

Supporting an Employee After a Loss

Manager and employee conversation guidance.

Overview

This document provides playbooks for manager-employee conversations after a loss. Refer to the section relevant to you.

For Managers

- ✓ A simple playbook for managers.
- ✓ First words to say (and avoid).
- ✓ Frequently asked questions.

For Employees

- ✓ Emails to send/say when notifying work.
- ✓ Privacy and returning to work.

For Managers

A simple playbook for managers.

Managers are often the first person an employee tells. A simple structure helps them respond with calm and consistency.

Step 1: When you hear about the loss.

Focus on three things.

a) Acknowledge

- Thank the employee for letting you know.
- Offer a brief, sincere expression of sympathy.

b) Stabilize the next few days

- Ask: "What do you need from work in the next few days?".
- Confirm what leave is available and explain options in plain language.

c) Agree on communication

- Decide how the employee prefers the team to be informed.
- Confirm how and when you will check in while they are away, if at all.

Step 2: While the employee is away.

- Limit contact to essential items and to agreed channels.
- Protect their time away by redirecting non-urgent requests.
- Coordinate with HR so pay, benefits, and paperwork are handled without the employee needing to chase information.

Step 3: Planning the return.

Before the return date, set up a brief conversation to discuss:

- The planned date and schedule.
- A temporary prioritization of work.
- Which meetings are essential in the first weeks and which can wait.
- How the employee wants their situation described to others.

Agree on a simple, time-limited return-to-work plan so expectations are clear for everyone.

Step 4: The first months back.

- Check in at agreed intervals, keeping conversations short and practical.
- Watch workload and adjust if it remains too heavy.
- Signpost confidential supports (EAP, benefits, community resources) if the person seems stuck or increasingly overwhelmed.

Managers do not need to act as counsellors. Their role is to create a stable, respectful environment and connect employees to the supports the organization already has.

 For more information, refer to: Solace Care, [Employer best practices to support employees with bereavement leave and loss in Canada](#).

For Managers

First words to say (and avoid).

Say

- ✓ "I'm so sorry. I'm here with you."
- ✓ "I'm so sorry about [Name]. I'm holding you both in my thoughts."
- ✓ "I don't have the right words. I care about you, and I'm here."
- ✓ "Would it help to talk about [Name] right now, or would you prefer quiet company?"
- ✓ "I can help with calls and logistics if you want me to."
- ✓ "Take the time you need. We'll flex deadlines and protect your focus when you return. Tell me what to share with the team, and what to keep private."
- ✓ Use their person's name. It affirms the reality of the loss and that their loved one mattered.

Avoid

- ✗ "They're in a better place."
- ✗ "At least ..." statements that minimize the loss.
- ✗ "Time heals all wounds."
- ✗ "Everything happens for a reason."
- ✗ Advice, timelines, or comparisons.
- ✗ Turning the conversation to your losses unless invited.

 For more information, refer to: Solace Care, [How to help someone who recently lost a loved one](#).

For Managers

Frequently asked questions.

Is it okay to say the person's name?

Yes. Most people appreciate hearing their loved one's name. If they explicitly state otherwise, respect their boundaries.

How long does grief last?

There isn't a timeline. Many people feel raw for months, and the ache can resurface for years. Your steady, simple support matters more than perfect timing.

What if I said the wrong thing?

Own it and repair. "I realize what I said may have hurt. I'm sorry. I'm learning. I care about you."

What if they cry? What if I cry?

Tears are welcome. Offer tissues and presence. You don't need to fix anything.

What should I not do?

Don't avoid them. Don't explain the loss with platitudes. Don't jump to lessons or "at least" statements. Don't share stories that increase their burden to comfort you.

What if they say they're fine?

Keep checking in without pressure. Offer small, specific help. Grief takes energy; "I'm fine" can be a shield.

 For more information, refer to: Solace Care, [How to help someone who recently lost a loved one.](#)

For Employees

Emails to send/to say.

A few things to keep in mind before reaching out.

- There is no obligation to share details. A name, a relationship, a general timeframe for absence, and a request for information about leave policy are all that is needed. Sharing more is a personal choice, not a requirement.
- Reaching out by email rather than phone is entirely appropriate in most cases, and often easier. It gives the person writing control over the message, and it gives the person receiving it time to respond thoughtfully rather than in real time.
- The templates below are starting points. Adjusting the tone, the level of detail, or the length to match the relationship and the workplace or institution is always the right call.

1. Notifying a manager or employer.

This is the most common notification most people need to make. The goal is to confirm the death, indicate that leave will be needed, and ask about the process without having to manage an extended conversation.

Short Version: Phone or in-person

"I need to let you know that [my mother / my partner / a close family member] passed away [yesterday / this week]. I'll need to take some time off. I wanted to let you know as soon as possible and will follow up about the specifics."

That is enough. More detail can come later if needed.

Email: Straightforward request

Subject: Bereavement leave – [Your name]

Hi [Manager's name],

I'm writing to let you know that [my father / my partner / a close family member] passed away on [date]. I need to take time off beginning [date] and expect to be away for approximately [number of days / one week].

Could you let me know the process for bereavement leave, or connect me with the right HR contact? I want to make sure everything is handled properly.

I'll check messages when I'm able to, and I'll do my best to note any urgent tasks before I'm away. Thank you for your understanding.

[Your name]

Email: When more absence may be needed**Subject: Bereavement leave – [Your name]**

Hi [Manager's name],

I wanted to let you know that [my mother / a close family member] passed away [this week]. I'll need to take bereavement leave starting [date]. At this point I expect to be away for [one to two weeks], but I may need additional time depending on circumstances. I'll keep you updated as I know more.

I'd appreciate being connected with HR to understand what's available to me. Thank you for your support.

[Your name]

2. Notifying HR or a leave administrator.

When leave is being handled through HR rather than directly through a manager, the message can be slightly more formal and focused on process.

Email: Straightforward request**Subject: Bereavement leave request – [Your name] – [Employee ID if applicable]**

Hello,

I am writing to notify you that a member of my immediate family, [my husband / my mother / my child], passed away on [date]. I am requesting bereavement leave in accordance with the company's policy and the applicable employment standards.

I would appreciate any information about the process for requesting leave, the number of days available, and whether any documentation is required. I am available to provide a funeral home notice or similar documentation if needed.

My expected return date is [date], though this may change depending on arrangements. I can be reached at [email or phone] for anything time-sensitive.

Thank you for your assistance.

[Your name]

3. Notifying colleagues or a broader team.

Sometimes a manager handles this communication. When a person wants to send their own note to a team, a brief, direct message is usually best.

Direct group message

Subject: A note from [Your name]

Hello everyone,

I wanted to let you know that I will be away for the next [week / several days] due to a death in my family. I appreciate your patience with anything that comes up while I'm out. [Name of colleague] has kindly agreed to cover anything urgent.

Thank you for your understanding.

[Your name]

4. Setting an out-of-office message.

An out-of-office reply removes the need to respond individually to incoming messages. It can be kept simple.

Auto response email or message

I am currently away due to a family matter and will have limited access to email until approximately [date]. For urgent matters, please contact [colleague's name] at [email or phone].

There is no need to explain further. The people who need to know already know. The people who do not need to know do not need more information.

5. What to say if someone asks for details.

Not everyone who receives a message will know to keep the response simple. If a colleague or administrator asks for more information than is appropriate to share, a short reply redirects without closing the door.

Email or message reply

"Thank you for reaching out. I'm keeping things brief for now, but I'll be in touch once things settle a bit."

Or, for someone asking about work coverage:

"I'm not sure yet about the full timeline. I'll keep you posted when I know more."

There is no obligation to account for grief in detail. A short reply is always acceptable.

6. A note on what these messages do not need to include.

None of the messages above need to include a cause of death, the name of the person who died, the location, the circumstances, or any other information the person writing them is not ready to share. They do not need to apologize for the timing. They do not need to reassure the employer or institution that the absence will be managed.

The only things these messages need to do are: communicate that a death has occurred, request the time or accommodation needed, and, where relevant, ask about the process. Everything else is optional.

 For more information, refer to: Solace Care, [What to say when telling work or school that someone has died: simple scripts and email templates.](#)

For Employees

Privacy and returning to work.

A brief conversation with a manager or human resources before returning can make a real difference. There is no obligation to share personal details, but letting the employer know what kind of support would be helpful, or what would feel difficult, gives both sides a chance to prepare.

Some things worth considering before returning include whether a phased return is possible, such as starting with reduced hours or fewer days in the first week. Some employers offer this informally, and others have formal accommodation processes. It is also worth identifying whether there are specific responsibilities or situations at work that may feel particularly hard at first, and whether a trusted contact at work can serve as a point of support if needed.

 For more information, refer to: Solace Care, [Returning to work after a loss: a practical guide for employees.](#)

Sources

1. [Employer best practices to support employees with bereavement leave and loss in Canada.](#)
2. [How to help someone who recently lost a loved one.](#)
3. [What to say when telling work or school that someone has died: simple scripts and email templates.](#)
4. [Returning to work after a loss: a practical guide for employees.](#)

This information does not constitute legal advice.