

What You Can Do to Prepare for your Co-Worker Returning to Work after Suffering a Loss



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As the Program Director at Maddie's Footprints I often hear stories from bereaved mothers who report that their coworkers did not know how to react when they returned to work after the loss.

I believe that oftentimes "death" is difficult to discuss and it's hard to know the right or wrong things to say. Grief is a normal, healthy part of the human experience.

Be prepared for your coworker to have good days and bad, that is to be expected. On behalf of Maddie's Footprints we have designed this presentation to help those who may be unsure about the return of their bereaved coworker.

**Before the employee
returns to work:**



Before the employee returns to work:

- Identify someone to be the key person in regular contact with the bereaved employee. This person can be the one facilitating the communication between the organization and the employee. This person can keep the others updated with what the bereaved employee wants colleagues to know.
- Try to keep the employee informed during their time away. Perhaps periodic emails to inform them of any developments, being invited to any formal gatherings, etc. Being proactive in making suggestions can be helpful as, in some cases of crisis, it can be hard for the bereaved to know what they might want or need.

Before the employee returns to work:

- Consider redistributing the employee's workload so that it is not as stressful when returning to work. This may, of course, cause an increase of strain on other employees which will need to be sensitively managed and monitored.
- Never assume that just because the bereaved coworker may not be mentioning what is happening, they are "over it."
- Seeing pregnant people in the workplace is often a trigger for bereaved families. Possibly informing the coworker before their return if anyone has become pregnant may be preferable to them then experiencing the shock of finding out when they return, which is often uncomfortable for both parties.

Before the employee returns to work:

- One way to assess how well your coworker is coping is to possibly conduct a return interview. It does not have to be formal or even in person, but a compassionate conversation about their experience and state of mind as they plan to return to work. This can alleviate awkwardness and confusion. A few tips on handling this conversation:
 - Acknowledge their loss: A simple “I am sorry for your loss” can actually go a long way.
 - If you have a close relationship, possibly ask if they would like to share their experience. Be prepared for them to possibly respond “no” and then do not force the issue.
- Be aware of the significance of the anniversary of the death, the child’s birthday, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, and so on.

What to NOT say or do:



What NOT to say or do:

- Referring to the baby as “it”
- Avoiding them or pretending it didn't happen (unless they specifically tell you they would rather not talk about it)
- Anything on the theme of implying that they can have another baby and that it will make it better—such as “you are young, you will have another one.”
- Referring to other children they might have, suggesting it will ease the pain; such as “At least you have.....”
- “Everything happens for a reason.”
- “Time heals everything.”
- “You are going to be fine.”
- “He/she is in a better place.”

Oftentimes we hear that when returning to work, the bereaved parent feels isolated because others are staying silent. Here are some suggestions to show your colleague that you care.

Show empathy.

“I am glad you are back, and we’re here for you. We cannot change what happened, but if there is anything we can do to make your life easier, know that we are all here for you.”

Acknowledge the grief is ongoing.

“How are you today?” is better than “How are you?” This allows people to answer honestly beyond responding, “I’m fine.”

Take your cues from the griever.

“I would love to hear more about your loved one whenever that might be convenient for you. I want to respect your privacy.”

Most importantly—continue to be kind. Your colleague has been through a difficult time and the grief journey is a long and hard one.

Grief can hit one in waves, they may be fine one day, and then another day may have extreme feelings of loss and sadness. If possible, let them know it is okay to take breaks, maybe take a walk or some alone time.

A helpful hint... possibly record their baby's birthday so you can be aware of it and sensitive in the following years to come. This is often the hardest anniversary.

If you have specific questions along the way, never hesitate to reach out to Maddie's Footprints at 337-534-4209 or refer to our "For Family" section under Resources on our website: www.maddiesfootprints.org for more tips.

