

Supporting Associates in Grief: A Manager's Guide

Being a manager is rewarding but can also be challenging. Every day, you're tasked with supporting your associates as they confront difficult issues and seek to solve new problems. One of the biggest challenges they might face is one that you may be unprepared to support them through: the loss of a loved one.

Thoughtful support through loss can help create a culture of care and safety, and can give associates a sense of predictability and control. Supporting associates through challenging times, such as a loss, also encourages a long-term sense of belonging. In contrast, a lack of support can lead to people feeling isolated, stigmatized, and less connected to you and your organization.

This guide will help you understand how people may experience grief and offer practical tips on how to support your associate through this life-altering experience.

Understanding the grief experience

Emotions

Many of us think of grief as the extreme sadness and longing that follows the death of someone we care about. While those are common components of grief, the full emotional picture is much more complex. People may experience a range of emotions such as anger, regret, anxiety, helplessness, guilt, or even a sense of relief depending on the circumstances. Others may experience a predominant feeling of shock, disbelief, or numbness. Confusion and disorientation are also common as people try to make sense of their state of being amidst such a life-disrupting event.

Thought processes

Grief also affects cognition, often impairing a person's ability to process, retain, and recall information. A bittersweet memory, sad thought, or powerful emotion can make it challenging to focus on much else. In addition, there's a mental toll of trying to go on living without the person who died or to cultivate meaning out of a deeply painful situation.

Behaviors

These shifts in emotion and cognition can influence behavior changes. During the grieving process, people may cope by isolating themselves from others to process the loss privately or by temporarily withdrawing from activities that previously brought a sense of joy and purpose. Or they may reach out much more frequently to seek comfort from loved ones and may invest themselves more deeply in those activities for a much-needed distraction or return to normalcy. But the key takeaway is, provided that the person isn't causing harm to themselves or others, there is no "right" or "wrong" when it comes to grief reactions.

The timeline for grief

For around 50 to 60 percent of people, the most acute phase of grief will last for a few weeks or months. For another 30 percent of people, acute grief lasts several months to one year before they gradually return to a sense of normalcy. There will also be around 10 percent of people who experience what's called "prolonged grief," which occurs when the grief reaction is experienced intensely for a year or more.

The symptoms of grief are complex and challenging. Below are some practical tips to help you navigate supporting your associate as they go through their own individualized grieving process.

Tips to support associates immediately following a loss

Reach out and empathize

When you make contact, be sure to directly acknowledge the loss and authentically offer your empathy. By directly acknowledging the loss, you show your associate that you're willing to discuss this difficult topic openly with them. This lets them know that you're accepting of them and interested in their well-being as they go through this challenging time. When you're talking, don't try to "fix" how they feel. For example, don't tell them to "stay strong" or suggest they keep busy so they feel better. Although phrases like these are intended to be encouraging, they can make someone feel worse by suggesting their feelings are flawed in some way.

Offer tangible support

Ask about specific ways you might be able to lend a hand. Offering to deliver a meal is likely to be helpful. However, try to avoid asking general questions such as, "is there anything I can do?" This puts the burden on them to think of something for you to do. In addition to practical offerings, you can extend your caring presence and show them that they're in your thoughts by sending a card and/or flowers. You may also ask your associate if your attendance at the funeral would be welcome.

After you've responded in ways that show you care about your associate outside of the office, you can lend your support around work-related logistics in a number of ways.

Volunteer to communicate with co-workers

Ask your associate what information they want shared with their co-workers. Respect their decision and do not share more than they have permitted. Trusting you to share the approved details of their absence will likely be a welcome relief from trying to figure out how to do this on their own.

Help with their return-to-work plans

You can also offer assistance by discussing bereavement leave and return-to-work options. It's normal and understandable to feel hesitant to talk about these logistics. They can feel trivial in comparison with their loss. You might consider sharing your intention with your associate as you start the conversation to help alleviate some of this discomfort. For example, you might say that you want to help them learn their options for time off and returning to work, so that they can focus more wholly on their loss and taking care of themselves.

To help your associate, share your company's bereavement leave policy and be sure to indicate whether there is any flexibility. Let them know if they can extend their bereavement leave through paid time off (PTO), unpaid time off, or through other workplace-specific programs, if these exist. Associates, especially those who are struggling with the logistics of planning a funeral, will often welcome your tactical support in understanding their options. In addition, they'll likely appreciate the clarity you're providing in a time that is otherwise without much.

Regroup and consider coverage first if needed

If you're feeling time pressure for your associate to come back so they can continue their duties and meet their deadlines, take time to regroup before making contact. The last thing you want is to pressure them to return to work before they're ready. To decrease your needs and urgency around their return, reach out to your team and figure out who can cover their responsibilities before you make contact.

Remember that returning to work is a personal decision

As your associate is deciding what they want to do, remember that the timeline for returning to work is a personal decision. Some associates may wish to come back soon after the death of a loved one, while others may need more time to sufficiently recover from the loss. Both are reasonable responses. Trust your associate to know when they're ready and don't discourage a return to work if they wish to come back shortly after a loved one's death. Some associates will find comfort in getting back into a work routine, as work can provide a sense of purpose and mastery. Work allows control over their circumstances, and offers structure to their day, which is often missed during the disorienting period of mourning.

The early phase of grief will likely be challenging for your associate, and can be difficult for you as you have these conversations. These tips can empower you to support your associate through this sensitive period. Remember, your role in this early phase is to offer your support in specific ways as you help them navigate the intersection of their work and their loss.

As a manager, your opportunity to help a grieving associate does not end here. You can continue to support them upon their return if they've taken bereavement leave.

Tips for supporting an associate returning from bereavement leave

Let grief accompany them on their return to work

Even though an associate may say they're ready to return to work today, they may experience a strong wave of grief tomorrow. Unexpected reminders of the person who died can trigger tearfulness or strong emotions, but an onslaught of grief can also come out of nowhere, without warning. When these moments occur at work, respond with compassion while recalling that this is all a normal part of the grief process.

Approach the topic and offer your condolences.

Although it may feel uncomfortable, it's important to acknowledge their loss and express your sincere condolences upon their return to work. This shows you recognize their painful experience and you're thinking of them during an especially difficult time. Proactively broaching the topic relieves them of the burden of needing to initiate a conversation or gauge your receptiveness to talking about the situation.

Express interest in how they're doing and respond with validation

Offer a simple statement that signals your care for their well-being and your receptiveness to as much, or as little, as they're comfortable with sharing about how they're doing. Continue to offer statements of care and interest periodically to show that their well-being is still top of mind for you. When you ask, use time-bound phrases like "how are you doing today?" to honor that their grief is an evolving experience. Initially, it's helpful to err on the side of support and periodically demonstrate to your associate that you're still a willing and empathetic listener. Take your cue from them regarding if and when you should phase out offers of care and support. When your associate does share how they're feeling, respond by listening without judgment and reiterate that their feelings are natural, reasonable, and valid.

Proactively offer specific forms of support and flexibility (but don't force it)

Associates who are grieving may feel reluctant to speak up and ask for support. They may not feel a sense of permission to do so or it may simply feel burdensome. You can overcome this by proactively offering tangible support, such as flexibility around work schedules and project deadlines. You can also offer to jointly reconsider their volume and scope of work, even if for a temporary period.

Let them know that these options are available and that you'd be happy to help them reprioritize their work activities and accommodate their needs, while also conveying that the decision to take advantage of this support is fully theirs. Be sure to emphasize that these are standing offers of support, even if they don't need flexibility at the moment. If they do take advantage of these offers, continue to check in and see how the accommodations are working for them. Offer adjustments as needed and as you're able.

Follow their lead on work adjustment needs

Changes to their work scope or workload might be helpful, but don't proactively make these changes without their input. Instead, make sure that any discussion about adjustment to work activities is collaborative. If they don't ask for accommodations or flexibility regarding work responsibilities or scheduling, they may want to return to their typical work routine.

Encourage self-compassion

Associates may find it tough to dive back into work after bereavement leave. They may be discouraged by their decreased productivity or feel more frustrated when they make mistakes. If you see these signs of self-criticism at work, let them know that mistakes are expected and setbacks are normal and inevitable for everyone. Reiterate that your job is to support them and promote their professional growth. Help orient them to the importance of being patient and kind with themselves, and remind them that they can learn from these moments and rebound.

The key takeaway for this returning to work stage is to expect a bumpy transition and to offer your support by being flexible and compassionate, continuing to check in, and collaborating on any work adjustment needs.

Special considerations for the loss of a co-worker

While the strategies above address many aspects of supporting someone through grief and loss, there are special circumstances that warrant additional consideration. When you're supporting associates through the loss of a co-worker, your role will be larger than it is when you're supporting associates through the loss of a loved one. This loss impacts not only your associates individually, but also you as a manager, and your team as a whole. It's crucial that you address this loss head-on with your associates and offer your leadership and genuine companionship on the path forward.

Bring people together to grieve

Gather your team and create time and a safe space to process the loss together. Don't rush this, slow down and be authentic. Allow your associates to talk about their feelings and share stories together about their lost co-worker. Share your own feelings and stories with your team. If the family of the deceased shares that they would like to open the funeral and/or memorial to co-workers, ensure your staff has the requisite time and ability to attend.

You may also consider offering counseling services to your team. Lyra offers "critical incident support," which includes virtual or onsite services from a counselor who can provide individual and/or group sessions to help process the loss.

Let grief accompany your team as time goes on

Continue to check in with your associates and see how they're doing. Decide with your team how to honor the loss together in ongoing ways. For example, you might propose making a bulletin board or scrapbook to memorialize the deceased co-worker. Or, you might suggest gathering funds for a donation to a charity or doing a yearly walk in honor of the individual. There is no single right answer and the process of discussing options will help people grieve together.

Practice compassion when it's time to rehire

Eventually, you will find yourself in the difficult situation of needing to fill the position your former associate held. When this time comes do not take this on alone and be transparent with your team. Have a colleague help you review applicants and interview them. Decide ahead of time what you will and will not share about the circumstances of hiring before you're in the interview process.

A special note if you have lost more than one associate

Losing one associate is challenging enough. If you find yourself in a situation where you've lost multiple associates, many of the same considerations apply. In addition, it's crucial that you address each loss with equal importance. Do not honor one individual more than another. While it's essential that you remember each individual equally, you can vary the level of communication about work-related logistics by the level of need. Inherently, people will need to know more about how a senior person's work is being covered. If you need to communicate in different ways about work-related responsibilities because of this necessity, address the reason head-on so people understand that it's not out of favoritism.

Losing associate(s) will pose emotional and practical challenges, but following the steps above can equip you to face these challenges with the knowledge that you're supporting your team well.

Things to avoid

Don't wait for the right words to offer care

Many times, we stop ourselves from offering care and support because we're afraid of saying the wrong thing. Remember, there are no perfect words. The most important aspect of offering support is to be transparent about your intentions. For example, you could share the following sentiment with the associate: "I'm not exactly sure what to say, but I want you to know that I care and I'm available to talk."

Don't depend only on questions

The question "How are you doing?" is a reasonable one, but proactive statements of support and willingness to listen can be even more helpful to an associate who isn't ready to share their feelings yet. For example, you could offer a statement such as, "I want you to know that I've been thinking of you and I'd like to hear about how you're doing, so when you'd like to share, I'm here to listen."

Don't minimize their experience

It's tempting to offer phrases like "I know what you're going through," or "It's going to be okay," to show that we can relate to their situation or express optimism about their recovery. These well-intentioned statements can lead people to feel dismissed or come across as insensitive. The best thing you can do is to keep the focus on their experience, validate what they're feeling, and offer your support.

Don't change their work without their input

When considering supportive actions for an associate, don't act unilaterally. Always work in conjunction with the associate to meet their needs, whether that entails adjusted work schedules, pushing back project timelines, or otherwise altering the nature of their work. Pre-emptive action can lead an associate to feel marginalized or undermine their sense of control.

Watch for signs of concern

Statements, behaviors, and mood shifts to notice

Pay attention to observed or self-described changes in the overall demeanor and functioning of associates returning from bereavement leave.

The chart below provides an overview of potential changes in mood, cognition, behaviors, and statements of safety risks. Be sure to note the category titles that emphasize "sustained or severe changes." This labeling recognizes that signs of concern in those categories may be expected as part of the grief process but can be problematic if they're long-lasting or severely impact the person's ability to function. When in doubt, or in any situation involving safety risk, reach out to your human resources (HR) department and/or Lyra for consultation or support.

| Sustained or severe changes in mood or behavior | Sustained or severe changes in cognition | Changes in health and wellness behaviors | Statements indicating safety risk |
|--|---|--|--|
| Persistent irritability, anxiety, anger, worry, or sadness | Difficulty sustaining attention | Neglect of personal hygiene | Statements about wanting to harm others |
| Decline in work performance, tardiness, or absenteeism | Difficulty processing or interpreting new information | Increased use of substances | Statements about wanting to harm oneself |
| Withdrawal from regular activities | Persistent problems recalling information | Engaging in reckless behaviors | Statements about feeling desperate or hopeless |
| Withdrawal from relationships | Expressing bizarre or incoherent thoughts | Reports of difficulty with sleep | Statements about suicide |

Know when overworking is a problem

While it's important to respect an associate's desire to resume their work routine, it's also beneficial to look out for signs that an associate is at risk of burnout. If your associate is consistently working longer hours or working weekends when that isn't required of them, reach out and let them know you've noticed this behavior and you want to check in.

Make sure they understand what is and isn't expected of them in terms of work availability and job performance, while also reiterating the value of taking breaks and self-care. Consistently working beyond expected hours is often unsustainable and could be more harmful than useful to both their productivity and well-being in the long run.

When your associates are struggling, having resources to offer can feel helpful and empowering.

Resources to offer

Additional leave options

In some cases, your associate may find that they need additional time off beyond their allotted bereavement leave and any additional sources of flexibility they may have taken advantage of, such as extending leave through PTO, unpaid leave, or other workplace-specific programs that may exist. If this occurs, you may offer to facilitate a conversation with HR to discuss short-term disability leave.

Lyra and other mental wellness benefits

If your associate shows some of the aforementioned signs of concern, you can gently suggest that they consider available care services through Lyra or other associate benefits that support emotional well-being. It's helpful to include information about how to access these benefits and highlight key features that may increase their chance of utilizing the services. For example, when presenting Lyra as a resource, consider mentioning that the services are free or low cost, confidential, accessible in person, online, or by phone, and that they can request a specialist in grief issues.

Keep in mind that not everyone who suffers grief and loss will need counseling. Most people will recover on their own with the help of their social support system and without the need for professional intervention. However, therapy is always an available option as are community support groups for individuals grieving similar losses (e.g., a widower's support group).

Critical incident support

If the loss you're helping your associate(s) through is the loss of a co-worker, you can consider using Lyra's critical incident support services, which provide access to individual and group counseling to support your associates following the loss. Contact Lyra at 1-800-825-3555 to request onsite critical incident support.

Consultation services for you

Lyra may also be available to help you with supporting an associate dealing with grief. Lyra offers consultation to managers and HR professionals to troubleshoot challenging or complex workplace situations and provide best practices for handling difficult conversations or heightened emotions. To determine if Lyra's manager consultation services are available to you, contact your HR or benefits team.

Visit walmart.lyrahealth.com or call Lyra's Care Navigator Team at 1-800-825-3555 to learn more about how Lyra can help you.