, and this will take time to get used to.

> **Key point**
>
> *Be aware that grieving employees have to adjust to a 'new normal' which will take time, and that they will not be 'back to normal' quickly.*

6 Worden, W., (2003), Grief Counseling and Therapy, USA: Routledge

People grieve in different ways

Each person's grief is unique and individual to that person. Some employees are very private and do not want everyone to know their business, while others prefer to talk openly about what has happened to them.

This reflects different grieving styles. The intuitive griever needs to talk with others about the loss and is more openly emotional. The instrumental griever is more solitary and action oriented. Generally women tend to have more intuitive grieving styles and men more instrumental, but not in all cases[7]. Both styles of grieving are appropriate.

> **Key point**
>
> *There is no one fixed way to grieve. People have different styles – some are more open than others. Both are appropriate.*

The tasks of grieving

The grief of each employee is unique, though there are some common tasks[8] that each person has to negotiate in the grieving process. These are:

1. **Accepting the loss**
    This means accepting that the loss has occurred, and that the person is not coming back.

2. **Experiencing the pain**
    There is no shortcut through grief. It is only by experiencing the pain of the absence of the person who has died, that people can begin to heal.

3. **Adjusting to an environment without the deceased**
    This means adjusting to the 'new normal' that has come about as a result of the person dying. This can be challenging but it can also offer the bereaved person new opportunities.

4. **Finding a new emotional place for the person who has died**
    This involves creating new ways of remembering the person who has died, so that they continue to be a part of the bereaved person's life.

These tasks of grieving take time to complete and involve constant reworking.

> **Key point**
>
> *The employee has a role in their own grieving process. Grieving is something that is done by a person rather than happens to her/him.*

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[7] Martin, T.L. and Doka, K.J. (2000) Men don't cry…women do: transcending gender stereotypes of grief, Brunner/Mazel, Philadelphia
[8] Worden (2003), Pp. 27-37.

Engaging with and detaching from grief

Grieving employees need to be able to engage with, and detach from, their grief.
At times they need to be able to think and talk about the person who has died. At other times they need to be able to forget about the loss and concentrate on something different. Healthy grieving involves being able to do both and to move from one to the other.

Key point
Grieving employees will move back and forward between focusing on their loss and being able to concentrate on productivity.

Grief can be transforming

The experience of death can be painful and challenging, but it also presents opportunities. These may be hard to see initially, but gradually over time a person may see how grief has changed their life. Increased ability to enjoy life, empathy for others' pain, and confidence in one's own resilience etc. are some of the ways that grief can influence people's lives.

Key point
Although grief is difficult, over time it can have positive transforming effects on people's lives.

The importance of support

The single most important factor in coming to terms with grief is social support. While the grieving process is individual, the support of friends, family, colleagues and the workplace are very important. This support can be practical (sharing some work tasks, doing a shopping or school run), social (e.g. continuing to invite/include the person to social events etc.) and/or emotional (e.g. checking in with the person from time to time).

Key point
Practical, social, and emotional support are very important in helping the bereaved employee to come to terms with their loss.

Chapter 2

Supporting employees who are grieving

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The workplace, along with family, friends and relatives can play an important role in helping employees come to terms with their losses.

Case study 3 – Margaret's story

Margaret's father collapsed at work one day and was rushed to hospital. He was diagnosed with a brain tumour which was inoperable, and was given three months to live. Margaret was his only daughter.

Margaret worked in a busy office which involved dealing with the public. She loved her job and liked the atmosphere at work which was supportive and proactive around work-life balance issues.

Margaret was distraught – she was torn between wanting to care for and be with her father, and needing financially to continue working. She spoke to her manager who was understanding and supportive.

They reprioritised her work load and agreed that Margaret could work flexibly over the next couple of months. She started earlier in the mornings and left earlier which meant that she could spend more time with her father in the evenings. They also agreed on what to say to colleagues. Margaret was quite a private person and only wanted a few close colleagues to know the full extent of what was going on.

Occasionally, Margaret had to leave the office at short notice. When this happened colleagues covered her work and she made up the hours at the weekend. She found that work was a break from the intensity of caring and it made a huge difference to know that her role in caring for her father was acknowledged and supported by the organisation.

Margaret found that she was beginning to grieve for her father even though he was still alive. She was able to speak about this to her manager and some of her close colleagues. Although they could not change things, just being able to speak about what was happening was a big comfort.

In the final weeks, Margaret negotiated to work reduced hours and was able to be with her father when he died. Her manager and many of her colleagues were present at the funeral.

Before she was due to return to work her manager contacted her to check on how she was doing. He acknowledged her father's death again and asked how he could support her. He outlined some of the supports that were available including an employee assistance programme and offered her the option of working in a different section away from the public for a couple of weeks.

Though Margaret was exhausted, she was keen to get back to work and took up the offer of working in a different section for a short while. Her manager maintained good contact with her over the coming months. He explained that while he did not want to be intrusive, he did want Margaret to

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know that she was a valued member of staff, and that he would like to support her as best he could. He understood that grieving can be difficult at times and if Margaret needed to talk to him, he would be happy to do this.

Margaret did have some difficult times particularly around Christmas, and her father's anniversary. She was able to speak about these to her manager who was understanding and told her that if things got really tough she could avail of a number of counselling sessions.

As before, being able to talk about it really helped and in the end she did not take up the offer of the counselling sessions.

Although her father's illness and death was a very difficult time, Margaret really appreciated how she was treated by her manager, colleagues and the organisation. Her commitment to the organisation, which had always been good, was even stronger now. Her colleagues also noticed how Margaret had been treated, and appreciated that they worked in an organisation which cared.

This case study shows the value of an open and flexible attitude on the part of the organisation and the manager to Margaret's situation. Her role as a care giver was recognised and her desire to balance both care and work commitments was supported.

Her manager had an understanding of grief and was aware that Margaret could experience grief reactions while her father was still alive. As her father's death approached Margaret's need for more time with him was accommodated. The manager and colleagues continued their support through the funeral and afterwards when she returned to work.

The commitment of the organisation to support its employees, train its managers and look for creative solutions to situations such as the one that Margaret was faced with, shows how employee bereavement situations can be managed well. The sensitivity and understanding of the manager was also a key factor.

Supporting employees who are caring for someone who is terminally ill

Caring for someone who is terminally ill (care-giving) can be a very stressful situation for an employee. There is a sense of being torn between the competing demands of work and the patient.

Different illnesses have different trajectories. For example, someone with late stage cancer may only have a number of months to live whereas someone with Alzheimer's disease could deteriorate gradually over a number of years. The demands on an employee in each of these cases will be different and each case needs to be assessed individually.

Employees who are in a care-giving role can experience grief before the person dies. This is known as anticipatory grieving, and can involve some/all of the grief reactions outlined in Chapter 1.

Understanding and flexibility

The two most important factors for employees who are care-givers are understanding and flexibility from their line manager and organisation. Knowing that the manager understands her/his situation and is willing to be flexible in terms of how, when, and where work gets done is a tremendous relief for a care-giving employee.

Many employees can manage both demands well when they feel supported and recognised, and do not abuse the situation.

The Help the Hospices organisation in the UK produce two very helpful booklets on Flexible Working which deal with short-term caring responsibilities and caring for a relative at the end of life. These are:

- *Flexible working – Helping employees with short-term caring responsibilities*

- *Flexible working – For people caring for a relative or friend at the end of life*

Both are available from Help the Hospices, Ph. 0044 207 5208200, www.helpthehospices.org.uk

Legislation – Carer's Leave

The responsibility and right of employees to care for family members is recognised in legislation through the Carer's Leave Act, 2001 (see www.welfare.ie and select Carers button to find out details of benefits) and the associated Carer's Benefit (see www.entemp.ie for full details – search under Carers Leave).

While the Act does provide a statutory mechanism whereby care-giving employees can take leave to look after seriously ill relatives, it may not be suitable for all employees in a care-giving situation.

The employee may need/ want to keep working because:

- The carer's benefit (maximum weekly rates are €180.70) is not sufficient.

- Work can provide a break from the duties of caring

- There are extra financial costs involved in caring for a seriously ill person

If the employee can be supported so that they can manage their care-giving role as well as continuing to do their job well, this can have significant benefits for everyone involved. For employees, their care-giving role is recognised and they can continue to work. For the organisation, staff are not absent unnecessarily thus avoiding disruption and the hassle of finding replacements. These types of solutions also help to improve morale and commitment among staff.

What helps – Supporting working care-givers

- An open approach in the organisation which recognises care-giving as a valid role for employees.

- Support for care-giving employees through flexibility around:
  - Work hours – flexitime, part-time, job-share, compacted hours etc.
  - Workplace – use of technology, working from home etc.
  - paid, unpaid and compassionate leave.

Other useful sources of help can be employee and employer organisations such as ICTU, SIPTU, ISME. Chambers Ireland, IBEC etc.

Supporting bereaved employees

The case study of Margaret shows us some of the key elements involved in supporting bereaved employees effectively in the workplace. These include:

- The role of the line manager

- The role of the organisation

- The role of human resources

- The role of occupational health / employee assistance programmes
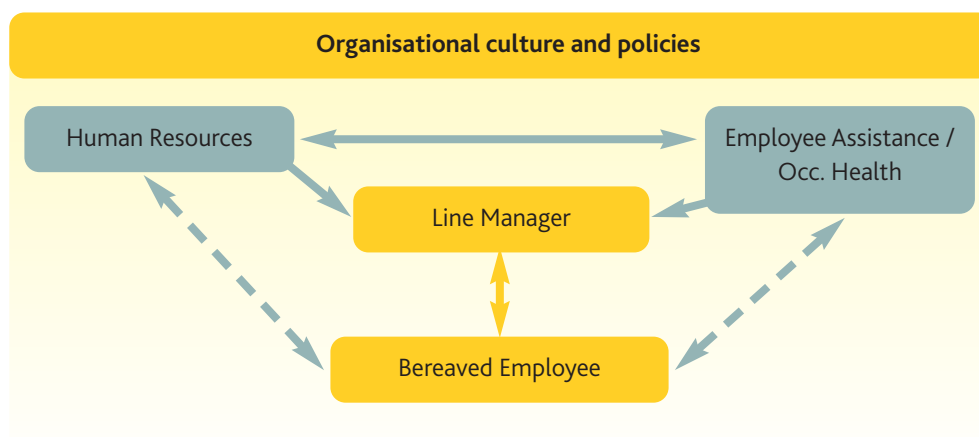
Fig.1 Supporting bereaved employees – Best practice model

The role of the line manager

The line manager if properly supported and trained is in a key position to support the bereaved employee. She/he will generally know the employee and their circumstances, and will be used to dealing with them on a day to day basis.

What employees find helpful

Many employees when asked about what they would find helpful in their workplace if they were coping with a significant loss mention three things[9]:

1. That their loss would be acknowledged

2. That they would be treated as normally as possible

3. That their manager would be flexible

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[9] Irish Hospice Foundation Training (2007) – Grief at Work – Supporting Employees Who Are Bereaved

How managers can support bereaved employees

Short-term

1. Establish good communication with bereaved employee, acknowledge their loss, check about what information to share, and inform colleagues appropriately.

2. Attend funeral rituals where possible, and provide practical help where appropriate.

3. Show flexibility and understanding around work issues and manage the return to work.

4. If unsure, seek advice from someone who has experience of dealing with grief e.g. an employee assistance or occupational health or other grief professional.

Long-term

1. Maintain good communication with bereaved employee and adjust work requirements as necessary.

2. Learn about the grieving process, and the organisation's policy and supports.

3. Be watchful for bereaved employees who may be struggling with their grief and direct them towards appropriate additional supports.

4. Encourage social, practical and emotional support of the bereaved employee.

The role of the organisation

Although managers have a key role in proactively managing employee bereavement, they must be supported at an organisational level both in terms of policy and culture. This means there must be buy-in throughout the organisation.

How organisations can support bereaved employees

Short-term

1. Ensure an open and proactive approach to employee bereavement amongst all staff, especially senior managers.

2. Acknowledge the employee's loss and facilitate staff to attend funeral rituals.

3. Support managers in adopting a flexible and sensitive approach to employee bereavement situations.

Long-term

1. Develop an organisational bereavement policy with the help of employees, and make sure it is known and accessible to all staff.

2. Train staff in understanding the grieving process and develop bereavement resource person(s) within the organisation.

3. Work proactively at creating an organisational culture that is supportive of employee bereavement through training and events (e.g. providing input on managing grief as part of induction training).

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The role of human resources

If an organisation has a human resources function their role in employee bereavement is to support the managers and make sure that they are trained in understanding bereavement and aware of the organisation's policies and the employee's entitlements.

If there is no bereavement policy in place then human resources will have a key role in developing this within the organisation.

The role of employee assistance / occupational health

Where an organisation has employee assistance / occupational health personnel or programmes, these can also be a support to managers as well as employees around bereavement.

It is important to note though that most bereaved people (approx. 80%)[10] do not need counselling or therapy to come to terms with their loss.

Employee assistance and occupational health professionals have a lot of experience in dealing with situations of loss and are good resources for a manager in deciding if a bereaved employee may need specialised help.

A professional's view
Martin Mc Cormack – Head of Social Work – Beaumont Hospital

You want to do the right thing but are wondering what that is?
Some employers can feel uncomfortable talking to their employees about the issue of serious illness or death. Clear time in your schedule to talk to the employee without interruption. If the employee is bereaved, acknowledge their loss.

Listen; don't rush to compare what they are going through with some experience you may have had, nobody can feel the way that that person feels. All you can do is try to be a support to the employee. In many instances the fact that the employee can talk about what is going on for them and feel that you understand can bring relief and comfort.

Ask them how you can be of support to them. The issue of what the employee is happy for you to share with other employees may come up. Make an agreement on what is ok to talk to others on the team about. Are there practical supports that can be offered? If bereavement has altered the life circumstances of the employee, they may want to discuss the option of flexible working. Flexible working does not necessarily mean fewer hours worked. Some require a variation in their contracted working status to accommodate life-cycle changes (e.g. from full time to part time and back to full time or even to work from home). If these are options that are available to the employee, let them know.

As part of trying to do the right thing for the employee and what they are going through be sensitive to tasks given to the employee. The issue of work performance can be one of process and dynamics. The employee may be exhausted coming into work. Health and safety regulations concerning the work environment are important. Can the employee safely operate machinery, are they at risk or putting others at risk?

In terms of the dynamics remember two things. Firstly, the employee may need to come to work for a break from the agony at home. Secondly, the employee may be under severe financial constraint as a result of their loved one's illness or bereavement and they need to be working. It is never a simple one for a manager to resolve. Again the issue of rostering, flexible working, and task designation may bring improvements all round.

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[10] Prigerson, H & Maciejewski, P (2006) A call for sound empirical testing and evaluation of criteria for complicated grief proposed for DSM-V. Omega: The journal of death & dying, 52, 1-7

A manager's view

Andrew Blair – HR Director, Bank of Ireland Security Services

Difficult subject

Death and loss are a natural and inevitable part of life. It should be natural therefore for organisations to consider the impact of such loss on employees.

However, death is not a subject that most of us wish to discuss or feel at ease with. In a work setting there is often an expectation that people can learn to deal with "personal issues" and to a greater or lesser extent manage themselves and the demands of their jobs, and most of the time this is the case. However, from an employer's perspective (or even a colleague's perspective) it is important to check.

Who should respond?

As a manager of a team I would see this as ultimately my responsibility to make sure that the individual has the appropriate support. The reason for this is that as a manager I will usually be aware of the circumstances; I should know the individual fairly well and therefore I am probably best positioned to gauge the situation to ensure that an appropriate response can be made. This poses a number of questions for the organisation:

- Am I aware of this aspect of my role?
- Am I capable of responding to such an issue and using good judgement?
- Do I know the organisational parameters around this issue?

This is where information and education is important. I may not be aware of my role as I may simply not have come across this before. Therefore ideally there should be a senior person or a Human Resource department that can guide me in broaching the subject. In some organisations there may be expert help available from an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) which can be very useful in helping to manage the situation.

However, I do believe it is best handled "locally" with the line manager and that the Senior Manager; HR department or EAP is not simply used to avoid dealing with the issue in a personal and meaningful manner. These additional resources are best utilised *after* you have made contact with the employee.

We may feel uncomfortable approaching a colleague about their feelings on a recent bereavement or indeed it can feel as if we are prying. However, if we avoid the subject altogether due to these feelings this can easily be misinterpreted as "nobody really cares" by the bereaved individual.

Therefore one of the basic principles for employers is that if they can provide an environment that is supportive to people and can facilitate people helping themselves on such issues they will produce not only a better balanced work culture but a more productive output.

This applies to bereavement as much as it does to the huge array of issues that we all must face in today's fast moving society. Given that death is one of the most significant and influential parts of our lives it is worth thinking ahead and perhaps planning what is appropriate for your organisation. For each organisation it is important to develop policies and practices that align with your culture and goals.

Chapter 3

Key points to consider in developing a policy

3

The case studies of Brian, John, Margaret and the Manager's view outlined earlier alert us to the individual nature of employee grief and the need for flexibility and discretion in the organisation's response. However, a minimum base standard is required, on which an effective and fair response can be built. A bereavement policy will provide such a base.

Organisations vary hugely in terms of culture, size and operating environment. What will work as a policy in a large organisation may not be possible in a smaller owner-led business. Therefore, when developing a bereavement policy it is important to reflect the culture and ethos of the organisation as well as the environment in which the business or organisation operates.

In the following paragraphs, key elements that could form part of a bereavement policy are explained and sample policy wording is suggested. These can then be modified and adjusted as required to fit the conditions of the organisation.

The elements involved are:

1. Leave entitlement
2. The return to work
3. Supporting employees who are grieving
4. Health and Safety
5. Organisational values and ethos
6. Concluding remarks

1. Leave entitlement

Compassionate leave

Perhaps the first area that people think about in relation to a bereavement policy is leave entitlement. Some amount of paid leave (often referred to as compassionate leave) is usually provided to allow the employee to attend to the funeral rituals and any other immediate matters associated with the death.

Compassionate leave is provided at the discretion of the organisation as there is no legal requirement in Ireland or the EU for this. However, in the IHF survey of 34 Irish organisations, the most common practice was to offer 3 or 5 days (see Appendix A, Page 46).

Unpaid and annual leave

Depending on the circumstances of the death, an employee may need a longer period of time off work in the short-term than that provided for by the organisation's compassionate leave provision.

In the longer-term, the employee may also need occasional time off to attend to ongoing details associated with the death. For example, if the death involved an accident or suicide the person may need to attend an inquest. Or, if the employee is the executor for the deceased, this can involve extra meetings with solicitors, accountants and other professionals. In such cases, having options for using annual leave or unpaid leave can be helpful.

The following is sample text on Leave Entitlements which can be used in a bereavement policy:

Paid Leave

- Bereavement leave is paid leave that allows an employee time off to deal with their personal distress, primarily when a member of their family dies.

- In the event of the death of an immediate relative, five working days paid leave will be granted. An immediate relative includes a spouse*, child**, parent, sister, brother or a person with whom the employee is in a relationship of domestic dependency***.

  - ☐ *Spouse also includes a partner with whom the employee is co-habiting, but who is not the employee's legal spouse

  - ☐ **Child covers children in respect of whom the employee is the adoptive parent or is in "loco parentis"

  - ☐ ***As per the Parental Leave Amendment Act 2006 – a) a person who resides with an employee is taken to be in a relationship of domestic dependency with the employee if, in the event of injury or illness, one reasonably relies on the other to make arrangements for the provision of care. Note, the sexual orientation of the persons concerned is immaterial.

- Three days leave will be allowed on the death of a mother/father-in-law, grandparents, grandchildren, son/daughter-in-law.

- One day's leave will be allowed on the death of an uncle/aunt to facilitate attendance at the funeral.

- In exceptional circumstances, three to five days leave may be granted on the death of someone outside the immediate family. These circumstances would include where the employee is responsible for funeral arrangements or has to travel abroad to attend the funeral.

- An employee should notify their line manager of their intention to take leave under the policy as soon as possible or at latest, on the first day of absence. Line managers have the right to exercise discretion in exceptional circumstances as outlined above. Leave days must be taken consecutively.

Annual Leave

- In the event of a death of an immediate relative, an employee may be facilitated in taking annual leave at short notice to supplement their bereavement leave. Requests should be directed to the line manger.

- An employee who suffers a family bereavement whilst on annual leave and has to disrupt or cancel leave plans, can avail of bereavement leave and take their displaced annual leave at a future date.

Unpaid Leave

- Unpaid leave on compassionate grounds up to a maximum of one month may be granted for the purpose of coping with family difficulties arising from the death of an immediate relative. An employee should consult with their line manager.

2. The return to work

Grieving is not over in 3 to 5 days. When the employee returns to work after their compassionate leave the real work of grieving is only beginning.

This involves adjusting to the 'new normal' that comes about as a result of the person dying. It may mean significant changes in the bereaved employee's life. For example, if an employee's partner dies they may have to take on extra responsibilities around the children. Or, if an employee's parent dies they may have to become more involved in looking after the remaining parent.

These new realities and responsibilities take time to adjust to. It may be that the bereaved employee needs to work part-time or reduced hours for a period in order to make these adjustments. The transition back in to work is therefore very important and requires sensitivity, flexibility and openness on the part of the organisation.

If your organisation operates policies on flexible work practices and/or work-life balance these can be very usefully applied to the situation of employee bereavement. The following is sample text on the Return to Work which can be used in a bereavement policy:

Return to Work

- In certain circumstances a full return to work may not be possible for an employee following the death of an immediate relative, for example where new child care arrangements have to be sourced or responsibility for the care of an elderly parent has transferred to the employee.

- In such instances it may be possible to facilitate a phased return to work on a part-time or reduced hours basis. Any such arrangement would need to be agreed in advance by the line manager, would be subject to an agreed maximum and would be managed in line with a Flexible Working Arrangement / Part-Time Working Policy.

3. Supporting employees who are grieving

There are a number of points that are relevant to the ongoing support of employees who are grieving:

- Loss and grief are normal experiences which will have an impact on employees in their work, as well as their private lives.

- Grief is not completed in a couple of weeks or months. Effective organisational responses to employee grief will include both short and long-term elements.

- Most people do not need counselling or therapy to come to terms with a death. They do need information, practical and emotional support. A small amount of people (approx 10-20%) may need specialised help (psychotherapy, counselling etc.).

- Employee assistance programmes (EAP) can be a helpful resource for line managers on how to manage individual cases. However, good practice suggests that grieving employees are best managed locally by their line manager with support or advice from either human resources, employee assistance professionals, or someone with knowledge of the grieving process.

- The role of the organisation along with friends, family and other supports, is to help employees to negotiate their grief, and not hinder, block or make this process more difficult.

- The following is sample text on Employee Support which can be used in a bereavement policy:

Employee Support

The organisation acknowledges that bereavement leave is intended to support employees in the immediate period around the death of a relative. However the process of grief, the natural reaction and adjustment to loss and change, may take a significant time to work through and will be personal to each individual.

- An employee with any concerns about the grieving process impacting on their work performance, should discuss this in confidence with either their line manager or the Human Resources Department to ensure necessary support is in place.

- The organisation recognises that the majority of people do not require counselling to cope effectively with their grief. However, for employees wishing to avail of professional help in coming to terms with a significant loss, the organisation will cover the cost of up to six counselling sessions with an independent counselling practice. This is a confidential service and can be accessed directly through Human Resources

4. Health and safety

The death of a loved one can have a significant effect on a person and their work. The reality of the impact of death in the workplace is illustrated by the recent experience of a pilot who had a 'cockpit incident'[11] – where he suffered a breakdown while attempting to land a plane a couple of days after burying his child who had died.

Sometimes people are not aware of how the death is affecting them and this has obvious implications for safety critical jobs. In the recent IHF survey, 21 out of 34 organisations (62%) believed there are or could be health and safety implications for employees who are bereaved. (See Appendix A, Page 47)

The following is sample text on Health and Safety which can be used in a bereavement policy:

Health and Safety

- The health and safety assessment of the workplace should include a consideration of the impact of bereavement on the employee, their duties, and the context in which they are working

- Any employee concerned about their ability to safely conduct their duties in the weeks following the loss of an immediate relative, should discuss this with their line manager

- Line management reserves the right to request an employee to meet the organisation Doctor before resuming full duties

5. Organisational values and ethos

If appropriate, a policy could include references to the organisation values, ethos and/or any stated commitment to high standards of staff management. For example, if you provide additional benefits such as flexible working and/or the provision of paid counselling services, this would support stated organisational values in a tangible way.

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[11] Irish Independent, 13 Jan. 2006, Cockpit crisis exposes gaps in airline safety checks

6. Concluding remarks

Dealing proactively with death in the workplace is new and can be challenging. A bereavement policy is an important first step. Like any other policy it has limitations and may need adjustments from time to time. It can be helpful to include a paragraph which keeps communication between employees and the organisation open on this topic.

The following is sample text on Concluding Remarks which can be used in a bereavement policy:

Concluding Remarks

■ The organisation acknowledges the personalised nature of bereavement and grief and is committed to supporting employees in practical and reasonable ways. Any queries or requests should be directed to your line manager in the first instance, or the Human Resources Department.

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Sample bereavement policy

1. Leave Entitlements

Paid Leave

- Bereavement leave is paid leave that allows an employee time off to deal with their personal distress, primarily when a member of their family dies.

- In the event of the death of an immediate relative, five working days paid leave will be granted. An immediate relative includes a spouse*, child**, parent, sister, brother or a person with whom the employee is in a relationship of domestic dependency***.

  - ☐ *Spouse also includes a partner with whom the employee is co-habiting, but who is not the employee's legal spouse

  - ☐ **Child covers children in respect of whom the employee is the adoptive parent or is in "loco parentis"

  - ☐ ***As per the Parental Leave amendment Act 2006: A person who resides with an employee is taken to be in a relationship of domestic dependency with the employee if in the event of injury or illness, one reasonably relies on the other to make arrangements for the provision of care. Note: The sexual orientation of the persons concerned is immaterial.

- Three days leave will be allowed on the death of a mother/father-in-law, grandparents, grandchildren, son/daughter-in-law.

- One days leave will be allowed on the death of an uncle/aunt to facilitate attendance at the funeral.

- In exceptional circumstances, three to five days leave may be granted on the death of someone outside the immediate family. These circumstances would include where the employee is responsible for funeral arrangements or has to travel abroad to attend the funeral.

- An employee should notify their line manager of their intention to take leave under the policy as soon as possible or at latest, on the first day of absence. Line managers have the right to exercise discretion in exceptional circumstances as outlined above. Leave days must be taken consecutively.

Annual Leave

- In the event of a death of an immediate relative, an employee may be facilitated in taking annual leave at short notice to supplement their bereavement leave. Requests should be directed to the line manger.

- An employee who suffers a family bereavement whilst on annual leave and has to disrupt or cancel leave plans, can avail of bereavement leave and take their displaced annual leave at a future date.

Unpaid Leave

- Unpaid leave on compassionate grounds up to a maximum of one month may be granted for the purpose of coping with family difficulties arising from the death of an immediate relative. An employee should consult with their line manager.

2. Return to Work

■ In certain circumstances a full return to work may not be possible for an employee following the death of an immediate relative, for example where new child care arrangements have to be sourced or responsibility for the care of an elderly parent has transferred to the employee.

■ In such instances it may be possible to facilitate a phased return to work on a part-time or reduced hours basis. Any such arrangement would need to be agreed in advance by the line manager, would be subject to an agreed maximum and would be managed in line with a Flexible Working Arrangement / Part-Time Working Policy.

3. Employee Support

■ The organisation acknowledges that bereavement leave is intended to support employees in the immediate period around the death of a relative. However, the process of grief, the natural reaction and adjustment to loss and change, may take a significant time to work through and will be personal to each individual.

■ An employee with any concerns about the grieving process impacting on their work performance, should discuss this in confidence with either their line manager or the Human Resources Department to ensure necessary support is in place.

■ The organisation recognizes that the majority of people do not require counseling to cope effectively with their grief. However, for employees wishing to avail of professional help in coming to terms with a significant loss, the organisation will cover the cost of up to six counseling sessions with an independent counseling practice. This is a confidential service and can be accessed directly through Human Resources.

4. Health and Safety

■ The health and safety assessment of the workplace should include a consideration of the impact of bereavement on the employee, their duties, and the context in which they are working.

■ Any employee concerned about their ability to safely conduct their duties in the weeks following the loss of an immediate relative, should discuss this with their line manager.

■ Line management reserves the right to request an employee to meet the organisation Doctor before resuming full duties.

5. Concluding remarks

The organisation acknowledges the personalised nature of bereavement and grief and is committed to supporting employees in practical and reasonable ways. Any queries or requests should be directed to your line manager in the first instance, or the Human Resources Department.

Chapter 4
Implementation of policy

4

There are a number of practical points to consider in relation to the bereavement policy. These include:

1. Interpreting the policy
2. Introducing the policy
3. Ongoing development

Interpretation of the policy

Flexibility

Unlike some other policies, a degree of flexibility is needed in interpreting a bereavement policy.

- Circumstances will differ and no two employees will have the same experience or needs at a time of loss. The death of an aunt could represent the loss of a primary care-giver to one employee and merely a distant relation to another. The death of a child may be experienced very differently to the death of an ageing parent.

- No assumptions can be made and no 'one size fits all' policy is possible.

Consistency

- However, consistency in policy interpretation is important to ensure a fair approach to different situations.

- Ideally guidance on policy interpretation should be provided by one person. In larger companies this responsibility usually sits with HR, in smaller companies the senior manager or manager with responsibility for personnel matters could guide any discretionary action.

Cultural Diversity

- Policy interpretation should allow for flexibilities relating to the multi-cultural nature of the workforce. Non-Irish nationals now comprise 10% of the population[12], and different cultures respond to death in significantly different ways.

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[12] Cultural Diversity in the Workplace (2007), Crowe, D., and Hogan, Dr. M, Dublin: IMI Bizlabs, P. 7.

- If unsure how to respond to a bereaved employee from a different culture, it is best to ask the person or someone else from their cultural group about what is appropriate.

Introducing a bereavement policy

It is worth putting some time and thought into the introduction of a bereavement policy. The following steps provide a simple guide on how this can be done.

1. Set up working group	→	2. Review current policy and practice	→	3. Identify gaps in policy and practice
6. Make changes based on feedback	←	5. Review draft policy with staff	←	4. Draw up new draft bereavement policy
7. Draw up plan for introducing new bereavement policy	→	8. Introduce policy and disseminate to all staff		
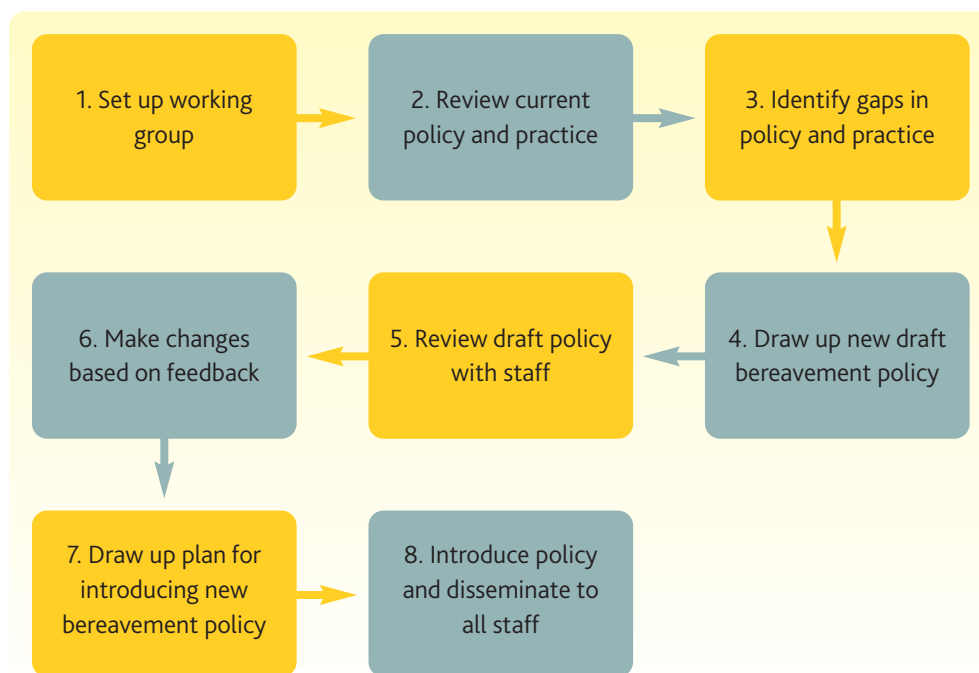
Fig.2 Introducing a bereavement policy

1. Establish a working group

This group could include representatives for employees, management, trade unions, cultural diversity and someone with responsibility for policy. It is worth considering inviting employees who themselves have had some experience of bereavement and have negotiated the grieving process, to be members of this group.

2. Review current practice

Review current practice for bereaved employees in the organisation and do an audit of both short and long-term support currently in place.

3. Identify gaps

Identify where current policy and practice could be developed and expanded.

4. Draw up a draft policy

Draw up a draft bereavement policy that is appropriate to the organisation. The sample text in this booklet (see Chapter 3) can be used as a starting point.

5. Consult with employees

Distribute the draft policy to members of staff from all areas of the organisation for feedback and comments.

6. Make changes based on feedback

There may be good suggestions which the working group has not thought of. It is important to be open to these and to make changes as appropriate.

7. Draw up plan for introducing new bereavement policy

This will include preparing key staff on their roles in relation to the policy.

8. Introduce the policy

This will involve ensuring that all members of staff are aware of the bereavement policy and its contents.

Ongoing development

Developing a bereavement resource person(s)

There may be employees who have had personal experience of bereavement and would be both suitable and interested in taking on a role of being a resource/support for others who experience grief in the workplace.

Although this could be someone from management, human resources or employee assistance it could also be another employee who has had experience of the grieving process. The key here is that the person has the interest, experience and maturity to take on the role.

The role of the bereavement support person can be developed in different ways depending on the requirements of the organisation but some of the core aspects could involve:

1. Sourcing up-to-date information on different aspects of bereavement and making this available to all employees.

2. Finding out about local and national bereavement supports and keeping an up-to-date list of these.

3. Learning about and keeping up-to-date with, best practice bereavement support.

4. Providing training on bereavement for managers and staff.

5. Being a resource for managers and human resource personnel on different aspects of bereavement.

Training and education

A policy on its own will not be enough to manage grief effectively in the workplace. Key personnel must be trained in understanding the grieving process, the organisation's bereavement policy, and how both impact on employees. Key staff will include:

- Senior management

- Line managers

- Human resources personnel

- EAP or occupational health personnel

- Anyone who has a supervisory role for employees in the organisation

This could be done by including inputs on understanding the grieving process in:

- Management and staff induction programmes

- Health promotion and work / life balance sessions

For a list of available training on bereavement see the list of Useful Bereavement Resources on page 41.

Reviewing the bereavement policy

Building in a structured review of the policy after 18 - 24 months allows its effectiveness to be evaluated and any relevant changes/developments to be incorporated.

Chapter 5

Useful bereavement resources

Courses and Training

Training / Workshops on Grief at Work and other aspects of bereavement – Irish Hospice Foundation – Ph. 01 6793188, Email: breffni.mcguinness@hospice-foundation.ie
Web: www.hospice-foundation.ie

Post-Graduate Diploma/ M. Sc. in Bereavement Studies – Irish Hospice Foundation / RCSI – Ph. 01 6793188, Email: orla.keegan@hospice-foundation.ie
Web: www.hospice-foundation.ie

Training in Grief Counselling Skills – (Certificate and Diploma levels) – IICPS at Turning Point, 23 Crofton Road, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin. Ph. 01 2801603
Web: www.turningpoint.ie

Counselling

Barnardos
Irish charity providing bereavement counselling for children. Helpline: 01 4732110
Web: www.barnardos.ie/barnardosbereavementcounselling.htm

Irish Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy
Ph. 01 2300061, Email: iacp@irish-counselling.ie
Directory of Accredited Counsellors and Psychotherapists – Geographical based listing of counsellors and therapists by speciality including bereavement.
Web: www.irish-counselling.ie

Cultural Diversity

The Immigrant Council of Ireland
Independent, non-governmental organisation promoting the rights of migrants.
Useful resource on questions of cultural diversity and bereavement. Ph. 01 6740200
Web: www.immigrantcouncil.ie

Information on Bereavement

Leaflets (series) by professionals and people who have experienced different types of loss – Irish Hospice Foundation — Ph. 01 6793188, Email: maura.dunne@hospice-foundation.ie
Web: www.hospice-foundation.ie

Bereavement – **Information for those affected by bereavement. (2007)** Excellent resource on practical aspects of dealing with a death. Citizens Information Board. Ph. 01 6059000
Web: www.ciboard.ie

Support for Families Directory (2006) – Family Support Agency, St. Stephen's Green Hse., Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2. Ph. 01 6114100
National directory of family and bereavement support organisations organised geographically.
Web site: www.fsa.ie

What should I say? What should I do? (2007) Booklet by Suicide Prevention HSE West on supporting a work colleague who has been bereaved. Contact Mary O'Sullivan 091 548360

Reference books

Handling Death and Bereavement at Work, Charles-Edwards, D, (2005), Great Britain: Routledge

Irish Stories of Loss and Hope, Delaney, S. (2007), Dublin: Irish Hospice Foundation

Grieving - A Beginner's Guide. McCormack, J. H. (2005). London, Darton, Longman and Todd.

Resources on Care-giving

The Carers' Association of Ireland: Ph. 056 7721424
Web: www.carersireland.com/index.htm

Care Alliance Ireland – National Network of Voluntary Organisations supporting family carers. Ph. 8747776, Mob. 087 2073265
Web: www.carealliance.ie

Suicide

Console
Irish charity supporting and helping people bereaved by suicide. Helpline: 1 800 201 890
Web: www.console.ie

Turning the tide of suicide (3ts)
Irish charity organisation raising awareness and providing information on suicide.
Web: www.3ts.ie/crisis.htm

Volunteer bereavement support

Bereavement counselling service
Charity organisation providing bereavement support to individuals through trained volunteers, as well as resources on bereavement. Ph. 01 8391766,
Web: www.bereavementireland.org/

Hospices / Hospitals
Contact social work department in relevant hospice or hospital
For full national listing of Hospice and Palliative care services see:
Web: www.hospice-foundation.ie (Local services directory)

Web sites

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
Government web site providing information on legislation relevant to bereavement.
Web: www.entemp.ie/employment/osh/publications.htm (E.g. search under Carer's Leave, Health and Safety etc.).

Department of Social and Family Affairs
Government web site providing information on entitlements for care-givers and people who are bereaved. Lo call 1890 500 000
Web site: www.welfare.ie (select Bereavement/Carers).

BBC. (2007). "Coping with grief - Bereavement."
Web: www.bbc.co.uk/relationships/coping_with_grief/bereavement_index.shtml.

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Concluding remarks

Death, loss and grief are not easy things to deal with, especially at work. However, they are normal and inevitable parts of life and they do impact on employees and the organisation.

Being proactive about managing grief in the workplace helps managers and employees to be prepared, and thus better able to respond when death and loss occur. It also ensures a speedier return to productivity than if the issues are ignored.

The development of a bereavement policy is an important first step in proactively managing grief at work. It sets out minimum standards, helps to ensure a consistent approach and provides guidance to managers and employees.

The benefits of developing such an approach are significant. It makes good business sense because employees will notice the way grieving colleagues are supported thus helping to improve morale and commitment to the organisation. It also helps to reduce unnecessary sick leave.

Managers, staff and organisations are generally compassionate towards employees who are bereaved and want to do the best possible for them.
Developing a bereavement policy is the next step in translating that compassion and concern in to a practical form which will benefit not just the bereaved employee but the organisation as a whole.

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Appendix A

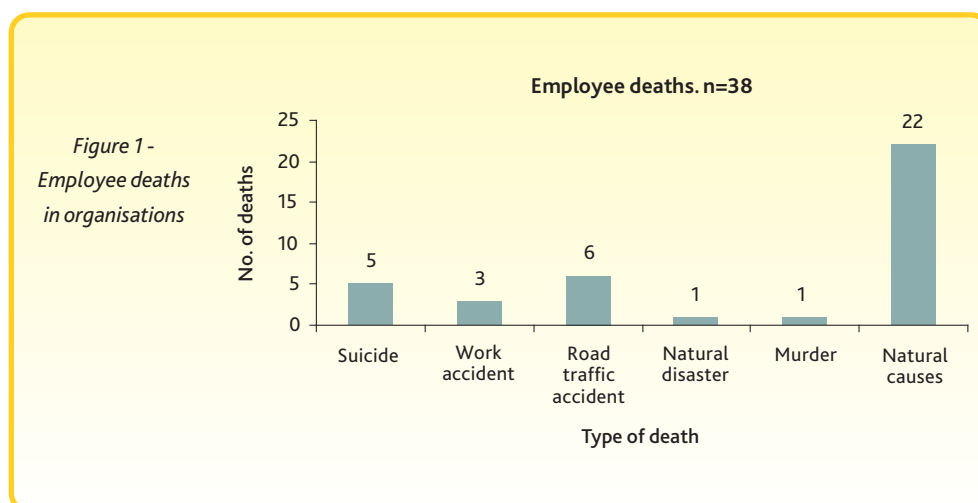# Review of current bereavement policies and practices

In 2006 The Irish Hospice Foundation commissioned a review of current bereavement policies and practices in 34 organisations in Ireland. The following is a summary of the results of this review.

Experience of bereavement

All of the organisations (34) had experienced employee bereavement (death or serious illness of a person related to an employee) in the last 12 months.

Half (17) had experienced the death of an employee at some point in the history of the organisation. A total of 38 employees had died in the 17 organisations with a significant number (16) of these being traumatic deaths such as car accidents, suicide and work accidents. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 - Employee deaths in organisations

Employee deaths. n=38

Type of death	No. of deaths
Suicide	5
Work accident	3
Road traffic accident	6
Natural disaster	1
Murder	1
Natural causes	22

Current policies

The majority of organisations (30, 88%) did not have what could be described as written bereavement policies which would provide guidelines to staff and line management on procedures and best practice. One organisation had a comprehensive death-in-service policy "to provide for a common approach and to ensure that such events are treated with consideration and respect." Another had a policy on dealing with bereaved families when an employee dies. Only a small number (5, 15%) had policies for supporting employees caring for a seriously ill relative. See Figure 2.

Figure 2 - Organisations with written policies

Organisations with written policies

No. of organisations

Bereavement: Yes, 4	No, 30	
Caring for ill relative: Yes, 5	No, 29	
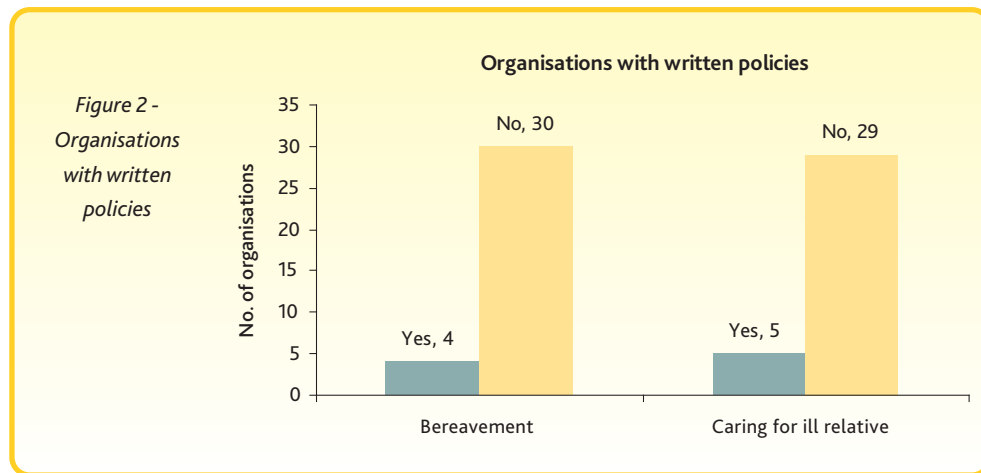
Compassionate leave

While few organisations have detailed bereavement policies, many (31, 91%) have some kind of provision for compassionate leave, with the most common being either 5 or 3 days paid leave.

- 13 (38%) provide 5 or more days
- 17 (50%) provide 3 days
- 1 (3%) provides 2 days

See Figure 3

Figure 3 - Compassionate leave provision

Compassionate leave provision. n=34

No. of organisations

5 Days or more	3 Days	2 Days	Not specified
13	17	1	3

No. of days paid leave
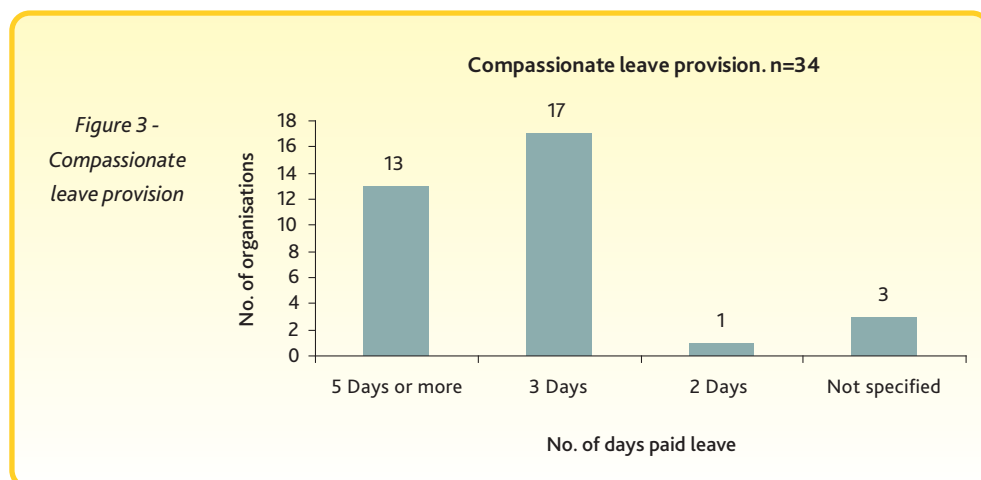
Compassionate leave discretion

Of particular interest was the practice of line managers exercising discretion in relation to the number of days leave provided to a bereaved employee above that which is specified. Half (17, 50%) of the organisations allowed their managers this facility.
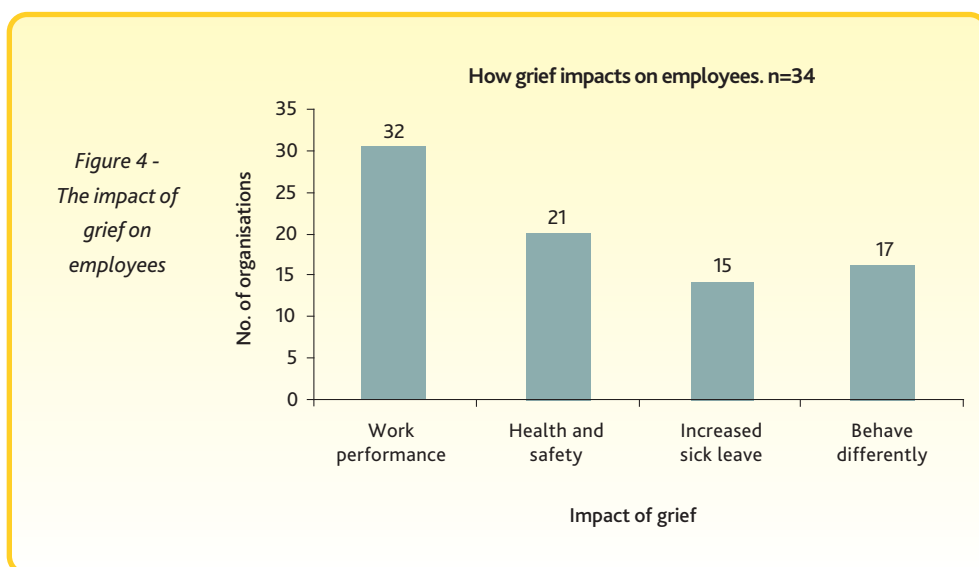
Current practice

Impact of bereavement on employees

The majority of organisations showed good awareness of the impact of bereavement on employees.

- 32 (94%) believed an employee's work performance is, or could be, affected by bereavement.

- 21 (62%) believed there are or could be health and safety implications for employees who are bereaved.

- 15 (44%) found an increase in sick leave for employees after a bereavement.

- 17 (50%) believed that employees behave differently after a bereavement.

Figure 4 - The impact of grief on employees

How grief impacts on employees. n=34

No. of organisations

Impact of grief	No. of organisations
Work performance	32
Health and safety	21
Increased sick leave	15
Behave differently	17

Impact of grief

The challenge of managing bereavement

When asked what organisations saw as the most challenging aspect of dealing with employee bereavement, the following were identified:

- ■ 9 (26%) Knowing what to say
- ■ 8 (24%) How to provide support
- ■ 6 (18%) Dealing with operational issues
- ■ 4 (12%) Dealing with difficult deaths like car accidents and suicide

Figure 5 - Challenging aspects of dealing with employee bereavement

Biggest challenge of employee bereavement. n=34

No. of organisations

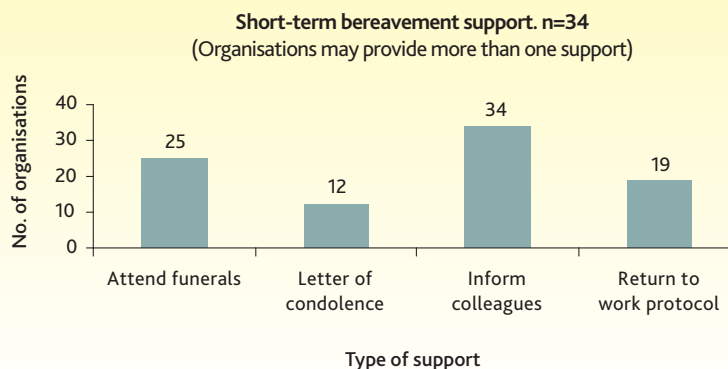| How to support	What to say	Difficult deaths	Dealing with colleagues	Operational issues	Other
8	9	4	3	6	4

Biggest challenge
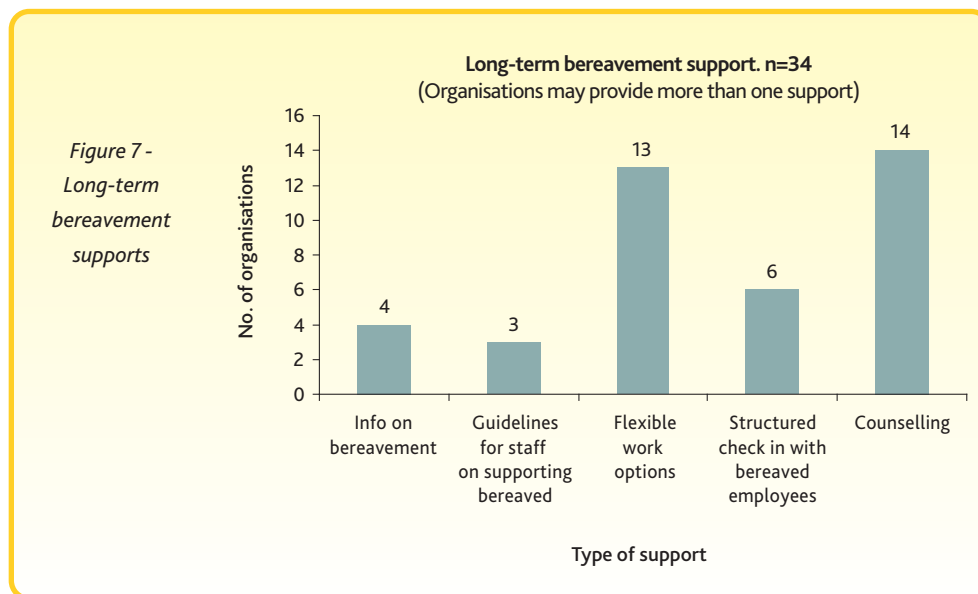
Support for bereaved employees

Many employers are sensitive to the impact of death and grief on colleagues. There was evidence of good practices in relation to supporting bereaved colleagues in the organisations surveyed and there were also gaps. Such gaps may be due more to a lack of understanding and awareness of the issues involved, rather than deliberate oversight.

Short-term supports in the immediate aftermath of a death tended to be quite good. These included facilitating attendance at funeral rituals, informing colleagues, managing the return to work of the bereaved employee and sending a letter of condolence. See Figure 6, below.

Figure 6 - Short-term bereavement supports

Short-term bereavement support. n=34
(Organisations may provide more than one support)

No. of organisations

Attend funerals	Letter of condolence	Inform colleagues	Return to work protocol
25	12	34	19

Type of support

Long-term bereavement supports are less well catered for. Only 4 organisations (12%) had information on bereavement which could be given to employees, and only 3 (9%) provided guidelines to staff on how to support bereaved colleagues. On the positive side, almost half, 13 (38%) had flexible work options that could be accessed by bereaved employees, while 14 (41%) had a system for accessing counselling where required. See Figure 7 below

Figure 7 - Long-term bereavement supports

Long-term bereavement support. n=34
(Organisations may provide more than one support)

No. of organisations

Info on bereavement	4
Guidelines for staff on supporting bereaved	3
Flexible work options	13
Structured check in with bereaved employees	6
Counselling	14

Type of support

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