

Supporting a staff member to return to work after a suicide bereavement

“People would ask me how I was doing. There was too much going on, I couldn’t put it into words. If I really told them, it would be overwhelming for them and me. I finally figured out the best way for me to answer. I would simply reply ‘as expected.’”

— Suicide bereaved

It can be hard to know what to say or do for a team member who has lost a loved one to suspected suicide. Offering support and compassion can make a big difference to the person’s wellbeing in the workplace. Knowing that people care is important.

An employer’s lack of understanding or empathy for their situation and grief can make it harder for the person to reintegrate back into work. It may also result in them leaving the workplace altogether. Give the bereaved time to ‘adjust’ to their loss and acknowledge that in their first few weeks — maybe months — their work performance may not be up to par.

What to say

People who are bereaved by suspected suicide often report receiving less support than people who are bereaved by other means. Often this is due to the stigma associated with suicide.

It can also be very hard for a bereaved person to explain how they are feeling and ask for help — particularly after a suspected suicide — when events may be complicated and hard to explain. They may tell you they are fine, when they are not.

Be proactive and gently offer your support. Don’t wait to be asked. Say things like:

- *“I’m glad you are back. We’re here for you.”*
- *“If there’s anything we can do to make your life easier, please know that we are all here for you.”*
- *“Please know that <person/service> is available to support you.”*

It’s best not to:

- Suggest you know how they feel. Everyone goes through loss differently.
- Say that the person who died is ‘at peace now’ or is ‘in a better place now’. This can contribute to suicide risk by implying death is an acceptable solution to pain.
- Tell the person what they should do or feel or when their feeling of grief will pass.
- Blame others or specific situations for the person’s suspected suicide. Suicide is complex and never the result of only one thing.
- Call the person who has died by suspected suicide ‘selfish’ or try to place blame.

Refer to *How to speak safely about suicide* on page 8 and the myths section in *A guide for workplaces: Responding to a staff member’s suicidality* for more guidance.

Bereavement leave

“The greatest things you can give someone who has survived a suicide loss is your time, reassurance and understanding.”

— Suicide bereaved

People can be affected in different ways by the death of someone close to them. It is important to offer support that will suit the person and help them during this time.

Some people may need extended leave or flexible work arrangements going forward. Alternatively, others may want to return to work immediately after their loss for a variety of reasons. Talk together about what they think will work best. Agree to check in on how it’s going, in case more leave may be needed.

A good starting point is to follow your workplace’s bereavement leave policy. Try to use your discretion and judgement when supporting someone during this time. If applicable, engage your HR team for support.

Contact the person to discuss what bereavement leave process will work best for them, along with any other support they may need when returning to the workplace. Everyone has different needs.

Consider offering:

- Discretionary leave or additional paid bereavement leave.
- Extended leave on full pay or allowing them to use annual or unpaid leave.
- Reduced hours and workload.
- A gradual return to their ‘normal’ working hours.
- Working from home options, where appropriate.

Workers are entitled to bereavement leave under the Employment Relations Act — see www.employment.govt.nz/leave-and-holidays/bereavement-leave/. This is a minimum of a day when the workplace accepts the person has suffered a bereavement and three days for particular family members.

Tangihanga

In te ao Māori, the process of mourning a loved one is called tangihanga. Also known as a tangi (to grieve/mourn), it’s an intrinsic part of Māori culture, with many tikanga (customs/practices) and other roles and responsibilities involving the person’s whānau at this time.

The duration of tangihanga, from the time a person passes away to te rā nehu (burial day), can take three to five days or more. However this timeframe varies depending on the whānau pani (bereaved family), tikanga ā lwi (tribal protocols) or other circumstances.

We recommend employers and people leaders:

- Provide flexibility or culturally-responsive practices, processes and policies to support staff to balance work and life commitments. This can include allowance for staff to take leave to uphold their cultural and whānau responsibilities.
- If staff need to take bereavement leave, ensure they are aware of their entitlements. If possible, offer them more days to cover the tangihanga process.
- Show respect and tautoko (support) for cultural customs and practices.
- Offer a return-to-work plan if the person was closely impacted and requires tautoko to transition back into work.
- If you have cultural support available in your workplace, seek their guidance.

For more information visit www.mentalhealth.org.nz/workplaces/culturally-responsive-workplaces

Offering practical support for returning to the workplace

“We live in a death-phobic, death-illiterate and death-awkward world. Which is so frustrating, given there’s a large proportion of people in the workforce every day who are coping with loss. We need to do better.”

— Dr Lucy Hone, *Coping with Loss*

Before the person returns to work, discuss what practical support they may need. Showing empathy for their situation can make a real difference.

The support someone may need when returning to the workplace can include:

- Having regular check ins. Create space for the person to have a voice in what their return to work may look like.
- Ensuring they know how to access counselling and wellbeing support services.
- Providing a private space for time out or where they can make calls.
- Being understanding about time off for formal appointments (e.g. with police or the coroner).
- Reducing workload or offering flexible work hours.
- Taking their cultural customs and religious beliefs into consideration.
- Understanding any short-term loss of efficiency and productivity.
- Giving them space, rather than isolating them.
- Setting up a workplace buddy or peer support system to support them.
- Being patient. Don’t set a time limit on grief.
- Avoiding overwhelming them with attention when they first return. A simple ‘welcome back’ is often enough.

Keep in mind, the person may experience grief or be triggered by reminders of their loved one or the trauma surrounding their death. Work with them to ensure flexible systems are in place to help them manage.

For more ways to support an employee returning to work after a suspected suicide, visit:

- www.afterasuicide.nz
- www.aoketera.org.nz
- www.copingwithloss.co