

Supporting a grieving employee

The Connect, Collaborate, Cultivate framework for managers

Knowing how to support a grieving employee can be hard to navigate. This guide is designed to make it easier on you, with actionable, grief-informed ways to support both your employee and your team through a loss.



Thank you for wanting to support your employee. What you do in the days and weeks after their loss will matter, and they will remember it. Managers and employees often describe workplace support differently. Managers tend to talk about leave policies and coverage, while employees talk about understanding, empathy, and having someone available. *Both matter, and this guide helps you offer both.*

The 3C framework

Every phase uses the same three steps, so you can extend real support without having to overthink it. Work them in that order. Compassion comes first, and the operational needs get handled throughout rather than up front.

- 1. Connect.** Manager to employee. Show compassion first. Nothing operational until the death has been acknowledged.
- 2. Collaborate.** Manager and employee together. Work out what needs to happen, covering personal needs as well as professional ones.
- 3. Cultivate.** Manager and the team. Help everyone else show up in a way that actually helps.

Four phases

Each phase covers one of the moments in the first year that employees and teams find hardest.

- **At notification, before bereavement leave**
- **Preparing to come back to work**
- **Return to work**
- **Long-term follow-up**

What you should know about grief in the workplace

76%

of bereaved employees say their work performance suffered after the death.

44.6%

have tried to suppress their emotions at work.

42.7%

say they seldom or never received support from their manager.

79%

consider quitting their jobs after a major loss, because of limited support.

PHASE 1: At notification, before bereavement leave

CONNECT manager to employee

☐ Step 1. Offer your condolences.

SAY: *I heard that [name or relation] died. Losing someone can be so hard. I wanted to personally give you my condolences and to offer to sit with you and hold space right now.*

THEN: Pause.

☐ Step 2. Let them choose what happens next.

SAY: *What would be most helpful to you right now: sharing a bit more about what happened, or working through some of the work-related bereavement logistics together?*

THEN: Follow their answer. Collaborate happens either right away or after they are done sharing.

☐ Step 3. If they want to talk, ask about the person rather than the death.

SAY: *What was [name or relation] like? How was your relationship?*

- Listen without filling the pauses.
- Hold back reassurance; avoid saying "at least" or "everything happens for a reason" or "you're strong".
- Avoid assuming that the relationship was close or easy.

☐ Step 4. If they don't want to talk more, then move to the practical side when they are ready.

SAY: *I understand it can be hard to talk about it right now. Let me help you with the operational things.*

PHASE 1: At notification, before bereavement leave

COLLABORATE *manager and employee together*

☐ Step 5. Understand what is pressing or most concerning.

SAY: *What is something that is work-related that is worrying you most right now?*

PERSONAL NEEDS

- ☐ PTO and bereavement leave. Check whether the policy covers this relationship, and if it does not, try your best to work something out. You want to help the employee with solutions.
- ☐ Travel time, and whether they will want time after the service as well as before it.
- ☐ Bereavement benefits, EAP details, and Help Texts. Send once, in a single message.
- ☐ Whether they want to hear from you while they are away, and through which channel.

SAY: *Based on what feels right to you, I can check in by phone or text while you are away, and you do not need to respond. Would that be okay, or would you prefer to go offline entirely? Both are ok.*

- ☐ A touch-base before they come back.

SAY: *Before you come back, I would like to connect so we can plan around your preferences for return to work.*

PROFESSIONAL NEEDS

- ☐ Help them reallocate their work while they are away, record who has what.
 - ☐ Ask about any pressing deadlines or deliverables that need to be on someone's radar.
 - ☐ Confirm what the team will be told, and who will tell them (either the employee or manager).
 - ☐ Agree to a return date but also let them know if it can be flexible.
 - ☐ Turn off on-call, system alerts, and calendar invitations.
 - ☐ Write down the name/relationship of the person who died and the date of the death.
- Phase 4 runs on this information.

PHASE 1: At notification, before bereavement leave

CULTIVATE *manager and the team*

- ☐ Tell the team only what the employee approved, and say whether contacting them is welcome.
- ☐ Ask colleagues about task-sharing and assign coverage accordingly, tracking who is covering what.
- ☐ Give the team some condolence message ideas they can use.

SAY: *I heard that [name or relation] died. I've been thinking about you ever since.*

OR: *Sending you my deepest heartfelt condolences over the loss of [name or relation]. Thinking of you and your family today. No reply needed.*

- ☐ Your team can decide on if any of the following items to be done by the manager or a staff- appointed lead:
 - Send a condolence card from everyone.
 - Send a meal gift card or coordinate a meal drop-off.
 - Send flowers. or a donation to a charity of thier choice.

Note: Standardize your bereavement response. Whatever you do for one employee, do for every employee. If you send a meal card for one loss, send it for all of them. When the response varies, it signals that some losses matter more than others.

PHASE 2: Preparing to come back to work

CONNECT *manager to employee*

- ☐ **Step 1. A few days before the return, start with them rather than with work.**

SAY: *Hi [name]. Before we jump into a work re-entry conversation, I wanted to start by just touching base. I've been curious about how you've been holding up lately, and also how the funeral was for you.*

THEN: *Pause. This invites them to start with grief rather than logistics.*

- ☐ **Step 2. Listen until they reach a natural stopping point, then validate what you heard before moving on.**

SAY: *Thank you for sharing more about what has happened over the past few days/weeks. I know that coming back to work is not a signal that you are no longer grieving. I understand that grief will be ever-present on most days, so my goal is to work with you on creating a plan that eases you back in.*

- ☐ **Step 3. Jot down any important notes.**

PHASE 2: Preparing to come back to work

COLLABORATE *manager and employee together*

☐ **Step 4. Whether a phased return or a full return suits them better.**

SAY: *I would like to make sure you have the flexibility you need. While some people like to jump right back in, this can cause a lot of stress, so many people prefer a more staggered approach where we build your workload back up over time. Which sounds best to you?*

☐ **Step 5. Tell them how the first day will begin, so nothing is a surprise.**

SAY: *When you come back, you and I will block the first hour or so together to build the work plan.*

PERSONAL NEEDS *decide these on this call*

- ☐ Whether they want their return acknowledged openly by the group or individually. *Both are ok.*
- ☐ Anything they would rather the team did not ask them about. Bereavement
- ☐ Remind them of the private spaces available to them if they need a break.

PROFESSIONAL NEEDS *the agenda for the first hour on their first day back*

- ☐ The first week's workload, agreed together and written down.
- ☐ One or two priorities that genuinely matter, and what can wait. Confirm what the
- ☐ Which meetings and accounts to step back into, and which to hold a little longer.
- ☐ Who keeps the shared work, and how the employee takes pieces back over time.
- ☐ A written summary of what happened while they were away.
- ☐ Turn off on-call, system alerts, and calendar invitations.
- ☐ System access, calendar, and on-call are turned back on when they are ready.
- ☐ How they step out of a meeting or take a moment on a hard day.

SAY: *If something hits you during the day, you can step out of anything without explaining yourself. I will cover it.*

- ☐ Permission to block their calendar as busy, for handling estate paperwork, probate, or closing down bank accounts. These often need to be done during business hours.
- ☐ Do they want regular manager check-ins over the first month.
- ☐ Remind them of available supportive resources. Give them a printed list.

PHASE 2: Preparing to come back to work

CULTIVATE *manager and the team*

- ☐ Ask the colleagues who were overseeing projects or tasks to write a summary of what was done while the employee was away and provide it to the manager to pull into a document.
- ☐ Encourage colleagues to meet with the employee and give them a verbal update and answer any questions.
- ☐ If the employee named topics they would rather not be asked about, make sure the team knows.
- ☐ Share the return date and only what the employee approved, including whether they want it acknowledged.
- ☐ Tell the team that task-sharing continues through the first month, and that the employee will take pieces back slowly over time based on their plan that was created with the manager.
- ☐ Give the team some ideas for what to say on the first day.

SAY: *It is good to see you. I have been thinking about you.*

OR: *No need to talk about anything at all. I just wanted to say I am glad you are back. I can make time today if you want to catch up.*

PHASE 3: Return to work

CONNECT *manager to employee, first thing on day one*

- ☐ **Step 1. Be there at the start of the day, and ask about them before anything about work.**

***SAY:** I am really glad you are back. Before we get into anything at all, how are you holding up this morning?*

Remember that getting through the door is often the hardest part of the first day, and their answer tells you how much to ask of them.

- ☐ **Step 2. Say out loud that today does not have to go well. Say this again even though you agreed to it on the phone. Permission given on a call rarely feels real once someone is back in the building.**

***SAY:** Nothing has to feel normal today. If you need to step out of anything at any point, you can, and you do not need to give a reason.*

PHASE 3: Return to work

COLLABORATE *the first hour or so back, in person*

☐ **Step 3. Use the time you booked to build the plan together.**

SAY: *Let us use this hour or so to put your plan together. Nothing we decide on today is set in stone, and we can amend it along the way.*

PERSONAL NEEDS *confirm what may have changed since the call*

- ☐ Confirm if they want their return acknowledged by the group or individually.
- ☐ Confirm any topics they would rather not be asked about, and if that has changed.
- ☐ Remind them of the private spaces, where they can go for a break.
- ☐ Remind them of resources available to them.

PROFESSIONAL NEEDS *the work plan*

- ☐ Give them a verbal and written update on their caseload, that took place while they were away.
- ☐ Encourage them to meet with colleagues who covered their caseload to ask questions and get more information.
- ☐ Stagger taking back tasks across this week and next, agree together and write it down.
- ☐ One or two priorities that genuinely matter, and what can wait.
- ☐ System access, calendar, and communication channels turned back on.
- ☐ Let them know they step out of a meeting or take a moment on a hard day.

SAY: *If something hits you during the day, you can step out of anything without explaining yourself. I will cover it.*

- ☐ Remind them about blocking their calendar to attend to some personal matters during work hours, such as estate paperwork, probate, or closing down bank accounts. Carve these in as busy.
- ☐ Agree on how often they want check-ins from you, and book them now.
- ☐ Agree on an end-of-week check-in, book it now.

SAY: *What was hardest this week, and what should we change for next week?*

THEN: Adjust the plan with them.

PHASE 3: Return to work

CULTIVATE *manager and the team*

- ☐ Remind the team about how the employee would like to be greeted and approached based on your conversation with them.
- ☐ Ask colleagues who were covering the employee's tasks to make some time to share with them any important updates.
- ☐ Remind the team to stay human-centered first. First check in, then move to tasks.

SAY: *I'm glad you're back. I've been thinking about you. How are you managing right now?*

OR: *Before we do work things, can we just touch based on how you're doing first?*

- ☐ Gently remind the team that their colleague may be forgetful, easily overwhelmed, and tearful for several weeks to months. This is all normal. Practice patience and gentle reminding especially within their first weeks back.
- ☐ Encourage the team to come to the manager if they need more support or guidance.

PHASE 4: Long-term follow-up, to the first anniversary

BEFORE YOU START PHASE 1 SET THESE REMINDERS NOW, USING WHAT YOU RECORDED IN PHASE 1.

- ☐ Do you have calendared check-ins at month one, month three, and month six.
- ☐ Have calendared in the first anniversary of the death?
- ☐ The birthday of the person who died, only if the employee told you the date.
- ☐ The first holiday reminder (it is always a good idea to mention that this holiday season could be hard on people who may be heading into this season with someone missing).

CONNECT *manager to employee, spread across the year*

- ☐ **Step 1. Open every check-in with the person rather than the work.**

SAY: I wanted to check in, and not about work. How have things been for you these past few weeks or months?

THEN: Pause, then listen. Check-ins should always feel relational and then helpful operationally at the end.

- ☐ **Step 2. Acknowledge the dates as they arrive.**

SAY: I know this week would have been [name or relation]'s birthday. I have been thinking about you and your family.

THEN: Only send this for dates they gave you. Do not go looking for them. Don't worry; you don't have to go on remembering important dates year after year, but it is so important, if you can, to do it in the first year.

- ☐ **Step 3. At one year, mark it properly rather than letting it pass.**

SAY: I know what this week is. I know a year doesn't mean that the grief is gone. Grief has no finish line. I am still here.

- ☐ Offer the day off in advance rather than waiting to be asked. Send a card or a personal note.
- ☐ Share resources on getting through a first anniversary. This is best done two weeks prior to the actual anniversary date. Here is a blog you can share:
helptexts.com/blog/how-to-get-through-your-first-death-anniversary/

PHASE 4: Long-term follow-up, to the first anniversary

COLLABORATE *manager and employee together, three check-ins across the year*

☐ **Step 4. Month one.** *They are back at full workload. Find out whether that is manageable.*

SAY: *Let's first do a grief check-in. What has been hard for you lately?*

THEN: You are carrying your full caseload again now. Is that feeling manageable? If it isn't, can we come up with some ideas together on what might feel supportive to you between now and our next check-in?

- ☐ Determine whether the workload is genuinely manageable, or restored on paper only.
- ☐ Any tasks still being shared that should come back to them, or should stay shared.
- ☐ Whether check-ins should stay at this frequency or move to quarterly.

☐ **Step 5. Month three.**

Outside support has fallen away, and grief often deepens here. Expect more strain, not less.

SAY: *Around three months is usually when family and friends start checking in less, and grief often gets harder rather than easier during this time. I want to check in on your grief and on whether or not you feel like you have enough support around you.*

- ☐ Absenteeism, presenteeism, and decreased productivity. Name it as grief rather than as performance.
- ☐ Flexibility re-offered rather than waiting for them to ask.

☐ **Step 6. Month six.** *The plan is old now. Rebuild it rather than reviewing it.*

SAY: *We built this plan six months ago. What is working for you now, and is there anything we should change?*

- ☐ A full workload review.
- ☐ If performance has declined, open it as a support conversation and say so plainly.

SAY: *I have noticed the last few weeks have looked harder. This is not a performance conversation. What would help?*

- ☐ Remind them of the resources that they have available to them.

Note: grieving employees need to be reminded many times throughout the year about what resources are available to them.

PHASE 4: Long-term follow-up, to the first anniversary

CULTIVATE *manager and the team*

- ☐ Remind the team that the first holidays without the person are often hard.
- ☐ Let the team know the anniversary is coming, if the employee agreed to that.
- ☐ Remind the team that absenteeism, presenteeism, and decreased productivity happen in grief, especially in the first year after a significant loss, and encourage the team to extend grace and kindness.
- ☐ Keep the employee included in the same work and the same social things they were part of before.
- ☐ Give your team examples of what they can say on the one year anniversary.

SAY:

Just want to let you know that I am thinking about you today. I know [NAME] is missed everyday and a little extra on today.

OR:

It's hard to image that it has been one year since [Name] died/passed. I'd love to see a photo or hear a memory about it, if you're up for that.

The checklist ends here. Grief doesn't. This guide is courtesy of Help Texts.

Help Texts is a text-based mental health and grief solution that provides personalized, expert support for employees, especially during the life events and challenges that traditional benefits often miss. Support is delivered directly by text, with no app, appointments, or waitlist required.

Designed to complement existing EAP, behavioral health, employee assistance, and wellbeing benefits, Help Texts extends support beyond the traditional point of care and makes it easy for people to access personalized guidance when and where they need it.

Core areas of support include:

- Grief & bereavement
- Mental health & emotional wellbeing
- Caregiver support & caregiver stress
- Healthcare worker wellbeing, burnout & compassion fatigue
- Pregnancy loss & reproductive grief
- Pet loss
- Stress, loneliness, anxiety, depression, thoughts of suicide, divorce, menopause, and other life transitions

Contact us to learn more: helptexts.com or email us at: info@helptexts.com