

Leading during bereavement and complex grief

Specific resources and guidance to help you navigate leading your teams in the event of grief

Facing bereavement at any time is difficult both personally and professionally. It is even more difficult in our current environment of incredibly high demands, with little to no down time, social distancing and a steady stream of anxiety-provoking media. Members of our teams will have family, friends and colleagues in critical care, with some recovering and others not.

It is also recognised that healthcare professionals are more prone to stress and professional burnout given their responsibility for patient care, especially during times of immense pressure in the workplace. In this current COVID19 pandemic, NHS staff are working under continuous pressure in situations that may feel unsafe, they may be working longer hours and having less contact with friends and family. Situations such as this can have an impact on our mental health and it's important that we put the appropriate support in place to ensure that staff are supported in the sad instance that they are affected by a death by suicide.

Losing someone close to us, be that a colleague or a family member or friend, can be devastating. The emotions relating to grief can also emerge without bereavement, in periods of significant change as we are in now. We know we will see many colleagues suffering the aftermath of traumatic experiences over the coming months.

Good leadership is at the heart of how you support people in the face of bereavement. In particular, the advent of COVID-19 has brought ideas of compassionate leadership to the fore. In a recent [article for the King's Fund](#), Suzie Bailey and Michael West suggest that compassionate leadership is one of the most potent ways in which people can deal with what feel frightening and overwhelming.

In particular, this means paying attention to staff, truly listening to them and hearing the anxieties, stresses, and grief associated with bereavement. This is also about modelling good adaptive leadership when you're working with uncertainty and complexity, and where you need to support and enable other people, facilitating actions and modelling leadership as something that can be practised by anyone, whatever their role or grade. Exceptional leadership for exceptional times summarises what this leadership can look like in practice.

A death from Covid-19 or suicide during the pandemic means we have little time to prepare, may not have been able to have spent time with them due to infection risks, were unable to say goodbye, may need to continue working or may be ill ourselves (Sudden 2020).

Below are some suggested 'do's and don'ts' for leading and managing your teams after a bereavement (Oskarkilo 2020).

Do	Don't
<p>Take your time: when calling on a vulnerable person or the bereaved give the time needed to demonstrate care.</p>	<p>Make assumptions: everyone behaves differently when distressed, there is no normal response to grief or Covid-19.</p>
<p>Listen to the story: talking is important for the distressed, use active listening to show you understand.</p>	<p>Blame you or others for failing: hear them out and accept what is true and recognise this response as frustration.</p>
<p>Provide information: make sure you have relevant written information and guidance to share.</p>	<p>Make promises you cannot keep: be realistic in what you can offer.</p>
<p>Be creative: although there are strict rules on not spreading infection, be personal and innovate.</p>	<p>Dismiss values and beliefs: people may express harmful thoughts or behaviours, check if they are at risk of suicide.</p>
<p>Show respect: people may have strong religious</p>	

or other beliefs. Be respectful of what matters to them.

Accept the depth of their sorrow: grief for some is worse than physical pain, acknowledge the pain they experience.

Have patience: distress makes it difficult for people to think straight, be patient and allow time for answers.

Don't forget the children: make sure that children are involved and their needs to understand are met.

Put yourself or your colleagues at risk: make sure you balance compassionate leadership with maintain safety standards and procedures

Expect to make things better: recognise you cannot stop the pain, but you can help reduce it a little.

Line managers should consider that everyone deals with death and grief differently, and each employee's needs will be different. Supporting an employee can help them feel valued and reduce their stress or anxiety. Research also shows being a supportive line manager can avoid or reduce sick leave, keep a good working relationship and keep the workplace productive (Acas 2020).

Below are some resources and simple steps to enable you, as a leader, to support your staff amidst your own complex grief (Acas 2020).

When an employee tells you about a death of someone close to them it is good practice to:

- offer your condolences
- assure them they do not need to come to work if they do not want to, and make it clear that work should come second
- ask how they'd like to keep in touch
- ask if there's any important work they need someone else to cover, if appropriate

If someone is upset, they might not be able to talk for long or they might ask someone else to contact you on their behalf. Communicating in a calm, empathetic way can help employees feel supported, and help ease their anxiety about returning to work. Speak to your HR team to ensure that any compassionate leave or time off is in accordance with policy and recorded correctly on ESR.

When you get in touch with the employee, it's good practice to ask:

- how they are
- how they'd like to be in contact while they're off, for example by phone or email, and how often
- if they want you to let others know about the death
- if they want to be contacted by others from work, for example to offer their support or condolences
- if they need any information or support from you, and signpost to any support that's available to them
- if they've thought about returning to work, if appropriate

When someone at work dies from COVID-19 or takes their life by suicide, it is good practice to:

- contact the person's family or next of kin to offer condolences
- arrange letters from the Chief Executive to both the family and the team/service
- tell others at work the person has died, in a sensitive and personal way
- let staff know how they can give their condolences
- talk about the death with the team in a safe space enabling all to share their emotions – recognising they may be complex and prefer 1-1 or group spaces. Consider arranging for qualified/trained facilitation
- contact the health and wellbeing lead for specific support for the team leader, team and yourself
- offer support to staff affected by the death, some links are provided below (Cruse, Sudden and Acas offer specific guidance and support for COVID-19 and suicide related deaths)
- share details of any memorial, if staff have been invited (also see [guidance on memorials during social distancing](#))
- notify HR to ensure all procedures are followed for pay, contracts, [pensions](#) and other arrangements
- ensure all COVID-19 deaths are reported appropriately

Many organisations are also looking at Schwartz rounds, learning circles, debriefing conversations and other group conversations to support staff because talking things through is important for all. Speak to your HR & OD lead to see if this is being offered locally to you.

When you are concerned about a colleague at risk of suicide:

There is a tragic reality that some of us will have concerns about colleagues at risk of harming themselves or taking their life by suicide. Flags to be aware of include communicating that they are feeling much worse, saying they would 'rather not be here'. You might be aware that they have considered suicide previously or have ideas about how they would kill themselves. It can also be more subtle including appearing restless and agitated, not wanting to talk to people, or not coping with everyday tasks (Samaritans 2020). It is important to remain calm and not panic.

- If you are worried someone **may be in immediate danger, call the emergency services.**
- If you are worried about the person but do not think they are in immediate danger **encourage them to talk about their feelings and to seek help.**
- Asking **simple, direct questions** can help. This includes asking someone whether they are having suicidal thoughts. Ask open questions, give them time to respond and try not to judge.
- **Suggest they call the confidential staff helpline** noted below. You can also call on their behalf.
- **Make sure you get support as well.** Caring for someone else who is suicidal can be very emotionally draining.
- Remember, it's ok to ask for help.

Bereavement specific resources for staff

Confidential staff support line operated by the Samaritans and free to access
Call 0300 131 7000 (7am-11pm, seven days a week)
Text FRONTLINE to 85258 (24/7)

Includes coaching, bereavement, mental health, housing, family, legal, benefits and debt help.

Free access for NHS staff to mental health self-help apps

NHS staff have been given free access to several mental health and wellbeing apps from now until the end of December 2020.

For suicide specific help: Stay Alive

For mental health self-help: Headspace, Unmind, Daylight, Sleepio and SilverCloud

To access click here: <https://people.nhs.uk/help/>

Acas 2020: Time off for bereavement. Support and guidance for policy around bereavement from the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas). Offers guidance on good practice in managing leave, suggested processes for when a member of staff dies and offers a template bereavement policy.

<https://www.acas.org.uk/time-off-for-bereavement>

BPS 2015: Early intervention for trauma. Evidence-based recommendations on early interventions for trauma. This includes the benefits and guidance on debriefing taken from RCTs and NICE guidance based on experience debriefing after traumatic events. https://232fe0d6-f8f4-43eb-bc5d-6aa50ee47dc5.filesusr.com/ugd/360df8_7b5a5170107c488cb2dac2568d76d6b4.pdf

Cruse Bereavement Care offers face-to-face, telephone, email and online support for anyone who has experienced a loss.

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help>

Call: 0808 808 1677

- **BEAD (Bereaved through Alcohol and Drugs)** – provides information and support for anyone bereaved through drug or alcohol use.

- [Child Bereavement UK](#) - provides support for anyone who has lost a child, and for children themselves who are bereaved. 0800 028 8840
- [Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Charity \(SANDS\)](#) – provides information and support for anybody affected by the death of a baby.
- [The Compassionate Friends](#) – offers a range of services supporting bereaved parents and their families. 0345 123 2304

Direct.gov. Guidance on practical elements of bereavement including applying for probate, registering a death, informing DVLA, benefits, support and tax.
<https://www.gov.uk/browse/births-deaths-marriages/death>

Dying Matters. Coalition of individual and organisational members across England and Wales, aiming to help people talk more openly about dying, death and bereavement, and to make plans for the end of life
dyingmatters.org

How are you feeling NHS is an easy-to-use resource that has been developed with NHS staff to help bridge a gap in understanding and enable us to talk openly and regularly about emotional health, assess the impact emotional wellbeing has on ourselves, our colleagues and on our patients and enable us to action plan to enable more good days than bad.
<https://www.nhsemployers.org/retention-and-staff-experience/health-and-wellbeing/taking-a-targeted-approach/taking-a-targeted-approach/how-are-you-feeling-today-nhs-toolkit>

Mind 2019: Bereavement. Understanding grief and bereavement (including from suicide), how to manage and where to get help.
<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/bereavement/about-bereavement/>

Staying Safe offers compassion, kindness and easy ways to help keep people safer from thoughts of harm and suicide, seek support and discover hope of recovery through powerful videos from people with personal experience
<http://www.stayingsafe.net/>

Sudden 2020: COVID-19 bereavement. COVID specific guidance on experienced grief and supporting yourself or someone else, particularly during social distancing. Advice where you are thinking about suicide or worried about someone else. Memorialising someone during social distancing.
<http://www.suddendeath.org/covid-19-bereavement/help-after-covid-19-bereavement>

Suicide – If you're worried about someone else (Samaritans). Guidance including what to look for, what to do, how to have the difficult conversation and general support during coronavirus.
<https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/support-and-information/worried-about-someone-else/>

Suicide – Supporting someone who feels suicidal (Mind). Includes who may be most at risk, how to help, talking about feelings, making a support plan and useful links. <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helping-someone-else/supporting-someone-who-feels-suicidal/about-suicidal-feelings/>

Suicidal feelings (Mind 2020). This includes what they are, possible causes and how you can learn to cope immediately and in the longer term. <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/suicidal-feelings/about-suicidal-feelings/>

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS) offer support for people who have been bereaved by suicide. They have a dedicated helpline, local support groups and many more practical resources.
<https://uksobs.org/>

'We need to talk about suicide' is an e-learning course developed by HEE and PHE that aims to provide support for volunteers and health care professionals, enabling them to recognise the early warning signs of suicide, support patients and their families and offer additional health services as required in times of need.
<http://www.nwyhelearning.nhs.uk/elearning/HEE/SuicidePrevention/>

Widowed and Young offers support to people under 50 who have lost a partner.
<https://www.widowedandyoung.org.uk/>

Zero Suicide Alliance aims to improve support for people contemplating suicide by raising awareness of suicide and promoting free suicide prevention training which is accessible to all. The training aims to enable people to identify when someone is presenting with suicidal thoughts/behaviour, to be able to speak out in a supportive manner, and to empower them to signpost the individual to the correct services or support. <https://www.zerosuicidealliance.com/training/>

Leadership amidst bereavement and grief resources

Bailey and West King's Fund (2020) Why compassionate leadership is vital during COVID-19 and simple things leaders can do. <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2020/03/covid-19-crisis-compassionate-leadership>

Berinato (2020) How leaders confront complex grief including response to change, anticipatory grief and anxiety. <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/manage-grieving-team-member.htm>

Mindtools (2020) Practical advice on leading grieving team members, including acknowledging feelings, showing empathy, avoiding giving prescriptive advice and ensuring, as far as possible, that people's workloads don't become overwhelming. <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/manage-grieving-team-member.htm>

Oskarkilo (2020) Resources on the psychological impact of dealing with death and bereavement on police officers, staff and emergency services workers (easily accessible and applicable to anyone working in health and care). Practical advice, alongside 'do's and don'ts' for leaders and managers. [Oskarkilo.org.uk](https://oskarkilo.org.uk)