

# The Bereaved Employee: Returning to Work

By Helen Fitzgerald, CT

After a death in the family, the time comes when grieving family members begin to re-enter the routines of everyday life. Out-of-town relatives return home. Children go back to school and grieving adults must get back to work. For some, returning to work is a welcome change. It is a part of their life that did not include their loved one, and it can create a break from what has been an ever-present grief. The office may be the only part of life that seems normal and routine.

But for many who have experienced a recent loss, returning to work can be difficult. If you are grieving, you may be dreading the thought of returning to the business world for several reasons:

- Seeing co-workers for the first time exposes you to “I’m so sorry” comments, and they remind you of your loss. As difficult as these expressions of sympathy may be to hear, they are better than no acknowledgement at all. A simple “thank you” is all the response that is necessary. You do not owe anyone a story you do not wish to share.
- You may have a high-pressure job with many deadlines and little room for mistakes. You have probably noticed that it is hard to concentrate and retain information in your grief. You may be easily distracted, and errors can occur. It is useful to check everything twice, or ask a co-worker or supervisor to review what you have done. Let your co-workers or supervisor know how difficult things seem at this time and where you need their help.
- You may worry about breaking down in front of colleagues or in the middle of an important meeting. This can happen, but save yourself embarrassment by briefly letting people know what has occurred in your life. If you need to excuse yourself, do so.

## **Before returning to work, try some of the following suggestions:**

- Be sure your office knows what happened. Give them as much information as you are comfortable sharing. Sometimes the circumstances around a death are very personal; if people ask too many questions, let them know you are not comfortable going into that right now. Allow one key person to have enough information to keep speculation at a minimum. Keep him or her informed about funeral arrangements, time away from work, and how you are doing.
- Let your office know you want to be included in regular e-mail correspondence so you can be kept updated on what is happening at the office.
- You might arrange to go into the office to meet co-workers for lunch, getting past the first encounters and “I’m so sorry” comments. It can make it easier to go back to work at a later date.
- Consider returning for half-days for a week or so, easing your way back into the normal routine.
- Ask a grief therapist — or ask your employer to arrange for one — to meet with co-workers, especially if the death was sudden or traumatic. An example: One employer

called a grief therapist to help employees after a co-worker reported the death of her child. These co-workers had some good questions: “What do we do with the pictures of our kids that are on our desks? Should we put them away because it is going to be so hard on her?” The answer: “It will be hard for her to see the pictures. But she must deal with it at some time, and it is better she do it with people like you who care for her. It may be worse if you put all the pictures away. She’d surely notice, and know it is because of her. Expect her to keep the picture of her dead child on her desk, and it is okay to comment on it.”

- Encourage your co-workers to learn more about grief so they can better understand what you are going through. Let them know what is helpful to you when you are having a particular hard day: giving you a hug, allowing you to have some alone time, fixing a cup of coffee, or going for a short walk. The more they know what they can do for you, the more comfortable they will be with your tears-and the more comfortable you will be in their presence.
- Keep good communication going. Set up regular meetings with your supervisor, colleagues or employees to talk about what is happening. Ask for feedback. Good, clear communication will discourage idle and unhelpful chatter.
- It is important to tell your story. But be careful not to share your feelings too much or too often. If you notice people getting bored, looking at their watch, or changing the subject, you may be overdoing it. Ask a trusted co-worker if you are talking too much. However, the need to talk to help yourself heal is very real; setting up an appointment with your company’s EAP (Employee Assistance Professional), contacting your local hospice, or joining a support group can give you an appropriate place where you can say what you need to say.
- You may need help with certain projects or deadlines. Don’t forget to thank those who help you. Small rewards are often appreciated, such as coffee break snacks, flowers, public thanks at a meeting, or an appreciative e-mail.

Thinking ahead will make your return to work easier and less painful. Healing from the death of a loved one is a long, slow process, but getting back into a routine is an important step in the journey.