

## SUPPORTING A COLLEAGUE AFTER A LOSS

Oftentimes, people don't quite know what to say or how to best support their colleague and friend after a loss, which can cause discomfort, awkwardness or disappointment for both people. Understanding the grief process and the needs of those who have experienced loss can help us be more compassionate and supportive when someone returns to work.

### **Here are some tips to help you support a colleague returning to work after a loss:**

- If you are a leader and have been in contact with them, ask the bereaved employee what they would find helpful in their return and share this with the team. For example, some people dread all the questions people might ask, while others want to be asked and want their loved one's death to be acknowledged and remembered by their colleagues.
  - Welcome the employee back and acknowledge grief. Keep this brief. For example, "I'm glad you are back, you have been missed." You can also add, "I'm so sorry for your loss." (A touch on the shoulder may be appropriate depending on your relationship.)
  - Listen. Resist the urge to talk after your greeting. Allow the person time to respond (or not) in their own way before continuing with your work.
  - Avoid comparisons. Telling stories about your own experience or someone else's experience can shift the focus and send the message that you are not allowing space for their grief.
  - Don't offer advice. Now is not the time. Be available to simply be with this person. Don't stress about trying to find the right words; your presence and willingness to share space with them is enough.
  - Be sensitive to facial expressions and non-verbal cues. These indicators may tell you whether or not the person needs space or would like to share.
- Practice patience. Expect to hear their story again and again if that's what they need. This is part of the healing process.
  - Don't avoid using the name of the person who died, especially if your coworker has talked about them regularly in the past.
  - Check in with your colleague in the days and weeks after they return. From time to time, ask "How are you doing today?" Adding "today" or "right now" provides an opportunity and an invitation for the grieving person to share and reflect on their process. Emotions from grief fluctuate from day to day, so it's important to know that there will be some difficult days and that's ok.



- Anticipate moments of intense grief – this may include crying, shutting down, irritability or anger. Stay present and let the person know you are there and that it's ok to show their emotions. They may need to leave the work area for a break.
- Return to your typical routines with this person. Invite them for coffee or lunch if that's what you did prior to the loss.
- If you are a person who likes to joke, continue being yourself; however, use some discretion and sensitivity during the early days of return.
- Be calm and friendly; no need to walk on eggshells. This just results in the bereaved employee feeling awkward.
- Be aware of the anniversary of the loss and offer support on that day. Mark it in your calendar now so you don't forget.

## NEED MORE SUPPORT?

Find more workplace wellness resources at [wellness.mb.bluecross.ca](https://wellness.mb.bluecross.ca).

Employees with Employee Assistance Program coverage with Manitoba Blue Cross can access counselling services at [wellness.mb.bluecross.ca](https://wellness.mb.bluecross.ca).

For leader and workplace support, call the Employee Assistance (EA) Centre at **204.786.8880** (in Winnipeg) or **1.800.590.5553** (toll free).

*For the Deaf, hard-of-hearing and speech-impaired community, our EA centre can receive VRS calls.*

