Dos and Don'ts of Bereavement

How you can help your employee after their child has died.

✓ DO

- **Do** recognise that your employee can, if treated empathetically, once again perform a valuable role in your organisation.
- **Do** be prepared for the employee to be absent for at least three to four weeks initially and potentially much longer. Talk through options including compassionate leave and a phased return.
- **Do** be aware of 'Jack's Law' or 'parental bereavement leave' whereby parents have a right to two weeks off if their child dies under the age of 18 or is stillborn after 24 weeks of pregnancy. These parents are also entitled to statutory parental bereavement pay.
- **Do** take a few minutes to talk to the bereaved parent on their first day back and assure them they have your support. Tell them they can have more time off if they find work too difficult.
- **Do** ask them how much they want their colleagues to know about what has happened. Try to provide an atmosphere of acceptance within the workplace.
- **Do** be brave enough to use the word 'death,' if your employee does. Take your lead from them in the language you use – you could ask them what language they want to use.
- **Do** reassure your employee that they are still valued by you and by their team, even if they don't feel up to handling their full responsibilities just yet.

✗ DON'T

- **Don't** think only in the short-term – your employees are one of your biggest assets, so taking good care of them following a major trauma will benefit your business in the long run.
- **Don't** think that one or two days of compassionate leave will be sufficient for them to recover.
- **Don't** ignore their loss after the first conversation. Keep in touch with them from time to time to find out how they are doing and be prepared to make appropriate adjustments to their work pattern.
- **Don't** be judgemental – be empathetic and understanding.
- **Don't** expect them to return to being their old self – the trauma of their loss will have changed them forever.
- **Don't** think that their emotional state will last forever; they will, with the right support, slowly heal.
- **Don't** be afraid to talk with them about their loss, particularly if it was a socially difficult death (e.g. suicide or substance abuse).
- **Don't** assume that they will perform to their previous standard in a short space of time.

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✓ DO

✓ **Do** understand that a bereaved parent will find a day's work totally exhausting. Keep in touch with them and suggest working part-time if appropriate. Give them time when emotions take over.

✓ **Do** reassure the bereaved parent that other staff will cover their workload. If they feel they are letting you down, they may try to return to work too quickly – in the long run that could be detrimental both to them and the business.

✓ **Do** signpost to support groups outside the work environment when requested, if possible. Be prepared to offer counselling if it might be appropriate.

✓ **Do** ask them from time to time how they want to be treated by their colleagues. There is a balance between ignoring the death and over-empathy.

✓ **Do** consider the effect that their role may have on them. If they are dealing with other people's traumas, see if there are ways that the strain can be reduced.

✓ **Do** consider their work environment. If they have to spend a lot of time working alone, every so often try to provide them with company, in a non-intrusive way.

✓ **Do** provide a safe, quiet space for them to retreat to if things become overwhelming during the working day, and a colleague they can notify if this is needed.

✗ DON'T

✗ **Don't** be too business-focused. Whilst you do have a business to maintain, try to recognise their long-term potential if they are well cared for.

✗ **Don't** assume that everyone grieves in the same way – it is a totally individual process and everyone is different.

✗ **Don't** go on appearances. They may look as if they are coping, but underneath they may be feeling desperate and very alone.

✗ **Don't** shy away from your own vulnerability; what has happened is every parent's worst nightmare. Try to stand alongside them.

ACAS have published a guide to good practice for employers entitled 'Time off work for bereavement: Leave and pay when someone dies', which you may also find very helpful.

Scan this QR code with your smartphone camera to access the PDF.

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