BEYOND EAP HR GUIDE SERIES

Supporting Employees Through Bereavement

A Practical Guide for HR Professionals & People Leaders

Helping workplaces respond with compassion, flexibility and confidence when an employee is grieving.



BeyondEAP
Specialist employee support when life gets complex

Specialist Employee Support When Life Gets Complex
www.beyondeap.co.uk

Welcome

A message from Sandie Dennis

BeyondEAP



Bereavement is one of the most universal human experiences — and one of the most individual.

When someone loses a person they love, workplaces often respond quickly.

Condolences are offered.

Compassionate leave is arranged.

Colleagues rally around.

And gradually, everyday working life resumes.

But for the person who has been bereaved, life may feel anything but normal.

They may return to work while still navigating shock, exhaustion, disrupted sleep, practical responsibilities, changes within their family and the emotional reality of living without someone who mattered to them.

And grief rarely moves neatly forwards.

Someone may appear to be coping well one week and find the next unexpectedly difficult.

A birthday.

An anniversary.

A familiar song.

The first Christmas.

Or simply an ordinary Tuesday when the loss suddenly feels very present again.

This Guide has been created to help HR professionals and managers support employees not only in the immediate aftermath of a bereavement, but through the less visible weeks and months that follow.

Reflection

Compassionate leave may have an end date.
Grief doesn't.

And understanding that difference can change the way workplaces support people through loss.

BeyondEAP

This Guide is designed as a practical resource for HR professionals, People teams and managers supporting an employee following bereavement.

How to Use This Guide

It can be used when a loss has just occurred, when someone is preparing to return to work, or when the impact of grief resurfaces weeks or months later.

Use this Guide to help you:

✓ Navigate the first conversation following a bereavement
✓ Understand how grief may affect someone at work
✓ Support an employee returning after bereavement leave
✓ Recognise that grief may resurface unexpectedly
✓ Avoid well-intentioned but unhelpful language
✓ Build flexibility around significant dates and milestones
✓ Maintain appropriate confidentiality and employee choice
✓ Support managers handling emotionally difficult conversations
✓ Recognise when specialist support may be helpful

Throughout this guide you'll find:

Beyond EAP Insight
Professional observations drawn from supporting employees through bereavement, trauma and complex life events.

Conversation Starter
Practical language managers can adapt when beginning sensitive conversations.

Practical Tip
Simple actions that can immediately improve an employee's experience at work.

Reflection
Questions to encourage discussion within HR teams and leadership groups.

Team Discussion
Conversation prompts for HR meetings and manager workshops.

Practical Tip

You don't need to become a grief expert.
A manager's role isn't to fix someone's grief or find the perfect words.
It is to acknowledge what has happened, listen without making assumptions and create enough safety for the employee to tell you what they need.

Why This Guide Matters

Grief doesn't remain neatly outside the workplace.
An employee may return to meetings, answer emails, meet deadlines and laugh with colleagues — while simultaneously carrying a loss that has changed their life.

Bereavement can affect:

Concentration and memory
Familiar tasks may require more effort than usual.

Sleep and energy
Grief can be physically as well as emotionally exhausting.

Confidence and decision-making
Someone who previously felt decisive may temporarily find choices more difficult.

Emotional regulation
Feelings can surface unexpectedly and without an obvious trigger.

Motivation and connection
Work may feel reassuringly normal to one person and strangely unimportant to another.

Identity and purpose
Loss can change family roles, responsibilities and how someone sees their life more broadly.

Yet much of this may remain completely invisible to colleagues.



Beyond EAP Insight

Being at work does not necessarily mean someone has stopped grieving.
For some employees, work may provide structure, connection and welcome respite.

For others, simply getting through the working day may take considerably more energy than anyone around them realises.

Good workplace support makes room for both.

Supporting Bereavement at Work — At a Glance



When someone is grieving, managers can feel pressure to find the right words or know exactly what to do.

Usually, neither is required.

What matters more is a compassionate response, respect for individual needs and a willingness to keep the conversation open.

DO

✓ Acknowledge the loss rather than avoiding the subject because it feels uncomfortable.
✓ Ask what the employee needs now rather than predicting what they will need later.
✓ Respect privacy and choice around what is shared with colleagues.
✓ Allow needs to change as grief, practical responsibilities and circumstances evolve.
✓ Keep checking in after the initial period of support has passed.
✓ Remember significant dates may affect someone long after their return.
✓ Offer flexibility where possible without making the employee feel difficult for needing it.
✓ Know when to signpost specialist support rather than expecting managers to hold everything themselves.

AVOID

✗ Assuming everyone experiences grief in the same way.
✗ Expecting a predictable recovery timeline.
✗ Pressuring someone to talk about their loss.
✗ Avoiding them because you're worried about saying the wrong thing.
✗ Assuming returning to work means they're “better”.
✗ Comparing their experience with your own.
✗ Deciding when they should be ready to “move on”.

Practical Tip

Don't try to solve grief.
The most helpful manager may simply be the one who makes it safe for an employee to say:
“Today is a difficult day.”

There Is No Standard Grief Response

Two employees can experience similar losses and respond in completely different ways.

One may want to return to work quickly because routine and familiar colleagues provide stability.

Another may struggle to imagine returning at all.

One may openly talk about the person who died.

Another may want work to be the one place where they don't have to talk about their bereavement.

Some people cry.

Some don't.

Some want company.

Some withdraw.

Some immerse themselves in work.

And someone's response can change from one day to the next.

None of these responses tells us how deeply someone is grieving.

That's why workplace support needs to begin with the individual rather than an assumption about what grief is supposed to look like.



Beyond EAP Insight

Grief isn't a performance we can assess from the outside.
An employee who appears composed may be struggling enormously.
An employee who becomes emotional isn't necessarily less able to work.
The question isn't,
“Are they grieving normally?”
It’s,
“What does this employee need from work right now?”
Reflection
Are your bereavement processes flexible enough to support different people differently?

Grief Doesn't Follow the Calendar

Workplaces naturally organise bereavement around dates.

The date of the death.

The period of compassionate leave.

The funeral.

The return-to-work date.

Perhaps a review meeting several weeks later.

These dates matter.

But they are only part of the employee's experience.

Because grief has another calendar entirely.

It can appear around:
The first birthday without them.
The anniversary of their death.
Christmas or another important celebration.
Mother's Day or Father's Day.
A family wedding.
A holiday they always took together.

The first significant piece of news they aren't there to hear.

Or on an entirely ordinary day when something unexpectedly brings the loss back into focus.

None of these moments necessarily appears on an HR system.

But they can profoundly shape someone's experience at work.

Signature Reflection

Workplaces may remember the date someone returns.
The employee may remember every date that person is missing from.
Grief doesn't follow the calendar.
And compassionate workplace support shouldn't assume that it does.

Support Should Evolve, Not Expire

Workplace support is often most visible immediately following a death.

Colleagues offer condolences. Managers arrange leave and make allowances. Practical support is put in place.

But as everyday working life resumes, the employee may still be adjusting to a very different reality.

This is where continued, thoughtful support matters.

It doesn't mean repeatedly asking someone to discuss their loss or treating them as permanently vulnerable.

It means maintaining a supportive relationship, recognising when circumstances change and making it easy to ask for help.

A brief, agreed check-in several weeks or months later can communicate something important:
“We haven't forgotten.”



Beyond EAP Perspective

Good bereavement support isn't necessarily about providing more support.
It's about providing the right support at the right time.
Sometimes that may mean flexibility.
Sometimes a conversation.
Sometimes practical adjustments.
Sometimes specialist one-to-one support.
And sometimes it means allowing work to remain the ordinary, familiar part of someone's life that they need it to be.

Conversation Starter

Rather than:
“Are you feeling better now?”
Try:
“How is work feeling for you at the moment?”
It leaves room for the answer to change.

What We See — And What We Don't

Some aspects of bereavement are visible in the workplace.
Many are not.

What the workplace may see

Time away from work
A funeral or memorial
A request for flexibility
A return-to-work meeting
Reduced concentration
Visible emotion
Changes in performance or behaviour

But behind those visible moments, an employee may be navigating much more.

What the workplace may not see

Disrupted sleep and exhaustion
Difficulty concentrating or remembering information
Administrative responsibilities following a death
Changes in family roles or caring responsibilities
Financial or practical worries
Supporting other grieving family members
Loneliness
Anger or guilt
Relief following a prolonged or difficult illness — and complicated feelings about that relief
Unexpected reminders or emotional triggers
The effort involved in appearing "fine"



Beyond EAP Insight

Grief isn't always visible as sadness.
Sometimes it looks like tiredness.
Irritability.
Withdrawal.
Forgetfulness.
Overworking.
Or simply someone who seems a little different from the person they were before.
That's why curiosity is often more helpful than interpretation.
Don't assume.

"They're not coping."
"They seem absolutely fine."

We can ask:

"How are things feeling for you at work?"

What Someone Needs May Change

Bereavement support should be reviewed with the employee, not simply decided for them.

An arrangement that was helpful immediately after a loss may no longer be appropriate several weeks later.

For example:

- An employee may initially need time away from work but later benefit from temporary adjustments to their workload.
- Someone who welcomed regular check-ins may eventually prefer to approach their manager when support is needed.
- An employee who initially wanted privacy may later feel comfortable sharing more with colleagues.
- A phased return or flexible working arrangement may need reviewing as confidence and energy change.

Rather than assuming what is helpful, managers can ask, listen and agree what works now.

The aim is not to manage someone's grief. It's to make work manageable while they navigate it.

Keep the Conversation Open

Useful questions include:
“How is work feeling for you at the moment?”
“Is there anything we could make easier over the next few weeks?”
“Is what we've put in place still working for you?”
“Would you prefer us to check in occasionally, or would you rather come to us if you need something?”

And, where appropriate:
“Are there any dates coming up that you think might be particularly difficult?”

Practical Tip

Agree how the employee wants support to happen.
Some people appreciate a manager remembering an anniversary or checking in.
Others may find this intrusive.
Don't assume.
Ask.
The employee should retain choice over how much they disclose and how their bereavement is acknowledged at work.

“What If I Say the Wrong Thing?”

This is one of the biggest worries managers have around bereavement.

And sometimes that fear results in something potentially more painful:

Saying nothing at all.

There are no perfect words that will remove someone's grief.

Fortunately, that isn't the manager's job.

Simple, genuine acknowledgement is often enough.

You could say:

“I'm so sorry.”

“Thank you for letting me know.”

“There's no pressure to talk about it, but I'm here if you need anything.”

“What would be most helpful from work at the moment?”

“Would you like colleagues to know, and if so, what would you be comfortable with us sharing?”

“Would it be helpful if we checked in again next week?”



Conversation Starter

If you don't know what to say, it's okay to acknowledge that too.
“I don't want to say the wrong thing, but I didn't want to say nothing. I'm really sorry for your loss.”
Human beats perfect.

Beyond EAP Insight

A manager isn't there to make someone's grief better.
They're there to help make work feel safer while someone is experiencing it.
That distinction removes a lot of unnecessary pressure from managers.

When Good Intentions Don't Land Well

Most unhelpful comments following bereavement aren't intended to cause harm.

Usually, they're attempts to comfort someone when we don't know what else to say.

But grief doesn't need to be explained away, compared or made more positive.

Be cautious with:
“Everything happens for a reason.”
“At least they had a good life.”
“They're in a better place.”
“You need to stay strong.”
“Time heals.”
“I know exactly how you feel.”
“At least…”
“You need to move forward.”

Even when said with kindness, these phrases can unintentionally minimise what someone is experiencing.

Also be careful about immediately sharing your own story

Saying:
“When my dad died…”
may be intended to communicate empathy.
Sometimes shared experience genuinely does create connection.
But at other times it can shift the focus from the employee's loss to our own.

Before sharing, consider:

Am I saying this because it will help them — or because I'm uncomfortable with their grief?

Try instead

“I'm really sorry.”

“That sounds incredibly difficult.”

“I can't know exactly what this is like for you.”

“You don't need to talk about it, but I'm here if you want to.”

And sometimes:

Say less. Listen more.

Reflection

We don't need to find a positive side to someone's loss in order to support them through it.

Sometimes the most compassionate response is simply being willing to sit alongside something that cannot be fixed.

Making It Safe to Say “Today Is Difficult”

Psychological safety around bereavement isn't about encouraging employees to disclose everything they're feeling.

Quite the opposite.

It's about creating a workplace where an employee has choice.

Choice to talk.

Choice not to talk.

Choice about what colleagues know.

Choice to ask for help without worrying that it will change how they're perceived.

A psychologically safe workplace allows an employee to say:

“I'm struggling today.”
“I'd rather not talk about it.”
“I'd actually like people to mention their name.”
“This date is going to be difficult for me.”
“I thought I was doing better, but this week has been hard.”

without being viewed as incapable, unreliable or unable to cope.

Privacy Matters

Don't make an employee repeatedly explain their bereavement to different people.

Ask what they are comfortable sharing, with whom, and who they would like to communicate it.

For example:

“What would you like your team to know?”
“Would you like me to tell them, or would you prefer to do that yourself?”
“Is there anything you would particularly prefer us not to share?”

Where personal information is shared within workplace support, the employee's autonomy, privacy and control should remain central.

Beyond EAP Insight

Psychological safety doesn't mean knowing someone's whole story.

It means they don't have to hide the fact that the story is affecting them.

Beyond EAP Action Checklist

Supporting an Employee Through Bereavement

In the immediate aftermath

☐ **Acknowledge the loss** personally and compassionately.

☐ **Ask what the employee needs now** rather than overwhelming them with future arrangements.

☐ **Explain relevant leave and practical support** clearly and sensitively.

☐ **Agree communication preferences** during any period away from work.

☐ **Clarify confidentiality** — what can be shared, with whom and by whom.

Preparing for return

☐ **Plan the return collaboratively** rather than assuming what will be manageable.

☐ **Consider temporary flexibility or adjustments** where appropriate.

☐ **Ask how the employee would like their return handled with colleagues.**

☐ **Recognise that concentration, energy or confidence may initially be different.**

In the weeks and months afterwards

☐ **Keep the door** open after the initial period of support has passed.

☐ **Review arrangements** rather than assuming what was helpful initially remains right.

☐ **Be mindful of significant dates,** where the employee has indicated they would find this helpful.

☐ **Notice changes without immediately interpreting them.**

☐ **Offer specialist support** where an employee may benefit from a confidential, independent space.

And don't forget...

☐ **Support the manager too.**

Know how to respond and where to seek urgent professional help if an employee expresses concerns about their immediate safety or wellbeing.

Managers don't need to become grief specialists.
They do need somewhere to seek guidance when a situation feels beyond their experience or they are unsure how best to respond.

Keep this in mind

Good support isn't about getting everything right on day one.

It's about keeping the relationship open enough to respond when something changes.

One Question to Take Back to Your Team



Many organisations have a bereavement policy.
They may set out compassionate leave.
Who employees should contact.
What happens with pay.
How an absence is recorded.
All of that matters.
But policy can only tell us so much about someone's experience of grief.
So perhaps there is another question worth discussing with HR teams and managers:

Does our bereavement support end when compassionate leave ends...
...or does it recognise what may happen afterwards?

Because the hardest working day may not be the first day back.
It could be three months later.
On a birthday.
An anniversary.
The first Christmas.
Or an entirely ordinary morning when grief unexpectedly reappears.

Team Discussion

Consider:
How do managers know when to check in again?
Would an employee feel comfortable saying they're struggling months later?
Do our processes allow support to change as needs change?
Do our managers know where to turn when they need guidance themselves?

Final Reflection

A bereavement policy tells people what the organisation provides.
A compassionate culture determines how supported they feel when they need it.

When Workplace Support May Not Be Enough

Grief is a natural response to loss, and many people navigate bereavement with support from those around them. However, where grief is accompanied by significant distress, traumatic experiences or difficulties with everyday functioning, specialist support may be helpful.

For others, grief can feel more difficult to carry.

The circumstances surrounding the death may have been traumatic.

The loss may bring previous experiences of grief or trauma back to the surface.

The employee may be supporting other family members while trying to manage their own emotions.

Or returning to work may reveal difficulties that weren't apparent while they were away.

There isn't a particular point at which someone should need additional support.

But there may be signs that a confidential, independent space could be helpful.

Specialist support may be appropriate where:

✓ The circumstances surrounding the death were traumatic
✓ The employee is finding the emotional impact of the loss particularly difficult
✓ Previous trauma or loss has resurfaced
✓ Anxiety, overwhelm or emotional distress is affecting everyday life or work
✓ The employee is carrying significant family or caring responsibilities alongside their own grief
✓ Returning to work feels particularly difficult
✓ The employee would simply value somewhere confidential to talk outside their workplace and personal relationships

Beyond EAP Perspective

HR and managers are there to provide **workplace support.**

They are not expected to become counsellors or therapists.

Recognising when an employee may benefit from specialist support isn't stepping away from the person.

Sometimes it's one of the most supportive things an organisation can do. Beyond EAP provides confidential, employee-led, one-to-one support for employees experiencing **bereavement, trauma and loss,** complementing existing workplace provision.

Where trauma forms part of someone's experience, support can be provided by appropriately qualified trauma practitioners, including EMDR therapists, while maintaining clear therapeutic confidentiality and workplace boundaries.

Continue Your Learning

Bereavement support doesn't begin and end with compassionate leave.

Continue the conversation with November's accompanying Beyond EAP Insight:

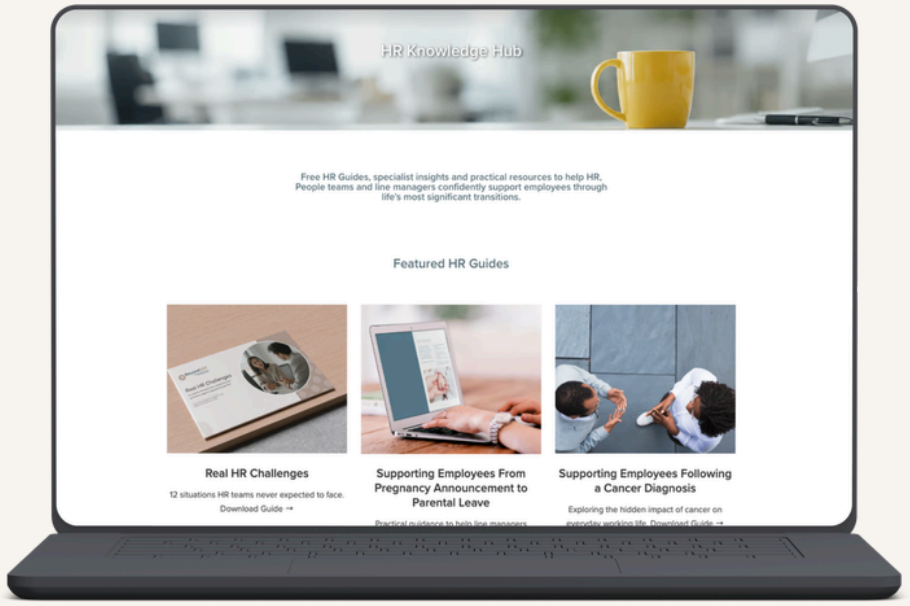
When Bereavement Is Traumatic: Supporting Employees After a Death by Suicide

Exploring the particular complexities of suicide bereavement, the potential impact of traumatic loss and how employers can recognise when additional specialist support may be helpful.

One idea to carry forward

Not all grief is visible. And not all bereavement can be supported through policy alone.

EXPLORE THE HR KNOWLEDGE HUB



Supporting Employees Through Bereavement

Seven Things to Remember

1. Grief is individual.
There is no single right way to grieve and no standard timeline.

2. Returning to work doesn't mean grief has ended.
For some people work provides welcome normality; for others it may require considerable adjustment.

3. Needs can change.
What helps immediately after a loss may be very different from what someone needs several months later.

4. Significant dates can matter.
Birthdays, anniversaries, celebrations and seemingly ordinary days can bring grief unexpectedly back into focus.

5. Managers don't need perfect words.
Genuine acknowledgement, listening and curiosity are often more valuable than trying to fix what cannot be fixed.

6. Privacy and choice matter.
Employees should retain as much control as possible over what is shared and how their bereavement is acknowledged at work.

7. Support the people doing the supporting.
Managers and HR professionals may also need guidance when carrying emotionally difficult workplace situations.

Remember
Compassionate leave may have an end date.
Grief doesn't.

Why Organisations Choose Beyond EAP

Specialist Support When Life Gets Complex

Some employee experiences need more than a generic wellbeing response.

Beyond EAP provides specialist employee support for life's toughest challenges, combining therapeutic expertise, deep workplace understanding and a genuinely human, workplace-aware approach.

Our specialist areas include:

Parental Coaching & Family Building

Support through the emotional and practical transitions surrounding parenthood and family building.

Trauma, Loss & Bereavement

Confidential one-to-one support for employees navigating bereavement, trauma, significant loss and emotionally complex life events.

Where appropriate, support includes access to qualified counsellors and EMDR trauma therapists.

Post-Diagnosis Health Coaching

Specialist support for employees navigating the personal and workplace impact of a significant health diagnosis, treatment, recovery and return to work.

How We Work

Confidential. Employee-led. One-to-one. Workplace-aware.

Beyond EAP can work alongside existing EAP, Occupational Health and internal wellbeing provision, providing additional specialist support where an employee's circumstances require greater depth or continuity.

Supporting an employee through a complex or traumatic bereavement? Beyond EAP can provide confidential, specialist support alongside your existing workplace provision.

DISCOVER BEYOND EAP

BeyondEAP

Specialist employee support when life gets complex



Supporting Employees Through Bereavement

A Practical Guide for HR Professionals & People Leaders

Compassionate leave has an end date.

Grief doesn't.

The dates may disappear from the workplace calendar.

That doesn't mean the loss has disappeared from someone's life.

BeyondEAP

Specialist employee support
when life gets complex