

Mental Health Awareness Week #KindnessMatters

Supporting colleagues following a bereavement or illness of a loved one

The latest in our support articles this Mental Health Awareness week focuses on supporting colleagues following a bereavement or illness of a loved one.

The unpredictability of life means we can never be sure how soon or how often we will face the challenge of a major life event such as bereavement or the illness of a loved one, particularly in the current COVID-19 situation.

Reactions may vary enormously and there is no right or wrong way to respond and no set time scales. Individuals, families and work colleagues can react and be affected in many ways. Even when individuals feel they are adjusting to the loss of someone they care for they will experience moments of setback.

Some of the feelings and reactions may include anger, denial, depression, lack of confidence, fear, guilt, shock, and despair. We should all offer the time and understanding that is needed. Employees should always receive a professional and sensitive approach, having regards to cultural diversity and any special needs that may become apparent.

What can I do as a manager?

Acknowledge a person's grief - A simple "I am sorry for your loss" will make them aware that you empathise with their loss. Do not let your own discomfort prevent you from acknowledging their loss. Ensure your voice tone conveys you genuinely are empathetic.

Encourage talking - It may be helpful to talk through feelings and memories. If a person does not feel like talking, that is ok too, but it is important that they do not become too isolated.

Ask the person what they would like their colleagues to be told. This may be particularly helpful if a death or illness was sudden, traumatic or that of a child. Colleagues may be concerned about what to say, you can help ease this if you have talked to the person and are aware of their wishes.

Keep in contact if the employee remains absent from work - when it's appropriate, talk to them about their return to work to ease the way. Once back into work continue to offer support and structure by having regular progress checks.

Where possible, offer some flexibility around their working hours - A change of shift or reduced hours for a period may help. Remember there will be many practical matters to attend to, together with physical and emotional adjustments, which are further complicated by the COVID-19 situation.

Be aware and be prepared to expect a less than best performance - the intensity and impact of a traumatic life event may reduce over time and your patience will help improve an individual's confidence. Worries can lead to concentration problems and this in turn can make us more accident-prone so remind the individual to take things slowly.

Financial pressures – appreciate the practical and financial consequences at this time. These can include accommodation issues, childcare and support difficulties, financial pressures and legal issues (see below).

Access support - ensure individuals are aware of the First Class Support helpline (details below) and know how to use it. Likewise use the helpline to support yourself and your team. Individuals may also like to speak to their GP if the distress is becoming overwhelming.

Help is available

First Class Support: 0800 6888 777 or www.rmgfirstclasssupport.co.uk. Professional support for Employees, colleagues or managers themselves. Fully confidential and available 24/7.

Condition specific **health guidance notes** on PSP and the [Health and Wellbeing Intranet Pages](#) to help with understanding of specific health conditions. Also see www.nhs.uk/conditions.

Rowland Hill Fund: 0345 600 4586 www.rowlandhillfund.org offering financial aid to colleagues, pensioners and their families in times of need.

Stepchange: Offering expert, tailored advice and practical solutions to problem debt, contact the UK's leading debt charity on **0800 138 1111** or visit www.stepchange.org.

The Royal Mail Group [Death in Service Guide](#) details what a manager needs to do follow the death in service of a colleague and how they can support themselves and others.