

# Managing employees during times of stress and grief

Keeping our work lives and personal lives separate yet harmonious is a balancing act at the best of times, but when things at home take an unexpected turn towards hardship it's especially challenging to keep the lines from blurring. Transformative and traumatic life events such as separation and divorce or the death or illness of a parent or loved one are a normal part of the landscape of our adult lives. When they affect our employees and coworkers, it isn't easy to know how to respond. Here are some things managers can keep in mind to support an employee through a time of crisis.



## **Offer compassion**

Sometimes we don't know what to say when someone is grieving, or indeed if we should say anything at all. In these instances, it is always better to explicitly offer condolences, compassion, and support. It is normal to feel awkward saying these things, but your employee or coworker will be grateful that their difficult time is being acknowledged and that you care about their well-being.

## **Be prepared to discuss their options**

Managers are usually the first people employees call when tragedy strikes. Human Resources (HR) and managers should be well informed on the most up-to-date company policies concerning bereavement time off and family medical leave. In cases such as divorce or separation, there may not be official policies in place, but it is important to have parallel options available, as the ending of a relationship can be as traumatic and life shattering as a death.

## **Listen to what they need**

Everyone is different, with different needs, especially during times of grief and change. Ask questions about what your employee needs during this difficult time. Do they want to keep the matter private, or would they prefer their colleagues know what's going on? What method of communication do they want to rely on? Is there a good time to contact them and a time they'd rather not be disturbed? Instead of prescribing what you think may help, listen to what kind of support your employee needs during their difficult time.

## **Recognize the importance of work**

You may think that taking a vacation is the best thing for your employee, but this may have to do more with you and what makes you comfortable than with them and what they really need. Often people prefer to keep

working during times of grief and stress, as staying at home can be an isolating and sad place. Work provides stability, normalcy, and a place to direct focus and exert control when everything else feels chaotic.

### **Recognize the importance of rest**

Equally, time off may be exactly what your employee needs. Even if they continue working or return to work early, it might be a time to be flexible with your expectations and lighten their workload. It's likely that the employee's colleagues are eager to know how they can help, and would be happy to pick up a little extra slack during the most difficult period of adjustment.

When an employee faces a challenging or traumatic life event, continue checking in with them about how they are doing and what they need. These guidelines can help you in best helping them. Remember that they are the experts in their own lives – what they might need can change from day to day and week to week, so keep an open dialogue, allow space for their emotions, and be flexible in what you and your organization can offer.