

Respecting and supporting grief at work

How employers can better support their
staff through personal loss



Foreword by Matthew Reed

We will all experience bereavement at some point in our lives. It's part of the deepest and most profound parts of the varied fabric of human experience. Because of this, there can be a sense that it's best let be – swept under the rug – and that it's something to quietly get over on our own.

But for people who've been bereaved, grief can have a truly profound impact on every aspect of their lives – whether they're at home or at work.

The emotional fallout of a bereavement doesn't respect our personal and professional boundaries at the best of times. But for many of us, the distinction between these aspects of life has become even more clouded throughout the pandemic.

At the same time, many more of us have had to face the agony of losing loved ones unexpectedly, grieve at physical and emotional distance from loved ones and come to terms with missing out on saying our final goodbyes.

As this report highlights, these experiences have affected our workforce very deeply. And while some employers are doing good things to support the people they employ through grief, others need to do much more.



Katie Hyams/Marie Curie

Too many people are struggling to be taken seriously when dealing with grief. They're unable to get the time off they need, or they suffer in silence without the acknowledgement and support of those around them. Not only does this impact their ability to process their grief, but it has an impact on their work too.

However, there are clear and manageable ways forward for those employers who are ready to implement better bereavement support. I hope the insights and guidance in this report will prompt more employers to see how making small, thoughtful changes can make a world of difference to someone who's grieving.

Matthew Reed,
Chief Executive, Marie Curie

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Introduction

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic continues to present UK employers with unprecedented challenges.

As we emerge from the crisis, many organisations are having to focus on recovery from the financial impact while simultaneously learning how to adapt to changes in the way we work.

The pressures experienced by employees, particularly in relation to furlough, working from home and the impact on their wellbeing, have been widely discussed in our media and the workplace. In a bid to support their staff, many employers have been prompted to transform working practices relating to health, safety and wellbeing on a scale not seen before¹.

Frequent news coverage on UK death rates due to Covid-19 and other illnesses has undoubtedly shone a light on our own mortality. Yet, what has been much less evident is the employer's response to death and bereavement – something that is, for many people, a devastating experience.

It is estimated that, at any time, around one in ten UK workers are affected by a bereavement². This number is likely to have increased significantly during the pandemic – recent research suggests as many as 24% of employees are bereaved in any one year³.

At the time of writing, the UK has suffered 947,655 deaths during the pandemic period⁴. For the foreseeable future, coping with bereavement and grief is likely to be a painful reality for many more employees than it has been in the past.

In 2021, Marie Curie conducted extensive research into bereavement in the workplace. We explored current employer policies and practices relating to the support of employees who have been bereaved and sought feedback from employees who'd lost a loved one or colleague.

We found that many organisations are compassionate. They allow staff time to begin the grieving process without feeling pressured to return to work too soon or leaving them without an income while they're off.

But this isn't universal, and our research exposed a severely uneven playing field. Many employees who have been bereaved are left without any entitlement to time off or the emotional and financial support they need. This can result in them returning to work before they're ready – something that can be very damaging for their wellbeing and mental health.

And, even among compassionate organisations, we found that, in contrast to other areas of wellbeing, bereavement and grief had a very low profile in their wellbeing plans – often reduced to time off and referral to external Employee Assistance Programmes.

When a bereavement happens, it can affect someone's whole life. It doesn't stop when they come to work. We're calling on all employers to review their policies and practices to improve the support they offer to their employees. If the right support is there, it can make the world of difference at a devastating time.

This report highlights some of the key findings from the latest bereavement at work research. It also includes practical points of consideration for employers.

About this research

We conducted extensive research into bereavement in the workplace. This included a review of existing studies and new Marie Curie research conducted during lockdown. Marie Curie engaged with 21 employers from a range of sectors, with 60 to 23,000 employees per organisation. We surveyed 400+ HR professionals and 1,000 employees who'd been bereaved in the previous 12 months. We've also referenced recent testimonies of employees who have been bereaved.

Our thanks go to all those who gave their valuable time and shared their insights and personal experiences with us.



The impact of bereavement on employees' health and wellbeing

While bereavement is an individual experience that will impact different people in different ways, it can have a profound effect on an employee's health and wellbeing.

The experience of grief can be immediate, happen unexpectedly or occur after a long period of time. It can also be triggered at different times and in different ways, sometimes after many years have passed.

Common grief reactions following the death of a loved one include anxiety, symptoms of depression, and a general deterioration in psychological wellbeing.

Many people suffer physical health complaints as well, including breathing difficulties, muscular pain, nausea and panic attacks. Sleep loss, fatigue and reduced energy levels are also common. In the worst cases, bereavement is even linked to increased risk of mortality^{5,6,7,8}.

Grief may contribute to employees under-performing, being unable to focus or handle certain situations when they're under pressure. Miscommunication and lack of understanding of grief can put a strain on working relationships, especially if the person who has been bereaved becomes withdrawn, or well-intentioned colleagues say the wrong thing (or worse, say nothing at all).

The impact of bereavement may be driven by varying factors across different age groups. Research on widowhood suggests that the death of a spouse among younger

people is associated with greater physical and psychological decline than among older widows and widowers. It can have a more disruptive impact because younger people may be less prepared to cope with the death of their partner than those who are older⁸.

Conversely, with more and more people working into later life, bereavement may have a significant impact on older people because of other concurrent "losses" – including declining social connections and their own failing health⁶.

No matter what an employee's circumstances, support from their employer will not bring their loved one back or entirely inoculate them from all of the damaging effects described here.

Yet, giving an employee the time, space and support to come to terms with their loss, carry out the practical tasks that follow a death, and care for loved ones, can make a significant difference to their grief experience – both immediately after the death and in the long term.

"Special paid leave allowed me to complete the endless practicalities that surrounded the deaths and the actions to start closing down my loved ones' estates, without worrying about getting time off or loss of earnings, particularly when funerals are incredibly costly. To know that I had access to paid time off for a bereavement was a weight lifted off my shoulders."

– Julia*

*Coalition for Bereaved Workers [2021]. Statutory bereavement leave and pay in Northern Ireland: A call to action

The prevalence of bereavement and its impact at work

In the UK, despite the progressive vaccination programme, 947,655 people have died during the pandemic period⁴. Furthermore, hundreds of thousands of excess deaths have been recorded across the globe.

All in all, we estimate that eight-and-a-half million* people in the UK have been impacted by a bereavement during this time – the equivalent of roughly one in every eight people in the UK population⁹. Pre-pandemic, around one in ten UK workers were affected by a bereavement. This number is likely to have increased significantly since March 2020. Research conducted in September 2020 suggests, in the previous 12 months, as many as 24% per of the working population were bereaved – equating to 7.9 million employees¹⁰.

Lockdown restrictions have had a devastating impact on the bereaved, preventing many from spending time with dying loved ones or attending their funerals. Our research found that the majority of people affected have “not had a chance to fully process” loss as they normally would, due to the pandemic (56%)¹¹.

Productivity and retention

Grieving employees may be unable to work at their normal levels of productivity while they deal with the mental, physical, and financial impacts of a bereavement.

Marie Curie found that 58% of employees felt their performance was still affected by their grief months after the death of a loved one. And it is estimated that “presenteeism” (being at work but unable to function effectively) of employees at work following a bereavement costs the UK economy £16 billion per year³.

Furthermore, it’s estimated that nearly two million people in employment suffer intense grief per year – alongside those grieving from prior years. Intense grief impairs an employee’s ability to work and puts individuals at risk of related physical and mental health conditions. On average, employees with intense grief typically take 22 days off within the first six months after a bereavement – the equivalent of a full-time working month³.

In the first six months following a bereavement, it’s estimated that productivity is 70% of capacity and 95% in the second six months.

*Based on an average of nine people impacted by every death.

It is estimated that, of the nearly two million people experiencing intense grief while in employment, around 95,000 people (5%) will leave their jobs after six months and not work for the remainder of the year³.

More than half (56%) of employees would consider leaving their employer if treated badly following a bereavement. This is likely to cost an employer between £20,000 and £40,000 to fill the vacancy¹². This figure does not include additional costs resulting from the loss of expertise and knowledge, and the potential negative impact on morale of colleagues who may have witnessed the poor treatment.

A supportive work culture contributes to a faster return to work. Flexibility in working can help employees to remain committed to their work and sustain higher morale, which in turn can increase productivity in the workplace^{13, 14}.

Key business benefits

The Sonnet Report (2020) commissioned by Marie Curie called out the employer as “one of the most significant stakeholders in terminal care, or bereavement”¹⁵. They cited several key business benefits, and

consequently reasons why employers should want to give bereavement a higher profile:

- **Reduced absenteeism and presenteeism**
- **Reduced staff turnover** and resulting cost regarding retraining, and loss of institutional knowledge
- **Positive effect on other staff** through embedding a culture of mutual support and care for each other, which spills over into their wellbeing, their engagement with the employer, and their ability to interact sensitively with the public
- **Improved recruitment** and employer brand as a caring employer
- **Increasing focus and importance among investors on Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG)** – the extent of an organisation's achievements in terms of its environmental impact, social impact and good and open governance.



The low profile of bereavement in the workplace

We interviewed a wide range of employers to explore the impact of employee bereavement on their organisations. We discussed how prevalent they thought bereavement was and whether it impacted on the organisation's performance.

For the vast majority of employers, bereavement was considered to have little or no effect on how they ran their businesses, notwithstanding short-term adjustments to cover work if an employee was absent or had died in service.

Regarding the impact of Covid-19, few employers we spoke to in December 2020 and January 2021 had been impacted by deaths from the virus, albeit some reported that a few employees had been ill and/or had relatives who had died.

When invited to estimate how many employees experienced bereavement in any one year, the response was typically “a handful” – an interesting contrast to the actual estimates referenced in this report.

All organisations interviewed had systems to record reasons for absenteeism, however the accurate tracking of time off due to bereavement was variable:

- While some companies recorded the absence as “bereavement leave”, others captured it under “compassionate leave” meaning that it would not be distinguishable from time taken off work for family emergencies or caring responsibilities.

- Absenteeism due to bereavement was only recorded immediately after the death of a loved one – i.e. when bereavement leave is taken. Any time off beyond that was recorded as “unpaid”, “holiday” or “sickness absence”.
- Analysis of bereavement leave data was also variable. Interviewees often commented that, while they collected the data, they didn't review it. A handful captured bereavement data on an HR dashboard, but commented that there wasn't a significant trend in bereavement absenteeism, so no action was needed.

Current practices for recording bereavement absence makes it very hard, if not impossible, for organisations to establish the prevalence of grief among their employees and any impact that may have on wellbeing and productivity.

Because dying and death is viewed as something that affects “a handful” of employees, it is seen as an important, albeit discrete, concern relative to other people-related issues.

We recommend that employers do more to capture data on their employees' experience of bereavement – not only in relation to time off, but also whether employees feel supported. These insights can inform their policy and practices to support staff during a very difficult time.

Bereavement policy and practice

Our research explored how bereavement support features in people plans, policy and current practice at work.

There were very few examples of dying, death and bereavement in the HR strategies and people plans of the organisations we spoke to.

Instead, all those interviewed had information relating to bereavement support included in their HR policies.

Just one in three employers had a dedicated bereavement policy, while the rest included information within other policies or their staff handbook. This finding is not dissimilar to other research. McGuinness's (2009) review of bereavement practices across 34 Irish employers found that most (88%) did not have standalone bereavement policies or guidelines for staff and line managers on procedures and best practice.

In our research, most bereavement policies tended to focus mainly on time-off entitlements in the period immediately after the death – with a minority referencing sources of bereavement support.

Bereavement leave allowance ranged from three days to up to two weeks – the most common was five days. Sue Ryder's research¹¹ found UK organisations typically offer between three and five days for the loss of a close relative^{***}.

It found that 62% of those surveyed believed that paid leave following the death of a parent, partner, sibling or child should be at least a week, with 42% believing it should be two weeks or more.

In many cases, there was a sliding scale of entitlement according to the closeness of the relationship between the employee and the deceased.

In all cases, bereavement leave entitlement was paid even though it is not a statutory requirement^{**}. The payment of additional time varied and depended on whether the time was taken as sickness, holiday, time off in lieu or unpaid leave.



^{***}Excludes the statutory requirement for two weeks' paid leave for bereaved parents of children under 18, which applies in all UK home nations except Northern Ireland.

Policies were not always stuck to rigidly – several interviewees commented, “in practice we ignore the policy”. The preference instead was for line managers or HR to be compassionate and use their discretion, enabling employees to have the time off they needed.

While compassion and flexibility are very much welcomed by Marie Curie, our findings suggest that many employers would benefit from updating their policy so that it reflects what happens in practice. This would also help to avoid the potentially damaging consequences for employees who have been bereaved and whose line managers conscientiously stick to the policy as written.

While the organisations we spoke to recognised that they could further improve their bereavement support, they are representative of many compassionate employers who are sincere in wanting to do the right thing by their staff.

There is significant scope for improvement in practice among many employers.

Compelling evidence from Marie Curie and others highlights problems stemming from the absence of clear, accessible policies and support. We found that one in four employees couldn't access a bereavement policy and almost one-third weren't clear about how much time off they were entitled to. Over half (54%) worried that taking time off would affect their job security and 43% felt pressured to return to work before they were ready.

Lower income groups

Nearly one in five employees in our survey did not receive any paid bereavement leave that was separate from their annual leave entitlement. While policies vary, many employers allow employees the option to take unpaid leave or annual leave (which, it's worth noting, is a different type of leave intended for rest and recuperation, rather than sickness or bereavement).

Employees who have been bereaved and have to take unpaid leave are presented with the additional challenge due to the drop in income at a time when extra funds to cover funeral costs, etc, may be required. Financial pressures relating to the bereavement can lead to employees returning to work prematurely. Almost half (49%) of employees reported that they couldn't afford to stay off work and had to return to work before they were ready¹⁶.

Employees on low incomes are not only less likely to recoup these financial losses. They're also at greater risk of being dismissed by their employer due to performance issues or absence¹⁷.

Sadly, lower income groups are also at a higher risk of experiencing complicated or persistent grief. Research suggests this is likely to be a result of a combination of financial pressures and difficulty in accessing time off and the information and support they need to help them process their grief¹⁸.

"My [relative] died on a Sunday, I was back in work on Wednesday morning. I couldn't afford to stay off work and wasn't paid for the two days I had to take off. It absolutely affected my ability to grieve. I was completely bereft, exhausted, and shell shocked. Having to worry about money at such a harrowing time is a very real issue. You have no time to grieve. Putting workers in that unpaid position is simply cruel."

– Lucy*

In Northern Ireland, Marie Curie's Policy & Public Affairs team is leading a coalition of charities and trade unions to campaign for the extension of statutory bereavement leave and pay to everyone bereaved of a close relative of partner.¹⁹

At Marie Curie, we encourage all employers to have a dedicated bereavement policy which is easily accessible and clearly sets out the support that's available to staff.

*Coalition for Bereaved Workers [2021]. Statutory bereavement leave and pay in Northern Ireland: A call to action



Typical bereavement support from employers

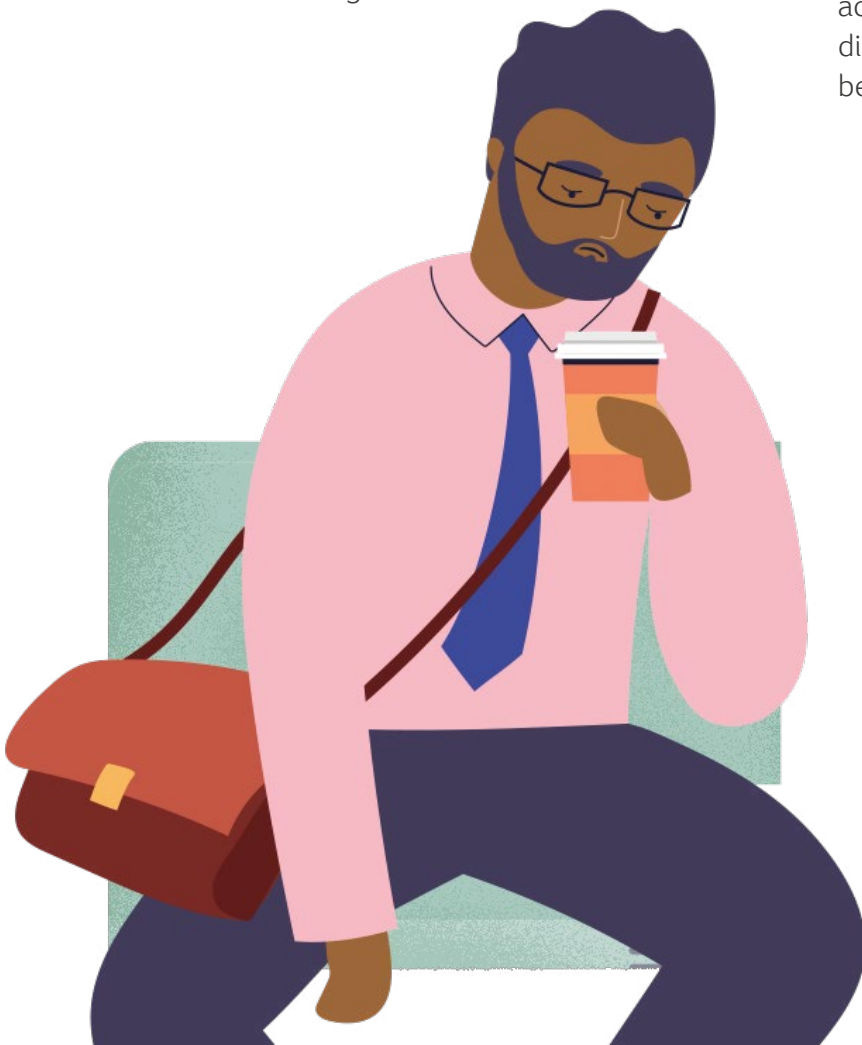
Many employers have been prompted to transform their working practices relating to health, safety and wellbeing on a scale not seen before¹. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development observed that “most organisations take some action to promote employee wellbeing, but there remains considerable variation in how strategic and proactive they are”.

This resonates with our research. While the pandemic created considerable pressures on businesses, most employers told us they had increased the promotion of existing support, added enhancements where they could, or used the pandemic as a catalyst to kickstart their wellbeing plans – particularly in relation to mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Organisation size, turnover and resources can often determine the sophistication of people practices, but not always. One of the smaller businesses we spoke to had won an industry award for its comprehensive wellbeing strategy, which included bereavement.

When discussing bereavement support in particular, there were very few examples of employers incorporating bereavement into their wellbeing plans. And, where they did, the focus tended to be for those who had been bereaved rather than those who were anticipating a bereavement due to a terminal illness.

This is consistent with a literature review by the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health²⁰ which found that there's little acknowledgement among employers of the difficulties faced by employees dealing with bereavement and grief.



Employee Assistance Programmes and other forms of bereavement support

From our discussions with employers, we found that time off and referral to an Employee Assistance Programme was by far the most common form of support. One interviewee candidly admitted, “we effectively outsource support to a third party”.

Feedback was mixed regarding the effectiveness of Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP). Many commented that usage was low and limited access to data meant they relied on anecdotal feedback rather than systematic monitoring of the service. Several commented, “as far as we know it’s good”.

Some speculated that low take-up might be down to employees not trusting that services commissioned by the employer would be 100% confidential.

We’re not suggesting that EAPs are unhelpful. There were some very positive examples of EAPs adding significant value, where the offer was integrated within general practice and well publicised to staff.

Examples of other bereavement support from the employers we interviewed included:

- **Intranet information**
- **Links to charities offering bereavement support (including Marie Curie)**
- **Referral to wellbeing leads or Mental Health First Aiders**

- **Bereavement networks for staff**
- **Buddying for line managers where a team member has died**
- **Participation in Marie Curie’s National Day of Reflection.**

There were few examples of training for line managers beyond providing written guidance. Line managers who needed help were encouraged to refer to their EAP provider and/or HR.

Our 2021 survey of employees who have been bereaved highlighted that over a third (35%) of employers did not provide guidance on bereavement. Line managers from those organisations said that they would welcome help on how to support employees who have been bereaved (31%) and their team when a colleague dies (38%).

The support needed predominantly relates to what to say to employees who have been bereaved as well as what to do when someone dies. Nearly one-third (29%) of employees we surveyed felt that colleagues in their organisation were not comfortable talking about death and dying.

Sadly, 29% also reported that they too were not confident in knowing what to say even though they had also recently experienced a bereavement.

Mental Health First Aiders – a note of caution

While organisations varied in what they offered with regard to emotional wellbeing/mental health, the introduction of Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAs) was a common theme. Nearly half of those interviewed had MHFAs and some were either launching programmes or considering it.

Some employers suggested that they might refer employees who have been bereaved to their Mental Health First Aiders.

While we advocate offering staff who have been bereaved the opportunity to talk about their situation, there are a few notes of caution here:

- **Grief is not a mental health condition – it is a natural emotional response to what can be a traumatic life event. We know it can be hard for grieving people to ask for help, so offering support under the guise of “mental health” may prevent people from reaching out as they don’t have a mental health condition or they may feel that the support is not right for them.**
- **We recommend that employers think about how they reference the support they offer. It can be helpful to make a specific reference to bereavement rather than just refer to mental health and wellbeing.**

- **Bereavement/grief is not included in the two-day Mental Health First Aider programme. If employers choose to signpost to MHFAs as a source of initial support for staff who have been bereaved, it’s important they ensure their MHFAs understand grief. We recommend that MHFAs embark on “top-up” learning on bereavement as part of their continuing professional development.**

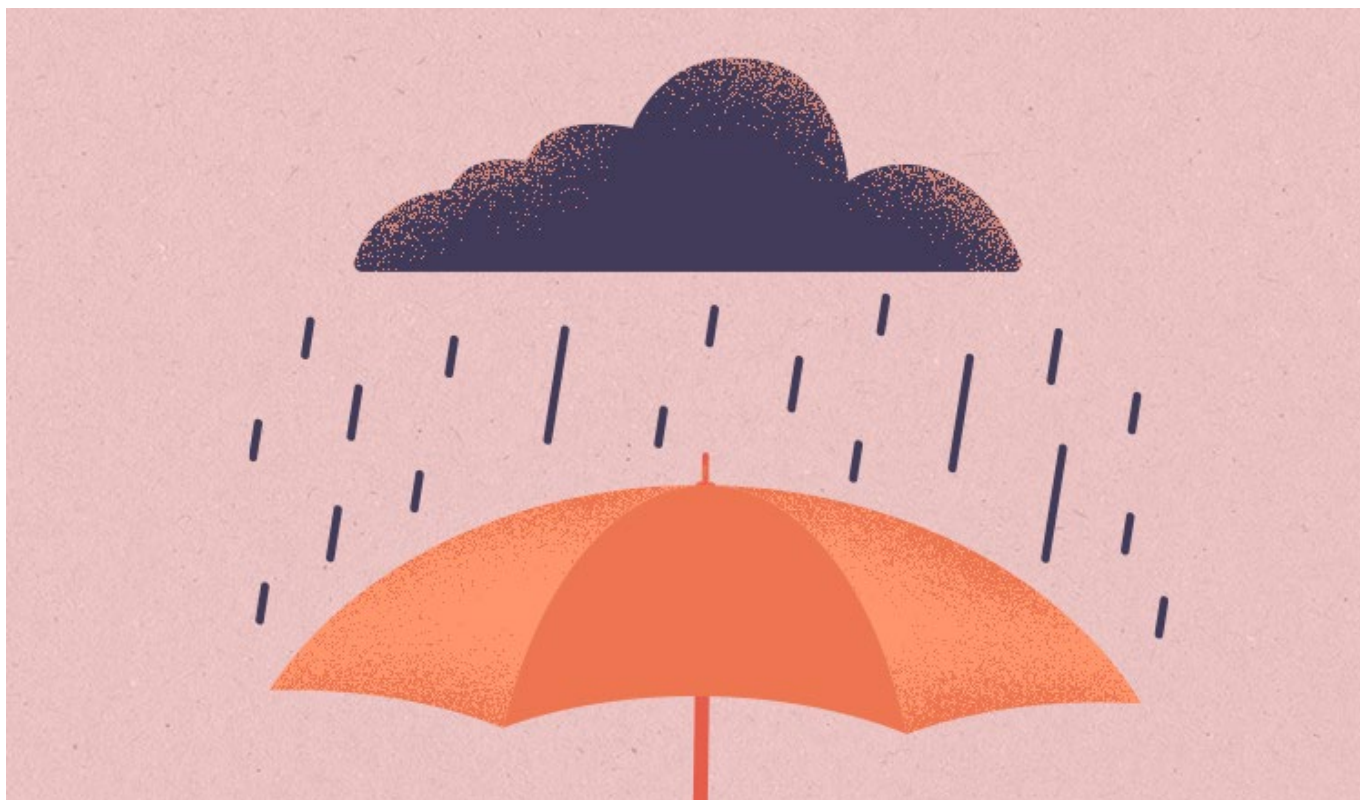
Given the potential to confuse grief with mental health, employers may consider introducing dedicated “bereavement champions” for employees who have been bereaved as an alternative to MHFAs.

Recognising the need to improve

At Marie Curie, we engage with employers every day. And we know from working with them, and through our research, that they’re very open to learning about how they can better support staff who have been bereaved.

Many employers (40%) have revised their bereavement policy in response to the pandemic, while others are planning to put one in place (18%). Many are looking to provide more guidance on bereavement, and a significant number (39%) plan to introduce support groups for employees who have been bereaved.

We're heartened that some employers are also considering what they can do to encourage a culture that destigmatises dying and grief and encourages staff to talk about their bereavement and support others.



We were thrilled that over 700 organisations, large and small, took part in the first National Day of Reflection. This brought people from all backgrounds and communities (and all parts of the UK) together to reflect on the tragic loss of life we've all felt during the pandemic, and support all those who are grieving.

The National Day of Reflection gave organisations the chance to raise awareness, engage in conversation among employees and promote resources on wellbeing and bereavement.

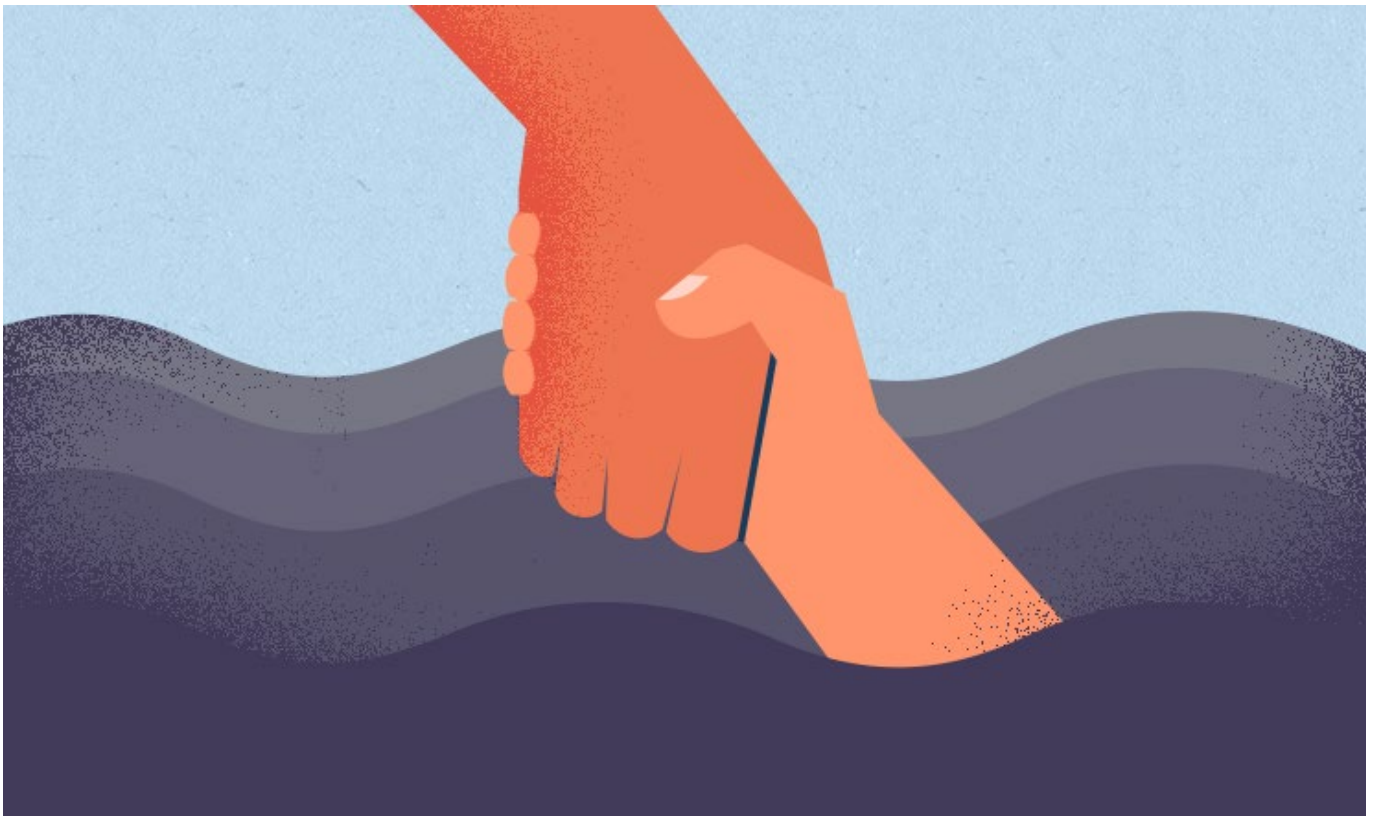
"There is a gap in our wellbeing proposition that looks really obvious. The only support specific to death and bereavement are when employees go through to our EAP platform. Whereas for all other areas of wellbeing there are a range of internal resources that were far quicker/easier accessed.

"I think there is an opportunity for more 'internal' resources to be made available to colleagues – they would obviously have to come from somewhere; either self-created (where expert/external advice would be helpful) – or pulled in from externally available 'ready-made' resources. The EAP platform then serves as 'the next level' for colleagues that need more detailed information and/or to speak to someone for support."

Learning & Development leader for a global power group

Recommendations for employers

- **Capture data and feedback on your employees' experience of bereavement** – not only in relation to time off, but also whether employees feel supported. These insights can inform your policy and practices to support staff during a very difficult time.
- **Have a dedicated bereavement policy** and regularly keep it up to date. Create a policy that works for your organisation and involve staff in its creation. Seek inspiration from external organisations offering help and expertise.
- **Consider whether you can pay bereavement leave** even when there is no statutory requirement to do so.
- **Include bereavement in your wellbeing plans**, remembering to provide support on pre-bereavement for those anticipating the loss of a loved one from a terminal illness.
- **Offer a range of support for employees and line managers.** Draw on experience and expertise within your organisation and access expert help from charities like Marie Curie.
- **Consider introducing dedicated bereavement champions** and/or make sure your wellbeing champions and Mental Health First Aiders have the knowledge, skills and information to provide initial support to bereaved



employees before signposting them to more specialist support as appropriate. Take care to recognise grief as a natural response to the loss of a loved one, not a mental health condition.

- **Ensure both your bereavement policy and any support you offer is well publicised and understood.**
- **Make sure line managers know how to support their teams.** Give clear guidance and training to ensure they have the knowledge, skills and confidence to know what to do and what to say. Emphasise the importance of flexibility and compassion.
- **Ensure you are as flexible as you can be regarding the return to work** and flexible working over the short and longer term.
- **Encourage people to understand and talk about bereavement.** Use a range of initiatives to engender a culture where dying, death and grief is not a taboo. Work with staff who've been bereaved. They know what it's like and can help you craft solutions that will be most helpful.
- **Take part in events that help people understand and talk about grief** – for example, the National Day of Reflection each March and the Good Grief Festival.

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About Marie Curie

Marie Curie is the UK's leading end of life charity. We provide frontline nursing and hospice care, a free support line and a wealth of information and support on all aspects of dying, death and bereavement. Our leading research pushes the boundaries of what we know about good end of life, and our campaigns fight for a world where everyone gets to have the best experience possible at the end of their lives.

For information and support on grief and bereavement at work, visit mariecurie.org.uk/grief-at-work or call our Support Line on **0800 090 2309**. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones. Your call may be recorded for quality and training purposes.

Thank you to all the organisations and individuals who support us and make our work possible. To find out how we can help you, your organisation or to make a donation, visit our website mariecurie.org.uk or call **0800 716 146**.

