

Death and Grief in the workplace: Guidance for Members

While caring roles are incredibly rewarding and make a huge difference in the life of residents and their families, no one can doubt how difficult these roles can be, especially in the midst of this pandemic.

UNISON members have told us that one difficulty being faced by many who work in care homes is the death of residents. We know that many of our members are having to face multiple deaths in short periods of time and, due to the lockdown measures, they are often the only person with these residents in their final moments. Added to this, they may then be facing the emotional challenges of informing families of their loved one's death.

Care work is already stressful and emotionally taxing and these new working practices resulting from Covid-19 are putting untold strain on many of our members.

UNISON recognises these difficulties and wants our members to know there is support available. We have put together some guidelines to help support you with these experiences surrounding death and grief and signpost to other organisations and support that is available.

Communication

Don't be afraid to reach out to those around you. Not only could they be a great source of comfort to you, but you may also find that they are struggling too, and you may find you are able to help each other. For those isolated from others in work, still reach out in any way you can, either by phone or the internet. If you feel unable to talk a text or an email is perfectly acceptable: what matters most is getting the support, not who it is from or how you do it.

Don't be put off if people are around you are quiet. It may be that they are unsure of how to approach you, feeling helpless in the face of your pain, or worried that they may upset you. Most people would welcome contact from you and an understanding of how best they can help.

Even though it does not change what has happened, talking about it is often a great therapy as it allows you to work through what you are feeling or verbalise thoughts that may otherwise stay stuck in your mind.

Cruse Bereavement Care has a helpline you can call: 0808 808 1677.

At a Loss also has access to bereavement counsellors on their Griefchat which can be accessed here: <https://www.ataloss.org/live-chat> .

Everybody needs support and this can come from a variety of sources and in a variety of ways. Find what works best for you.

Accept your feelings

First of all, there is no right way of feeling or correct way of dealing with an event, and when experiencing grief we can be wracked by a multitude of emotions, all of which are normal. You may feel anger, depression, denial, sadness, emptiness, helplessness, guilt or a number of other things.

Recognise how you feel and let yourself explore it. You may also find that your emotions are constantly changing and may even move back and forth. This too is normal

There may even be times when you feel happy, laugh or find yourself smiling. This is not disrespectful, nor is it abnormal. Give yourself permission to find moments of happiness. Try to embrace these feelings, and even seek them out by trying to remember good memories or identifying things you did that made those that have died happy. You may even wish to share these good memories and warm feelings with others; those around you may need them as much or even more than you.

According to Cruse Bereavement Care, 'It is very common to see, hear or feel the presence of someone who has died, so don't feel worried if this happens. This can be more common in the case of traumatic bereavement, and if someone is isolated in a location where they saw the person die, or where they are constantly reminded of their illness.'ⁱ

Remember, there are no rules and everything you are feeling is normal and valid, but if you are struggling to cope with the way you are feeling or finding it overwhelming reach out and seek support.

Look after yourself

Sometimes it is the last thing on our minds, but it is important we look after ourselves, especially when we are grieving.

- Eat well: a good diet can have mood boosting properties and provide us with the energy we need to deal with our grief, which can be exhausting.
- Rest up, take time to recuperate, relax and unwind. Our bodies and our emotions are on a rollercoaster and they need time to switch off. Dealing with grief is like recovering from an illness: it takes time and energy.
- Exercise, get moving, get your endorphins flowing. Ultimately it doesn't matter how you do this: anything is better than nothing and something as simple as a walk could do you wonders.
- Fresh air and sunlight are medicine for the soul and a little each day is strongly recommended. If you can't get out for a walk, perhaps sit in the garden if you have access to one, or open a window.
- Treat yourself. Whilst getting out and about is currently difficult and certain pleasures are not easily come by during this pandemic, there are ways you can treat yourself in work or at home. Allow yourself to eat meals or treats you enjoy and help keep your appetite up, buy something (within your means) that you like or have been wanting, or take time to enjoy a hobby you have or even watch a tv show or film you enjoy. This is not selfish and you shouldn't feel bad doing it.
- Protect yourself from further trauma: limiting your exposure to the news (considering the current climate) or even avoiding it altogether for a period may help you to do this. Avoiding heavy drinking is also advisable. Whilst you may feel that having a few drinks helps to numb your feelings, the 'depressant' effect in alcohol can magnify any distress when the buzz has worn off.

If you are finding the above difficult, you could ask someone to prompt or encourage you with this. Sometimes looking after ourselves is the furthest thing from our minds but ultimately the most important. Making it part of your daily routine can also make this easier.

Routine, routine, routine

It is important to try to stick to your daily routine, where possible. This might include getting up and going to bed at regular time, sitting down to meals in the usual way or at the usual times and continuing with daily rituals you may have such as exercise, meditation or regular catch up with co-workers.

Not only is it possible that the structure will help you get through each day but it will also make life easier when it feels like everything may be collapsing around us. A routine allows us a certain amount of 'muscle memory' rather than the active thinking that can be difficult.

If and when you find you have the energy to complete your usual chores and make order in your work and home space, an orderly physical environment may help during times of emotional turmoil.

Accept practical help

Despite what has been said above about keeping to your usual routine, don't be surprised if there are times when your body needs more rest or you lack energy to complete normal everyday tasks. Some days you will have more energy than others and this is perfectly normal. In these moments, don't be afraid to accept or even ask for help, especially with practical chores. At home you could allow those you live with to cook for you or do your shopping, even if you are isolated a friend or neighbour could drop shopping or a meal to your door or collect medication from the pharmacy.

At work your co-workers might be able to help with some of your routine responsibilities, bring you lunch or speak to others around you on your behalf.

Whilst it is a good idea to stick to a daily routine, the world won't stop if you leaving your washing for a day or two or you don't go to the supermarket for a few weeks.

Sources of information for this guidance and places you may find further help

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/coronavirus/grieving-and-isolation>

<https://www.ataloss.org/>

<https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/workplace-grief-loss-coping-with-death-of-coworker-0503185>

<https://www.thegoodgrieftrust.org/professional-advise/>

<https://www.thegoodgrieftrust.org/need-know-info/coronavirus-bereavement-advice/>

ⁱ <https://www.cruse.org.uk/coronavirus/grieving-and-isolation>