

# *Breaking the Silence* in the Workplace

A Guide for Employers on Responding  
to Suicide in the Workplace





# *Breaking the Silence* in the Workplace

A Guide for Employers on Responding  
to Suicide in the Workplace

---

**Ciaran Austin**

Console

---

**Breffi Mc Guinness**

Irish Hospice Foundation

---

**Published 2012**

ISBN: 978-0-9566590-3-3

---



# Contents

---

<b>1</b>	<b>Acknowledgements</b>	4
<b>2</b>	<b>Glossary and Abbreviations</b>	5
<b>3</b>	<b>Foreword</b>	7
<b>4</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	9
<b>5</b>	<b>Suicide Bereavement Support</b>	12
5.1	Responding to suicide in the workplace	12
5.2	Common grief reactions to suicide	14
5.3	Grief and time	16
5.4	Tips on supporting someone bereaved through suicide	16
5.5	Frequently asked questions on supporting someone who is bereaved through suicide	17
<b>6</b>	<b>Other Relevant Information on Responding to Suicide in the Workplace</b>	19
6.1	Be Prepared	19
6.2	Inquests, What to Expect	20
6.3	Tips on Supporting Someone Bereaved through Suicide	21
6.4	Frequently Asked Questions About Suicide Bereavement	22
<b>7</b>	<b>When an Employee Dies by Suicide On-Site</b>	23
7.1	Developing a plan for responding to an employee suicide on-site	23
<b>8</b>	<b>When an Employee Dies by Suicide Off-Site</b>	25
8.1	Communicating with staff about the death of a colleague	25
8.2	Supporting colleagues	26
8.3	Honouring the memory of the employee who died	26

<b>9</b>	<b>When an Employee is Affected by the Suicide of Someone Close</b>	28
9.1	Short Term (Sprint) Needs of a Bereaved Employee	28
9.2	Returning to Work	29
9.3	Long Term (Marathon) Needs of a Bereaved Employee	29
9.4	Outside bereavement supports can be helpful	30
<b>10</b>	<b>When a Former Employee Dies by Suicide</b>	31
10.1	How the news of the former employee's death is communicated	31
10.2	Sending condolences	32
10.3	Supporting colleagues	32
<b>11</b>	<b>Developing a Bereavement Policy for Dealing with Suicide in the Workplace</b>	33
11.1	Leave Entitlement	34
11.2	Supporting Employees Who Are Grieving	35
11.3	Concluding Remarks	36
<b>12</b>	<b>Appendices</b>	
	Appendix 1 – Useful Suicide Support Contacts	37
	Appendix 2 – Other Useful Support Contacts	38
	Appendix 3 – Sample Suicide Bereavement Policy	39
	Appendix 4 – Implementing a Bereavement Policy	42
	<b>References</b>	IBC



# I

## Acknowledgements

**Console and the Irish Hospice Foundation gratefully acknowledge the following for their contributions to the development of this guide:**

All of the families, colleagues and workplaces who through their own experience of suicide and desire to make things better, have provided the impetus for the development of this guide.

Thanks to all those who gave their time and professional expertise in helping to develop this guide. Organisations consulted include: The National Office for Suicide Prevention, The Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, The Irish Association of Suicidology, The Irish Business and Employers Confederation, The Irish Congress of Trades Unions, The Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association, Living Links, An Garda Síochána, Pieta House, The Courts Services, The Dublin City Coroners Office, Aware, Wicklow Local Authorities, Business in the Community, 1Life Suicide Prevention Helpline and The Bethany Bereavement Support Service.

Their openness, patience, care and positive suggestions have contributed richly to this resource.

Special thanks to Esther Lynch and David Begg of ICTU and Brendan Butler and Kara McGann of IBEC for their support in making this guide a reality.

Finally a special word of thanks to all of the staff in Console and the Irish Hospice Foundation who have helped make this resource possible, especially Sharon Foley CEO IHF, Paul Kelly CEO Console, Orla Keegan, Angela Edgehill, Caroline Lynch, Emily Cox and Fr Danny Cleary MSC.



# 2

## Glossary of Terms

### **Suicide**

The act of deliberately or intentionally taking one's own life. Suicidal behaviour can be defined as any deliberate action that has potentially life-threatening consequences, such as taking a drug overdose or deliberately crashing a car.

### **Bereavement**

The period after a loss during which grief is experienced and mourning occurs. The time spent in a period of bereavement is undefined.

### **Loss**

A person experiences loss when they lose someone or something that is of significance to them.

### **Grief**

The normal process of reacting to a loss. The loss may be physical (such as a death), social (such as divorce), or occupational (such as a job). Emotional reactions of grief can include anger, guilt, anxiety, sadness, and despair. Physical reactions of grief can include sleeping problems, changes in appetite, physical problems, or illness.

### **Complicated Grief**

Complicated grief is identified by the extended length of time of the symptoms, the interference in normal function caused by the symptoms, or by the intensity of the symptoms (for example, intense suicidal thoughts or acts).

### **Depression**

An illness that involves the body, mood, and thoughts, that affects the way a person eats and sleeps, the way one feels about oneself, and the way one thinks about things. A depressive disorder is not the same as a passing blue mood. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be wished away. People with a depressive disease cannot merely "pull themselves together" and get better. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or years. Appropriate treatment, however, can help most people with depression.

## Intervention

The act of intervening, interfering or interceding with the intent of modifying the outcome. In medicine, an intervention is usually undertaken to help treat or cure a condition.

## Counselling

In the context of mental health, “counselling” is generally used to denote a relatively brief treatment between a counsellor and a client which is focused mostly upon behaviour. It often targets a particular symptom or immediately problematic situation and offers suggestions and advice for dealing with it.

## Psychotherapy

“Psychotherapy” on the other hand is generally a longer term treatment which focuses more on gaining insight into chronic physical and historical emotional problems. Together, the therapist and client may investigate underlying causes and deep rooted emotions. Its focus is on the client’s thought processes and way of being in the world rather than their specific, immediate problems.

## Trauma

Any injury, whether physically or emotionally inflicted. “Trauma” has both a medical and a psychiatric definition. Medically, “trauma” refers to a serious or critical bodily injury, wound, or shock. In relation to mental health, “trauma” has assumed a different meaning and refers to an experience that is emotionally painful, distressful, or shocking, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects.

# Abbreviations

- **BITC** Business in the Community
- **CISM** Critical Incident Stress Management
- **EAP** Employee Assistance Program
- **HSA** Health and Safety Authority
- **HSE** Health Services Executive
- **IBEC** Irish Business Employers Confederation
- **ICTU** Irish Congress of Trades Unions
- **IHF** Irish Hospice Foundation
- **IMI** Irish Management Institute
- **ISME** Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association
- **NOSP** National Office of Suicide Prevention





# 3



## Foreword

**Suicide is a tragic and shattering reality which not only brings a life to an untimely end but also has a far reaching effect on family, friends, colleagues and communities. The workplace is one such community where people can spend up to half their waking hours, with many forming important relationships with their colleagues.**

I commend this initiative by Console and the Irish Hospice Foundation to help employers to respond appropriately and effectively to suicide. *"Breaking the Silence in the Workplace"* provides a practical, sensible and sensitive set of guidelines for those whose work centres on best human resource practice - employers, unions, managers and work colleagues.

Each one of us must play whatever part we can in helping to reduce the pain which comes after suicide. It takes courage to break the silence in the workplace and speak about suicide. This guide provides an excellent support to employers to help them do this in a compassionate and informed way

Richard Bruton, TD, Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation





# 4

## Introduction

In Ireland, over 500 people die by suicide every year and there are few families, communities or workplaces that have not been touched by suicide, either directly or indirectly. A death by suicide is often the result of an accumulating, complex set of circumstances or experiences in a person's life (which can include their worklife) rather than a single event. There are many contributing factors and few simple answers to the questions that arise in the aftermath of such a tragic loss. Similarly, the impact on those left behind can be significant and wide-ranging, especially in what can be the close community/team setting of the workplace.

Thankfully, there are many organisations, services and information providers who can help employers by offering support and understanding on the wide range of issues connected to suicide. (see Appendix 1 for a full list of relevant organisations). Some of these (e.g. Console [www.console.ie](http://www.console.ie), Living Links [www.livinglinks.ie](http://www.livinglinks.ie)) can also suggest approaches for the workplace which are based on best practice knowledge of what can help people affected by suicide.

For many people, work and the relationships that people have with their colleagues can be an important part of their lives. Yet, in the workplace, fear or trepidation often prevent people from accessing help, or helping others who may be in crisis, or bereaved by suicide. By saying or doing nothing, we only reinforce fears and anxieties which may cause added distress or concern for those affected. For that reason, it is vital that we find ways to remove those fears and draw on the experiences and resources offered by others to work safely, collaboratively and effectively.

### Case Study 1 – Stephens's Story

Stephen worked as a retail store manager in a large nationwide department store. He managed a small team of department managers and a large team of about 60 retail and sales assistants. It was a busy store with many pressures in relation to long opening hours, targets and customer services.

Late one night in February, Stephen received a phone call delivering the news that his brother, aged 22 had died suddenly by suicide in the family home. This was an immediate shock for Stephen and all his family – his brother had never been “unwell” and there had been no signs that anything was wrong, or that his brother was planning to end his own life.

Stephen lived and worked about 200 miles from his family home, so that night he set out on the long journey home, to be with his family. Stephen knew that he had to contact his employer and that the store would still have to open the next day, but it was late at night and Stephen was a key holder. Unable to get his HR Manager on the phone, Stephen contacted another store manager, his peer from another store location. This manager made immediate arrangements and called other key holders to arrange cover for the following days. He also informed Stephen that he would make all necessary contact with the employer for him, and to concentrate on a safe journey home. This was a relief for Stephen, as the shock, numbness and disarray he felt that night, made the long journey home difficult enough.

The next day, Stephen received a phone call from the HR Manager, offering condolences and any support that was necessary. The HR Manager assured Stephen that all was under control in his work, and to spend his time and energy to focus on his family. Importantly, the HR Manager also informed Stephen that she would inform his staff of his bereavement. She asked if Stephen would prefer the method of his brother's death to remain confidential. Stephen decided that he had no need for this to remain confidential and consented to the team learning of the suicide.

Over the next few days, Stephen received many messages of support and condolences from his colleagues. The HR Manager and one representative from the team made the long journey to the funeral, and presented Stephen with a beautifully packaged collection of about 50 short letters, from nearly every member of his staff. Stephen later learned that his staff had all been given time out during their daily briefing meetings, to collectively write messages to Stephen and his family. This was touching and very memorable for Stephen; he found that gesture to be a lot more personable than a series of remembrance or sympathy cards.

When Stephen returned to work, he found the transition to be very smooth and relatively stress-free. The interim manager who held the store in his absence, remained in situ for another week or so, to help in small and practical ways. There was no accumulated workload, and every effort was made to slowly ease Stephen back to a normal routine. In addition, on his return to work, Stephen received a personal letter from the international Chairman of the company, offering condolences and support from the organisation. Stephen had only met the Chairman once, and was touched at this acknowledgment.

Three months later, some of Stephens's team informed him of their intent to hold a collection and fundraiser for a national mental health charity. They asked his permission and Stephen gladly offered his support to this. This meant a lot; Stephen knew his team had not forgotten about his tragic loss, and wanted to send him a message of support.

Stephen's story provides an example of good practice in responding to the reality of suicide in the workplace. It shows how good leadership and communication along with helpful practical responses can make a big difference in a difficult situation. This guide will draw on Stephen's story and other experiences to suggest ways that workplaces can respond in compassionate and informed ways to the challenges that suicide present to employers and staff alike. Although suicide is a difficult and painful reality when it visits a workplace, there are approaches that we know can be helpful and make a difference in a positive way.

### **Context of the guidelines**

This guide is designed specifically, with employers in mind. It aims to help organisations to increase their understanding and confidence in responding to suicide in the workplace. Through this understanding, employers can be helped to reduce or minimise impacts on workplace outcomes such as absenteeism, sick leave and/or reduced performance.

Workplaces can vary hugely in terms of size and ways of doing things. What might work well in one setting, may not be as appropriate in another. Therefore while there are things that we know can be of help in responding to suicide in the workplace, the guidelines in this document are presented as suggestions rather than hard and fast rules. Each employer, whether large or small, can adapt them to the individual circumstances of their own workplace.

There are four main types of suicide bereavement situations which can occur in the workplace.

1. When an employee dies by suicide on-site
2. When an employee dies by suicide off-site
3. When an employee is affected by the suicide of someone who is close to him/her
4. When a former employee dies by suicide

The following sections will explore what is involved in supporting employees bereaved through suicide and other practical information about responding effectively to suicide in the workplace (including tips and frequently asked questions). Further sections will examine the four workplace suicide scenarios outlined above and offer practical approaches for each one. The last section will look at suggestions for developing a bereavement policy to deal with suicide in the workplace. Finally a list of useful contact details and guidelines for implementing a suicide bereavement policy are provided in the Appendices.



# 5

## Suicide Bereavement Support

### 5.1 Responding to suicide in the workplace

In order to maintain a healthy and safe work environment, responding *appropriately* to the experience of suicide in the workplace whether through an employee affected by suicide, or an actual employee death on-site or off-site, is very important.

Bereavement support describes the psychological “first aid” we can administer to those bereaved in the aftermath of a death by suicide. Best practice suggests that when employers or those in responsibility handle this crisis well, there is a positive impact on other employees’ reactions to the loss and the resulting long term effect it may have on them.

It can be challenging to know how best to support work colleagues and/or employees affected by suicide, but it is important to know that an employer should never feel alone when tasked with supporting those affected by suicide. There are organisations and agencies that can offer advice and information to support employers in these difficult situations. Managers and employers are not expected to have all the skills necessary to support someone affected by suicide (for a full list of suicide bereavement support organisations see Appendix 1).

## Case Study 2 – Sharon’s experience

About five weeks before the closure of medium sized telephone Call Centre, staff and management held a celebratory night out, to mark the end of their work together. The team was relatively young and some had worked together in the organisation for many years. The following day, one young male employee did not present to work. Later that evening, the Call Centre Manager, Sharon received a phone call from this employee’s family to inform him that he had died by suicide that morning in his home town.

Sharon was intensely shocked by this news, and given that she was managing the closure of the Centre and the redeployment of staff to other locations, it was a huge upset for her. Sharon immediately did four things;

- Offered sincere condolences to the employee’s family, and checked that they were comfortable with the team learning the following day of their colleague’s death.
- Sharon called the national HR Manager who worked in a secondary location. The HR Manager agreed to come to the site the following morning to assist her in telling the team of this news. The HR Manager also took up the duties of informing the Health and Safety Manager (HS) and the CEO.
- Sharon looked up and contacted the local HSE Regional Suicide Resource Officer for some advice in how best to tell the staff this sad news.
- From that call, Sharon also contacted a local bereavement support organisation who offered some counselling presence in the Centre the following day.

The next day, Sharon and her HR Manager gathered the team together, in a separate meeting room. She delivered the news in a caring and concise way, avoiding any speculation about the employee’s death. She also expressed her own shock and told the team she would keep them informed as details emerged. The team were given some space and time to digest this information. In addition, the team were offered some support from bereavement counsellors who were on site later that afternoon. They were on hand in a private room for any employee to drop in during the afternoon. Some chose to do so.

As the week progressed, Sharon was able to update the team on removal and funeral arrangements. The team came to the conclusion that a small delegation, and the CEO would attend the funeral, and the organisation sent flowers and a formal condolence. At the funeral, the employee’s parents expressed a wish to visit their son’s workplace, meet some of his colleagues, and take some of his personal belongings. This was arranged for the following week, when Sharon organised a small lunch for his parents, and they talked casually with some of his colleagues and cleared his desk. It was a difficult day, but again, Sharon had offered access to some bereavement counsellors, for any employees who wished it. The employee’s parents had never seen their son’s workplace before and they seemed comforted and reassured by the compassionate welcome they received there.

There were only a few weeks remaining before the closure of the Call Centre and the redeployment of all the team. Sharon was aware that this would be an emotional time for everyone and so she allowed the logistical work of the Centre closure to progress at an agreeable and sensitive pace. Sharon arranged for two additional workers from another site to come and assist with some of the heavier work. She also organised some lunches for the team and invited the bereavement counsellors back weekly for some informal presence on the site. Literature and leaflets were made available on how to access supports outside the workplace after their redeployment. Sharon also scheduled a lunch date with employees for 2 months later, to give those who wanted to come together again the opportunity to do so.

This is another example of responding to a difficult and complex suicide situation in the workplace in an effective way. The key to being able to manage this situation well was Sharon's willingness to seek out and ask for appropriate help from people who were experienced in dealing with suicide.

#### **Key Learning Point**

You are not expected to know everything about how to respond to suicide in the workplace. Seek advice and help from people who are experienced in dealing with suicide (See Appendix 1)

## **5.2 Common grief reactions to suicide**

It is helpful when employers foster a good general awareness of the common themes of, and reactions to, suicide. This helps employees who may experience traumatic grief reactions, and also helps the organisation return to a degree of normalcy and the pursuit of its goals. People may experience very different severities of emotion over very different time periods. Their unique response may depend on a variety of factors including the individual's differing styles of coping; their previous personal experiences of death and loss; their supports outside the workplace and their particular relationship with the deceased (e.g., peer, manager, client, customer, or vendor). It can be a complex and on-going journey.

When someone dies by suicide, it is useful that employers have a basic understanding of what their employees may be experiencing as a result. There are some common grief emotions and reactions to remember, including;

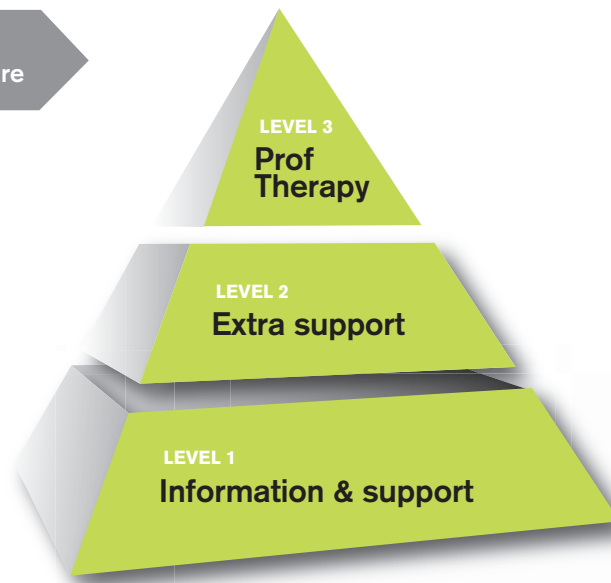
- Denial
- Anger
- Shame
- Depression
- Despair
- Fear
- Isolation
- Shock & Numbness

Although these grief responses are common to most people who are bereaved, the support that employees may require following a suicide can vary from person to person. In particular, bereavement by suicide can bring with it prolonged and persistent questioning and intense feelings of guilt or blame.

Best practice suggests that the type of support that people may need can be divided in to three different levels. This can be represented by the pyramid of bereavement care (see Fig. 1 Page 15) and can be explained as follows;



Figure 1.  
Pyramid of Bereavement Care



- Level 1** Level 1 applies to the majority of people (approximately 60%) who are grieving and involves providing information on the grieving process, practical help with tasks, and social support. It is non-professional support and can be provided by anyone who has an awareness of, and some basic training in, the grieving process. In the workplace this is the typical support that managers and colleagues can provide to someone who is bereaved.
- Level 2** Level 2 applies to a smaller percentage (approximately 25%) of people who need extra support with their grief. This could be because of the additional traumatic nature of a death by suicide. It is generally short term, and provided by non-professional volunteers who themselves have had some experience of the particular grief. People providing Level 2 support will have had specific training in listening skills and understanding the grieving process. Some organisations may have occupational health or employee assistance programs which may provide some Level 2 support, but generally it is provided outside of the workplace by local support organisations. (See Appendix 1 for a list of suicide bereavement support organisations).
- Level 3** Level 3 is specialised support provided by professionals (Psychotherapy, Psychology, Counselling, Medical) and is appropriate for people who develop complications or become stuck in their grieving process (approximately 10-15%). Professionals providing this support will have had specialised training in dealing with complicated grief. Suicide bereavement support at Level 3 is quite specialised and in the workplace the normal procedure would be to refer people to outside providers of this kind of support as required. (For a list of Level 3 suicide bereavement support organisations see Appendix 1).

<sup>1</sup> Petrus Consulting, U. Bates, et al. (2008). Review of General Bereavement Support and Specific Services Available Following Suicide Bereavement. Dublin, HSE and National Institute for Clinical Excellence NICE (2004). Services for families and carers. Improving supportive and palliative care for adults with cancer. The Manual. London, Author: guidelines on bereavement care.

Some bereaved employees may experience relatively few of the reactions outlined earlier (Level 1) and best practice suggests that the role of employers would be to provide support at this level (i.e. information, practical help and social support). Others may experience several reactions (immediate or delayed) in a prolonged or intensive manner (Levels 2 and 3). If an employee is experiencing symptoms of unusual intensity and duration, it is important to guide her/him to appropriate Level 2 and Level 3 resources. These may be within the organisation but are generally found in the wider local community. If you are concerned about an employee and what support he/she might need, seek advice from one of the suicide bereavement support organisations in Appendix 1.

### 5.3 Grief and time

Grieving takes a long time, often longer than we might think. Two years is a good rule of thumb for people to come to terms with the major aspects of a death, though with sudden deaths such as suicide the grieving period can take longer. Appropriate grief support can be thought about in terms of an athlete running in a race. Around the time of the death generally people are very concerned and aware of the person who is bereaved. There are many rituals (removal, burial, inquest etc.) and the bereaved person will generally receive good support. We call this 'Sprint' or 'Short Term' bereavement support. Over the Longer Term (two years and upwards) what we call 'Marathon' bereavement support is required. This involves being aware that an employee who is bereaved by suicide can be affected for a long time after the death and that she/he can require support at different times and at different Levels over that period.

#### Key Learning Point

Bereavement support in the workplace can be thought of as both a 'sprint' and a 'marathon'. The role of the workplace is to provide Level 1 bereavement support and to be able to guide an employee to appropriate Level 2 and 3 supports as required.

### 5.4 Tips on supporting someone bereaved through suicide

When supporting someone who has been bereaved by suicide...

#### Do

- Give time to listen and understand
- Ask what can you do that would help
- Be yourself and communicate naturally
- Ask the person if he/she would like to talk about it
- Know what supports and services are available elsewhere
- If you don't know what to say, explain that you don't know what to say

#### Don't

- Avoid the person or allow awkwardness to prevent you offering support
- Offer too much opinion or speculate on events
- Avoid talking about the person who has died
- Assume you know how the person is feeling
- Use clichés ("*there is a reason for everything*", "*time is a great healer*", "*they must be at peace now*")
- Attempt to find reasons for or pass judgement on their loss
- Ask how they are, unless you have time to listen



## 5.5 Frequently asked questions on supporting someone who is bereaved through suicide.



- **Is it better to avoid the subject or mention it?**

It is better to acknowledge a person's loss than to avoid talking about it. For example, "I am sorry to hear that your mum died". While a person may gain some comfort in learning that you have been through similar yourself, it is also important not to relate their loss to your own, or to assume that you know how they feel.
- **Does everyone grieve the same way?**

No. There are different grieving styles – some people like to express their grief openly while others are more private. If unsure, ask the person who is grieving what they would prefer.
- **What if I upset someone by asking them how they are?**

Don't panic. Support and reassure the person. It is normal for people who are grieving to get upset. Remember it is the fact that their loved one has died that is upsetting them, not necessarily what you have said.
- **If I mention suicide – can that cause other people to suicide – i.e. copycat suicides?**

Research tells us that using the word "suicide" does not plant the idea in someone's head. In fact, if someone is feeling that low, hearing the word can bring some relief and reality to their situation. If you are concerned, seek advice from a suicide support organisation (see Appendix 1 for a listing of appropriate organisations).
- **What can I do for someone who is grieving?**

Ask them what would be helpful for them. Practical things such as going for coffee, for a walk, or taking some time out with them can be really helpful. Allow the person who is grieving to guide you on what would be helpful for them.
- **Why is there an inquest after a suicide?**

An inquest is held after a death by suicide as such deaths are classed as a "unnatural" and therefore must be investigated. It can be a stressful time for friends and families as many details about the person's last hours and their method of suicide may be recounted. Some families might prefer not to attend the inquest, while others find it important that they do.
- **How can I support someone around the time of the inquest?**

Helping in simple practical ways is important. If appropriate, offer to bring them along on the day, talk with Gardai or staff at the Coroners Court on their behalf. Even being present or planning some time out with them around the time of the inquest can help. Support can be offered in the form of a simple listening ear to help ease any anxiety or stress.
- **What is the most important thing in supporting someone who is grieving?**

Listening. Simply creating some time for the person and listening to them if they want to talk is really valuable.

- **How do I balance showing care and concern for a person who is grieving with getting my job done?**

By being fully present to the person who is grieving when you are able to and separating from them and their situation when you have to.

- **How long does grief take?**

Generally longer than we might think. Two years is a good rule of thumb to come to terms with the major aspects of a loss and often people say that the second year can be harder than the first. With the added complex reactions associated with a death by suicide, complicated grief may persist for much longer.

- **Does bereavement around suicide take longer than other bereavements?**

In some cases, yes. The sense of loss and complex questions that accompany such bereavement can mean that some people experience a protracted grief. In other cases, the timescale may not be much different, but the intensity of the grief may be heightened.

- **Do people get over their grief?**

Grieving is not so much about getting over losses as learning to live with them and finding new ways to cope with loss and changed circumstances.

- **What do I do if I am really concerned?**

Talk to someone who is experienced in bereavement support or who is knowledgeable about suicide, and ask for advice (see Appendix 1 for a list of suicide bereavement support organisations).



# 6

## Other Relevant Information on Responding to Suicide in the Workplace

### 6.1 Be Prepared

Given every organisation will have varied capacities and structures in place, the level of preparedness for handling suicide, or suicide bereavement, in the workplace will also vary. Employers and organisations should never feel alone in this regard, there are many bereavement organisations that can support and advise on what is appropriate for their particular workplace (See Appendix 1 for a list of appropriate organisations).

Some general steps that can be taken to build preparedness include;

- If possible, nominate personnel in the organisation, or have access to someone outside the organisation, who are skilled, or could be trained in the areas of loss, bereavement and suicide.
- Gather information on the range of suicide supports and services that are available or even simply find where this information can be accessed. For example, Helplines, community support groups, counselling services, emergency services, Gardai.
- Ensure your organisation has a suitably developed policy on bereavement in the workplace. See Section 11 Page 33 for information on Developing a Suicide Bereavement policy for the workplace.
- Consider if your organisation needs to develop a Crisis Response policy. Some larger organisations use CISM (Critical Incidents Stress Management) guidelines to formulate detailed coordinated strategies appropriate to the size of their organisation. The formation of an Incident Team may also be necessary to implement more detailed and substantive CISM or Crisis Response protocols. (See Appendices 1&2 for organisations which can provide guidance in the development of such protocols.)

**Key Learning Point**

It is important to be prepared for the possibility of suicide visiting your workplace. Gathering information on local suicide support resources, along with development of an organisational response plan and a bereavement policy are important preparation steps.

**6.2 Inquests, What to Expect**

If death is due to an unnatural cause such as suicide, the local Coroner is obliged to hold an inquest. An inquest will establish the legal facts about the death, establishing the circumstances and cause. Typically, an inquest will not take place until at least six weeks after the death. The death will be registered by means of a Coroner's Certificate when the inquest is concluded (or adjourned in some cases). Prior to the inquest (or whilst awaiting the post-mortem report), the Coroner's office will provide an Interim Certificate of the Fact of Death, which may be acceptable to banks, insurance companies and other institutions.

In the event of a suicide in the place of work, employers should liaise directly with the Gardaí as to how this process will work. It may be necessary for colleagues to be present at the inquest, especially if they found the body of the deceased. The Coroner decides which witnesses should give evidence at the inquest and the order in which they should give their evidence. Evidence must be presented so as to provide a logical sequence of the circumstances surrounding the death.

Employers should also be cognisant that for employees who have been bereaved through suicide outside their workplace, the time around the inquest can be a particularly upsetting or anxious time. An inquest may investigate and publicly report on personal family circumstances and situations that preceded the death by suicide. It can be helpful and supportive if an employer can provide additional emotional support at this and if appropriate, time off to attend the inquest.

**Key Learning Point**

An inquest must be held if a death is due to an unnatural cause such as suicide. Employees may be required to attend. This could be a stressful time for those employees and sensitivity and flexibility on the part of the employer can be very helpful.

### 6.3 Don't avoid the topic of suicide

#### Case Study 3 – Patricia's Experience

When Patricia lost her youngest son Keith (aged 22) to suicide, her family were intensely traumatised. Keith had a difficult history of ill health and had attempted suicide on several occasions previously. Still, it was a devastating and sudden loss and one that caused many divisions within the immediate family.

Patricia was employed as a senior manager for 26 years at the same business, although few of her colleagues or the CEO were ever aware of her difficulties at home. She was very successful and was a well-respected member of the team. At the time of her son's death, Patricia was afforded generous leave from work to manage all the immediate needs that she now faced. Patricia was later allowed to return to work on a phased basis for one month which she was very appreciative of.

As time progressed though, Patricia felt that her colleagues and the CEO avoided the topic of her son's death and offered only superficial sympathies and brief "check-ins". While she was able to turn to other close friends, and began some counselling privately outside work, Patricia also yearned to hear her son's name even just mentioned in her workplace; everyone seemed to shy away from her in the staff canteen. Patricia was becoming increasingly isolated and her performance, motivation and attendance all began to suffer.

One day, Patricia sought permission to display a poster, on the staffroom noticeboard, about a local suicide awareness event. She thought this may send a positive signal to some of her colleagues that she was ok to talk about things. While she was given permission to display the notice, within a few days it had been inadvertently covered by another poster. By the following week, it had been removed. Patricia found this particularly hurtful. She felt as though her loss had been minimised and the stigma associated with Keith's death, reinforced. Sadly, within 18 months, Patricia decided to take early retirement from her job. Patricia always loved her work and so did this reluctantly, although she felt that her employer was relieved to see her go. Patricia sensed that the CEO had always found it hard to look her in the eye since her son's death and she felt a great discomfort and awkwardness with most of her colleagues.

Patricia's story highlights how colleagues and line managers may sometimes feel a reluctance to approach the subject of a death by suicide. It is understandable that this may be the case as it can seem awkward or perhaps even frightening. Reacting as such does not reflect badly on an employer or colleague as it is a very natural response to a difficult topic. Still, saying nothing or completely avoiding the topic (or the person) is unhelpful and may reinforce the isolation that the bereaved person is already feeling.

Some people may feel the need to talk about their loss, others may want more privacy and time. But in either case, offers of assistance, listening or support can always be made; the lead should always be taken from the bereaved person themselves.

Best practice shows that very simple invitations and basic offers of listening will make a huge difference. Training and educating people around suicide and how to support people affected by it, is also useful. At times like these it's important to remember that employers or organisations should not shy away from the task, and need not feel alone. For example, talking with a suicide support organisation (such as those listed in Appendix 1) can bring comfort, direction and confidence at such times.

#### **6.4 Take care of yourself when working with suicide**

Suicide is an emotive subject. Whether faced with a suicide in the workplace, or indirectly through a bereaved colleague, everyone can be affected. The effects of such a traumatic death may be obvious with some, and not-so-obvious with others. Some may grieve or suffer in silence. Managers or leaders themselves may need support, and finding a safe place to talk about it within the workplace, or outside, is vitally important.

Employers, employees and colleagues may need to identify what might be necessary to nourish and replenish them – for example, rest, relaxation, exercise, diversions. Grief can be emotionally and physically exhausting. The sharing of reactions and the promotion of an inclusive, healthy and supportive work environment will allow all concerned to grieve appropriately and express their thoughts and feelings to trusted people. Again, advice from individuals and organisations experienced in working with suicide can be helpful here (See Appendix 1 for a list of appropriate organisations).

##### **Key Learning Point**

If you are dealing with a suicide situation in your workplace or supporting someone affected by suicide, you also need to be supported appropriately and to care for yourself, as this kind of work can be very demanding.





# 7

## When an Employee Dies by Suicide On-Site

If a suicide occurs *in the workplace*, the immediate shock and trauma on employees and colleagues can be quite intense. At this early stage, a calm and considered approach is crucial. Such an event will necessitate the involvement of a number of statutory agencies which can include the Emergency Services, the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), any on site safety representatives, the Health Services Executive (HSE) etc. It is also important to remember that because a death by suicide is classified as “unnatural”, the scene will also require analysis by the Gardai.

### 7.1 Developing a plan for responding to an employee suicide on-site

Best practice suggests that each workplace should have a plan in place for dealing with the situation of an employee who has died by suicide, on site. This plan could be incorporated in to the Health and Safety statement. Larger organisations or employers could introduce such a plan and incorporate it within existing Critical Incidents Stress Management (CISM) or Crisis Response protocols (See Appendix 2 for organisations that can advise on these matters ). Smaller employers could make reasonable plans and protocols appropriate to their size and level of resources. Broadly, any plan should include procedures for dealing with;

- Contacting the Emergency Services
- After the Emergency Services have confirmed that the person is dead, taking advice on how the body is to be taken care of
- The immediate safety of the area
- Establishing the facts – What has happened, who was involved, when it happened, how it happened, where it happened
- Establishing communication with the family or next of kin of the employee. Finding out what information the family or next of kin want shared and keeping all other information confidential
- Communication with emergency services and relevant agencies or departments (Health and Safety, Employee Assistance, Unions etc)
- Reporting a death both internally to employees and externally to authorities, family and/or the community. It is important that the information shared is accurate and appropriate, as this helps to prevent rumours which could add to people's distress
- Employees who may require medical or mental health interventions
- Returning personal items of the employee to the family

Best practice also suggests that a nominated Incident Team is formed who meet regularly in the days and weeks after the employee death. In a large organisation, this Team could include members of Senior Management, Public Relations, Human Resources, Health and Safety etc. Members should be suited to their role, have appropriate skills (e.g. good organisational skills, attention to detail, a calm approach) and have an interest in this type of work. It is suggested that someone who is recently bereaved may not be a suitable person for such a team.

Members of the Incident Team would typically be assigned roles and responsibilities, which could include;

- **Team Leader** – responsible for establishing the facts of the situation and coordinating and directing the activity of the team. A primary objective of the Team Leader should be to, at all times, ensure careful consistency of information and its delivery so as to avoid rumours and unhealthy speculation. The Team Leader should also be instrumental in setting a supportive, informative and inclusive tone and approach within the workplace.
- **Family support person** – represents the organisation to the family of the deceased employee and would be the key contact for all communications between the family and the organisation. It is important that any person tasked with breaking the news of an employee's death, to their family, should do so after careful liaising with the Gardaí. Where possible, this person should meet with the family face-to-face.
- **Staff support person** – responsible for coordinating appropriate support for staff around the incident which could include trauma debriefing, psychological and bereavement support, as well as practical support. (See section 8.1, Page 25 *Communicating with staff about the death of a colleague* for further details).
- **Information and communication contact person** – responsible for coordinating communications within the organisation and with outside parties, media, customers, etc.
- **Emergency services and statutory agencies contact person** – responsible for liaising with emergency services – Gardaí, Fire Service – and statutory agencies – Health and Safety Authority, HSE etc
- **Workplace cleanup** – responsible for the sensitive cleanup of the workplace after the body has been removed. The authorities or Gardaí will usually advise on how best to handle the scene of death. There may be a requirement for them to conduct enquires or analysis, so at times, this may take some days. In due course the task of restoring the scene of death to its normal function may lie solely with the employer. At this time it may be helpful to call on the services of outside facilities services, so as to avoid further traumatising colleagues by asking their involvement. An important consideration for employers is, that a quick “clean-up” of the scene of death may leave some employees with the impression that the organisation wishes to “cover-up” quickly or return to work as if nothing has happened. This may feel hurtful to employees, so such matters should be handled within a sensitive and considered timeframe.

Best practice suggests that the Incident Team meet some time after any incident, and again annually to review their plan, outcomes and Team itself.

#### **Key Learning Point**

Each employer should develop a plan for responding to the suicide of an employee on- site (this may be based on a plan for dealing with similar emergency situations). Seek advice if required, from relevant suicide support and other organisations (see Appendices 1&2) including the Health and Safety Authority ([www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie)) who can advise on Safety Statements.



# 8

## When an Employee Dies By Suicide Off-Site

A sudden and traumatic death such as suicide can have a hugely emotional impact on those left behind. The intensity of the facts associated with suicide often heightens the resulting emotional response, can impede peoples' coping mechanisms, and impact negatively on their work and health.

Best practice suggests that early direction and clear communication can help to prevent serious outcomes and minimise risks to those left behind. The workplace can essentially be thought of as a “community” and it is helpful when the “leader” uses his/her position to set the tone and sensitively instil confidence and hope across the entire work community. If information about the death of an employee is poorly or sporadically communicated, the news may develop into speculation or rumour.

### 8.1 Communicating with staff about the death of a colleague

If tasked with delivering the news of an employee's death to colleagues, an employer should decide in advance who will do this. It is suggested that it should always be someone in authority. The delivery of such news can in itself, be very stressful, therefore a second nominated person supporting this role will also help. At this point, liaising with a suicide bereavement organisation such as those listed in Appendix 1 may also help to formulate ideas and strategy.

When delivering the news of an employee's death, there may be a fear of “over-stepping the mark”, or causing more harm than good. By keeping such delivery simple and concise and by instilling messages of support and cooperation, an employer can have a positive, helpful influence on their wider team. Some tips include;

- Rehearse or plan what is to be said
- Call a team meeting to bring bereaved employees together; find a place that is comfortable and suitable
- Structure and boundary the session
- Ensure enough time is allocated for the meeting
- Use an open and honest approach
- Avoid speculation and dispel rumours

- Observe any confidentiality requests that the family, or authorities have asked for
- Convey compassion and competence to the wider team
- Remain calm
- In the first instance, details about the death may be unclear and there may be a need for giving further updates in the future. Where appropriate, simply acknowledge this with employees

## 8.2 Supporting colleagues

Given that different members of the team will have had varied relationships with the deceased, their reactions to the death will also vary. For example, some colleagues may have been very friendly with the deceased while others may have had a very formal relationship. Some workers may be distracted, upset and shocked at the news. Generally, after hearing traumatic news it is best if staff are given time to take in what has happened and be encouraged to remain at work (allowing that productivity may be temporarily affected). The purpose of this is to provide structure and support. It also conveys the message that the situation, while difficult, can be managed, and people will benefit by being able to support each other at work.

As a group, bereaved colleagues should be given the opportunity to discuss a death by suicide and collectively decide how the team will be represented at the funeral, removal etc. Time off should be arranged to allow a reasonable number of colleagues to attend such events or for nominated colleagues to visit the deceased's family. It is also helpful if bereaved colleagues are informed of how the *organisation* will respond, for example, communications with the family, sending of flowers or cards.

It is always helpful if an employer can respond to employee's needs in a timely, inclusive, sensitive and accommodating manner. If unsure of what might be required in the case of a death by suicide, it can be helpful to contact a bereavement support organisation for guidance on how to identify specific needs or how to respond to them (See Appendix 1 for a listing of relevant suicide bereavement support organisations).

### Key Learning Point

When an employee has died by suicide, it is important to strike a sensitive balance between a timely return to "routine" and allowing space for employees to acknowledge what has happened, talk informally and support each other.

## 8.3 Honouring the memory of the employee who died

In time, consideration should be given as to how colleagues and the organisation/employer would like to honour the memory of the employee who has died. This should be done in an inclusive and sensitive manner, respectful of the family's wishes and those of colleagues. In time, practices such as collectively writing to the deceased's family, raising money for a local charity, or holding a small ceremonial event may help. Such events should generally be kept simple and uncomplicated and participation in these events should be optional.

Other opportunities to remember the deceased at difficult times (such as birthdays, anniversaries) could be considered, although permanent or public memorialising can be unhelpful. For some, these may function as a permanent reminder of a very traumatic experience which happened to occur in their workplace. For example, a simple plaque or picture may be more appropriate than an area which could become a “shrine” or intrusive to others’ workspaces. In any case, the decision to remember the deceased or install a memorial should be made inclusively and sensitively, taking into account the wishes of the family, and those of employees. Suicide bereavement support organisations such as those in Appendix 1 can advise on how safe, appropriate or sensitive any proposed memorials are.

**Key Learning Point**

It is important to consider how to honour the memory of the employee who has died. This should be done inclusively and sensitively. It is best to keep things simple and allow participation to be optional.



# 9

## When an Employee is affected by the Suicide of Someone Close

Often an employee may experience the suicide of a loved one outside their workplace (e.g., in their own community or family). At this time it is important that an employer has an appreciation of their specific needs so they can effectively support their employee. Best practice suggests that employers should follow the pyramid of bereavement care by looking to provide Level 1 support and having pathways in place to access other Level 2 and Level 3 services, if required (See page 15 for an explanation of the different levels of bereavement care).

### 9.1 Short Term (Sprint) Needs of a Bereaved Employee

Best practice would recommend an employer getting in touch with a bereaved employee as soon as news of their loss is heard. This will give an opportunity to deliver condolences and to reassure the employee that their immediate work can be covered and that they take time to focus on their family and own needs at this time.

A bereaved employee may have some specific short term needs which their employer should remain aware of. For example, they may need assistance or practical help in how to access entitlements or services. They may also have to liaise with the Gardaí or the Coroner's court and this in itself will take time and could be an added stress for them. At this early stage, the bereaved employee will need time and emotional reassurance as well as this practical help.

It would also be helpful for a senior person from the organisation to ask the bereaved employee or their family about funeral arrangements and what information they would like to be shared (or not) with other colleagues. A bereaved employee may find it difficult to communicate with important people in their own lives, such as close friends or family members. Struggling to understand the specific trauma, circumstances of the death and why the deceased took their own life is common and it can lead to isolation, ill health and anxiety. Still, exploring and trying to find a reason for the suicide can be an important part of the bereavement process; it may persist for a long time and their space and time to explore these reasons should be respected.

As an employer, it is important to include bereavement within the organisations policies (See Section 11, Page 33 for details of how to develop a bereavement policy). Given the added dimension to bereavement through suicide, extra flexibility or discretionary time off may be appropriate.

For example, a post mortem will be required (given that suicide is an “unnatural” death) and this may take additional time. Later, an inquest will be held and relatives may want to attend this and face further upset around that time.

For more details on possible leave options that could be included in a workplace Bereavement Policy that would address suicide see Section 11.1, Page 34.

## 9.2 Returning to Work

While the bereavement process is important in enabling people to come to terms with, and to adapt to, their tragic loss, grieving can be very challenging. It is an active and protracted process that requires a great deal of emotional, psychic and physical energy. Instead of bringing people together, suicide can bring hostility and accusations into the family or workplace. This often comes about by members of the family attributing blame for the suicide.

Although a quick return to work after bereavement may be important, it is also important to balance this with the bereaved employee’s specific needs. It can be helpful to discuss with the employee what their specific needs are and what might be possible from the organisation (e.g. suitable temporary or other adjustments in workload and practices may be possible).

An employer can provide valuable support by preparing work colleagues for the return of the bereaved employee. This should be done in an inclusive and sensitive way, asking the bereaved person before they return to work, what it is that would be helpful to them. For example, clarifying if it is ok for work colleagues to talk about their bereavement or suicide, or agreeing what support they would like from their colleagues.

When the bereaved employee returns to work, it is advisable not to take anything for granted and again, to be inclusive in involving the bereaved employee by asking questions about worries or concerns. If there is a *link person* (e.g., HR Manager, Pastoral Counsellor, Employee Assistance Personnel) they may take on this role in a confidential and sensitive way.

For more details on handling the return to work of an employee bereaved through suicide that could be included in a workplace Bereavement Policy see Appendix 3, Section 2.

### Key Learning Point

In the short term, it is helpful to communicate directly with the bereaved person about what information they wish to share with colleagues and to be open to negotiate around other immediate needs that they might have after the death of the person.

## 9.3 Long Term (Marathon) Needs of a Bereaved Employee

Considering the emotions and reactions that are normal when people are grieving after a suicide, it is understandable that the efficiency and work practices of some employees may become disrupted. It is helpful when employers are aware of this and can make reasonable allowances for each person’s work performance in the weeks and months after the death.

As time passes, some people bereaved by suicide will find a way of living with their loss and will adjust their lives in a healthy and positive way. For others, the pain may be prolonged and they may develop associated problems over many years. Dealing with reminders can be difficult and a bereaved employee may struggle to cope with their shifting emotions. The first and second anniversaries are often intense and anxious times for a bereaved person and an employer could note such dates so as to be sensitive of this at the time.

The stigma and fear associated with suicide mean that friends or colleagues sometimes avoid engaging with the person, or even mentioning the deceased with the bereaved person. In truth, some bereaved employees appreciate opportunities to safely remember their loved one and talk about them with a colleague. Others may not, and their wishes should be also respected.

In the long term, some bereaved employees may need to adjust their work practices. Some employers or organisations may already have flexible work arrangements in place, and if available, these could be helpful for an employee who has been bereaved by suicide. It is generally recommended to review each individual case on a needs basis. Talking with the employee may help to identify how their changed family circumstances have impacted on their practical work-life balance. For example, the bereaved employee may struggle financially to provide for immediate or extended family in the absence of the deceased or there may be greater responsibilities or different commitments to fulfil. Some may experience long-term stressful reactions to a traumatic death scene or become isolated within their family or community due to perceived guilt or blame.

#### 9.4 Outside bereavement supports can be helpful

Outside supports and services may prove helpful (and in some cases, essential) for an employee bereaved by suicide. The supports required will depend on their level of distress after their loss. Employers and colleagues can provide support at Level 1 and have pathways in place for accessing Level 2 and Level 3 bereavement support when required (see Fig 1, Page 15).

For example, someone who experiences a mild distress may simply find linking in with a helpline, or attending a community self-help group useful (Levels 1 and 2). For others, who experience moderate levels of distress, a support group may be helpful (Level 2). For those whose distress is severe, or quite prolonged, they may need counselling or medical help, or benefit from hospital or psychiatric services (Level 3).

There are a number of support organisations who deal specifically with bereavement through suicide. It is important that employers seek guidance on what organisations, agencies and services are available and appropriate. A list of suicide bereavement support organisations can be found in Appendix 1.

##### **Key Learning Point**

The impact of a death by suicide can be felt by an employee in different ways for years after the event. It is helpful to communicate regularly with the employee around their needs and to be able to guide them towards appropriate supports as required. Seeking advice from suicide bereavement support organisations in Appendix 1 can be helpful.





# 10

## When a Former Employee Dies by Suicide

There may come a time when an employer or organisation learns of the death of a former employee by suicide. This may come as a shock for many former colleagues who worked closely with the person in the past. Others could experience relatively few reactions. Depending on the length of time the deceased had been out of the employment of the organisation, reactions will vary greatly.

In the aftermath of *any* suicide, all people connected to the person who has died, will reflect and question their prior involvement with them. Some may ask questions of themselves or speculate as to whether their involvement with (or lack of involvement with) the person impacted on their decision to end their life. This is natural and understandable.

Given that a former employee who has died, will likely have been less connected to the workplace in their final weeks/months/years, there may be less of an insight for colleagues into what life was like for them. For that reason, speculation and rumours may become rife. An employer should do what they can to avoid perpetuating such rumours, and deliver or share information in a clear, concise and compassionate manner as highlighted in previous sections.

When a former employee has died by suicide, best practice suggests that an employer or organisation consider the following;

### 10.1 How the news of the former employee's death is communicated.

- If the deceased was a recent employee, or was someone with very close ties with the workplace, an employer can communicate the news to senior management and agree/plan to announce the death to the team. As highlighted earlier, this should be done in a clear and concise way, with consent from, and respect given to, the deceased's family and their wishes (See Section 8.1, Page 25 *Communicating with staff about the death of a colleague*).
- If the deceased was not a recent employee, then an employer could acknowledge their death by meeting or communicating with a smaller group of employees, perhaps those who remember or who had worked alongside the deceased.

## 10.2 Sending condolences

- In either case, it may be appropriate for the organisation to send formal condolences to the family, have representation at the funeral and offer support to the family if needed.

## 10.3 Supporting colleagues

- There may also have been difficult or challenging situations for the former employee before they left work. Perhaps they were made redundant, or were dismissed. If so, an employer should remain cognisant that on hearing of the former employee's death, some staff may experience heightened feelings of guilt or blame. In particular, it may prove upsetting or challenging for staff, personnel or management who were involved in any such procedures before the former employees leaving. They may need some support at Level 1 (see Fig 1 Page 15) and/or be guided towards additional supports at Levels 2 or 3. As before, it can be helpful to seek advice from appropriate suicide bereavement support organisations (See Appendix 1).
- It can also be helpful to refer to other best practice standards in these difficult fields (e.g., redundancies, disciplinaries, dismissals) so as to ensure all employees are given appropriate levels of consultation, assistance, information and/or support during related processes. At all times, employers should remember that advice and information on such matters is available from employer agencies like those listed in Appendix 2.

### **Key Learning Point**

If a former employee dies by suicide, it is important to consider how the news of this death will be communicated to staff, how condolences will be offered to the family, and the types of support that colleagues affected by the death may require.



## II

# Developing a Bereavement Policy for Dealing with Suicide in the Workplace

The previous sections alert us to the individual nature of employee grief after a suicide and the need for flexibility and discretion in the organisation's response. However, a minimum base standard is useful, on which an effective and equitable response can be built. A Bereavement Policy will provide such a base. In 2007 the Irish Hospice Foundation worked with both employer organisations and unions in Ireland to produce a guide for developing a bereavement policy called *Grief at Work* (McGuinness 2007). The core of this guide was a suggested template bereavement policy which could be changed and adapted as required by individual organisations to suit their needs. This provides a good base on which to develop policy guidelines in relation to responding to suicide in the workplace.

In order to take account of the specialised nature of suicide bereavement, additions are suggested in three sections of the template bereavement policy. These are

- Leave entitlements
- Supporting employees who are grieving
- Concluding remarks

In the following paragraphs, these changes that could form part of a Suicide Bereavement Policy are explained and sample policy wording is suggested. It is important to remember that these are suggestions which are informed by best practice rather than prescriptions. They can, and indeed will likely need to be, modified and adjusted to fit the culture and context of the organisation as required. Following these paragraphs a full sample Suicide Bereavement Policy is outlined in Appendix 3 and guidelines for implementing such a policy in Appendix 4.

## 11.1 Leave entitlement

### Compassionate leave

Perhaps the first area that people think about in relation to a Bereavement Policy is leave entitlement. Some amount of paid leave (often referred to as compassionate leave) is usually provided to allow the employee to attend to the funeral rituals and any other immediate matters associated with the death. There is an extra factor to be taken in to consideration in relation to suicide and that is the mandatory inquest which takes place after such a death that can require the presence of close family members, friends or anyone involved with the person around the time of their death.

### Unpaid and annual leave

Depending on the circumstances of the death, an employee may need a longer period of time off work in the short-term, than that provided for by the organisation's compassionate leave provision. In the longer-term, the employee may also need occasional time off to attend to on-going details associated with the death. For example, if the death involves suicide, there may be further legal or official requirements that require the presence of an employee. Or, if the employee is the executor for the deceased, this can involve extra meetings with solicitors, accountants and other professionals. In such cases, having options for using annual leave or unpaid leave can be helpful.

The following is additional sample text on Leave Entitlements which could be used in a Bereavement Policy that responds to suicide:

#### Paid Leave

Bereavement leave is paid leave that allows an employee time off to deal with their personal distress, primarily when a member of their family dies.

In the case of suicide or unnatural death, because of the requirements of the state authorities (e.g. An Garda, Coroner etc. ), the funeral arrangements may be delayed beyond the entitlements outlined above. Further, the employee affected by the suicide or unnatural death, may be required to attend an inquest which takes place several weeks after the death. In such cases additional paid leave will be considered on a case by case basis.

#### Unpaid Leave

Unpaid leave on compassionate grounds up to a maximum of one month may be granted for the purpose of coping with family difficulties arising from the death of an immediate relative. For example, after a suicide or an unnatural death, there may be additional pressing matters for the family to address such as practical or legal obligations.

An employee should consult with their line manager in relation to their needs in such situations and each case will be evaluated individually.

## 11.2 Supporting Employees Who Are Bereaved

There are a number of points that are relevant to the on-going support of employees who are grieving;

- Loss and grief are normal experiences which will have an impact on employees in their work, as well as their private lives.
- Grief is not completed in a couple of weeks or months. Effective organisational responses to employee grief will include both short and long-term elements.
- Most people do not need counselling or therapy to come to terms with a death. They do need information, practical and emotional support (Level 1 bereavement support). A small amount of people (approximately 25%) require extra support generally provided by non professional volunteers (Level 2 bereavement support). A minority of people (approximately 10-15%) may need specialised help (Level 3 bereavement support - psychotherapy, counselling etc.) See Page 15 for further details.
- A suicide related grief can place extra demands on employees. While the emotions experienced (especially shame and guilt) can be more intense than with a non-suicide grief, the support required is essentially the same
- Employee assistance programmes (EAP) can be a helpful resource for line managers on how to manage individual cases. However, good practice suggests that grieving employees are best managed locally by their line manager with support or advice from either human resources, employee assistance professionals, or someone with knowledge of the grieving process (See Appendix 1 for a list of appropriate suicide bereavement support organisations).
- The role of the organisation along with friends, family and other supports, is to help employees to negotiate their own grief, and not hinder, block or make this process more difficult.

The following is sample text on Employee Support which could be used in a Bereavement Policy:

### Employee Support

The organisation acknowledges that bereavement leave is intended to support employees in the immediate period around the death of a relative. However, the process of grief, the natural reaction and adjustment to loss and change, may take a significant time to work through and will be personal to each individual.

Traumatic death such as suicide, road traffic accidents etc. or the death of a child may give rise to intense grief responses which require specialist support. In such situations the organisation will seek advice from appropriate bereavement support organisations on how best to respond.

### 11.3 Concluding Remarks

A Bereavement Policy is an important first step in providing a basic standard of support to all employees who are bereaved. Like any other policy it has limitations and may need adjustments from time to time. It can be helpful to include a paragraph which keeps communication between employees and the organisation open on this topic.

The following is sample text on Concluding Remarks which can be used in a Bereavement Policy:

#### **Concluding remarks**

The organisation acknowledges the personalised nature of bereavement and grief and understands that specific situations such as suicide or unnatural deaths may require considered support. The organisation is committed to supporting employees in practical and reasonable ways. Any queries or requests should be directed to your line manager in the first instance, or the Human Resources Department.

See Appendix 3 for a complete sample Suicide Bereavement Policy which incorporates the changes suggested above. Again, this is provided as a guideline and not as a prescriptive policy requirement. Further information on implementing a bereavement policy is contained in Appendix 4.



# Appendix 1

## Suicide Support Organisations

### Suicide Bereavement Support

- 1. Console** [www.console.ie](http://www.console.ie) **Levels 1,2,3**  
Console is a national organisation providing a wide range of suicide prevention, intervention and bereavement services and supports. It also provides helpline services, training and resources around suicide.
- 2. Living Links** [www.livinglinks.ie](http://www.livinglinks.ie) **Levels 1,2**  
Living Links is a charity providing outreach support and information to those bereaved by suicide.
- 3. Irish Hospice Foundation** [www.hospice-foundation.ie](http://www.hospice-foundation.ie) **Level 1**  
The Irish Hospice Foundation provide a range of resources, training and information on bereavement and loss in the workplace. It is a not-for-profit organisation that promotes the hospice philosophy and supports the development of hospice and palliative care.

### Suicide & Mental Health Support

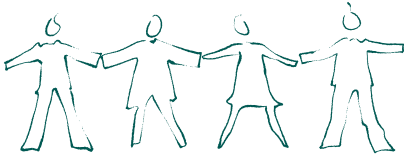
- 1. The Samaritans** [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)
- 2. Aware** [www.aware.ie](http://www.aware.ie)
- 3. Grow** [www.grow.ie](http://www.grow.ie)
- 4. Shine** [www.shineonline.ie](http://www.shineonline.ie)
- 5. 3T's** [www.3ts.ie](http://www.3ts.ie)
- 6. Suicide or Survive** [www.suicideorsurvive.ie](http://www.suicideorsurvive.ie)

### Suicide Prevention

- 1. National Office for Suicide Prevention** [www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie)
- 2. Console** [www.console.ie](http://www.console.ie)
- 3. 1Life Suicide Prevention Helpline** [www.1life.ie](http://www.1life.ie)
- 4. Pieta House** [www.pieta.ie](http://www.pieta.ie)

### Suicide Inquests

- 1. Dublin City Coroners Court** [www.coronerdublincity.ie](http://www.coronerdublincity.ie)



## Appendix 2

# Other Useful Support Contacts

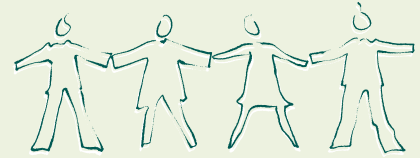
### General Bereavement Support

- 1. Health Promotion** [www.healthpromotion.ie](http://www.healthpromotion.ie)  
Booklets available on Bereavement Support and Directory of Bereavement Services.
- 2. Irish Hospice Foundation** [www.hospice-foundation.ie](http://www.hospice-foundation.ie)  
The Irish Hospice Foundation provides a range of resources, education, training and information on bereavement and loss.
- 3. Bereavement Counselling Service** [www.bereavementireland.com](http://www.bereavementireland.com)  
The Bereavement Counselling Service offers support and counselling to enable people to deal with their grief.
- 4. Bethany Bereavement Support Group** [www.bethany.ie](http://www.bethany.ie)  
The Bethany Bereavement Support Group is a voluntary parish based ministry which aims to help the bereaved and grieving through a nationwide network of support groups.

### General Workplace Support Contacts

- 1. CIPD** (Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development) [www.cipd.ie](http://www.cipd.ie)
- 2. CISM Network Ireland** (Critical Incidents Network Ireland) [www.cismnetworkireland.ie](http://www.cismnetworkireland.ie)
- 3. IBEC** (Irish Business & Employers Confederation) [www.ibec.ie](http://www.ibec.ie)
- 4. ICTU** (Irish Congress of Trade Unions) [www.ictu.ie](http://www.ictu.ie)
- 5. IMI** (Irish Management Institute) [www.imi.ie](http://www.imi.ie)
- 6. ISME** (Irish Small & Medium Enterprises Association) [www.isme.ie](http://www.isme.ie)





## Appendix 3

# Sample Suicide Bereavement Policy

### 1. Leave Entitlements

#### Paid Leave

Bereavement leave is paid leave that allows an employee time off to deal with their personal distress, primarily when a member of their family dies.

In the event of the death of an immediate relative, five working days paid leave will be granted. An immediate relative includes a spouse, child, parent, sister, brother or a person with whom the employee is in a relationship of domestic dependency.

- Spouse also includes a partner with whom the employee is co-habiting, but who is not the employee's legal spouse
- Child covers children in respect of whom the employee is the adoptive parent or is in "loco parentis"
- As per the Parental Leave amendment Act 2006: A person who resides with an employee is taken to be in a relationship of domestic dependency with the employee if in the event of injury or illness, one reasonably relies on the other to make arrangements for the provision of care. Note: The sexual orientation of the persons concerned is immaterial

Three days leave will be allowed on the death of a mother/father-in-law, grandparents, grandchildren, son/daughter-in-law.

One days leave will be allowed on the death of an uncle/aunt to facilitate attendance at the funeral.

In the case of suicide or unnatural death, because of the requirements of the state authorities (e.g. An Garda, Coroner etc. ), the funeral arrangements may be delayed beyond the entitlements outlined above. Further, the employee affected by the suicide or unnatural death, may be required to attend an inquest which takes place several weeks after the death. In such cases additional paid leave will be considered on a case by case basis.

In exceptional circumstances, three to five days leave may be granted on the death of someone outside the immediate family. These circumstances would include where the employee is responsible for funeral arrangements or has to travel abroad to attend the funeral.

An employee should notify their line manager of their intention to take leave under the policy as soon as possible or at latest, on the first day of absence. Line managers have the right to exercise discretion in exceptional circumstances as outlined above. Leave days must be taken consecutively.

## **Annual Leave**

In the event of a death of an immediate relative, an employee may be facilitated in taking annual leave at short notice to supplement their bereavement leave. Requests should be directed to the line manager.

An employee who suffers a family bereavement whilst on annual leave and has to disrupt or cancel leave plans, can avail of bereavement leave and take their displaced annual leave at a future date.

## **Unpaid Leave**

Unpaid leave on compassionate grounds up to a maximum of one month may be granted for the purpose of coping with family difficulties arising from the death of an immediate relative. For example, after a suicide or an unnatural death, there may be additional pressing matters for the family to address such as practical or legal obligations.

An employee should consult with their line manager in relation to their needs in such situations.

## **2. Return to Work**

In certain circumstances a full return to work may not be possible for an employee following the death of an immediate relative, for example where new child care arrangements have to be sourced or responsibility for the care of an elderly parent has transferred to the employee.

In such instances it may be possible to facilitate a phased return to work on a part-time or reduced hour's basis. Any such arrangement would need to be agreed in advance by the line manager, would be subject to an agreed maximum and would be managed in line with a Flexible Working Arrangement / Part-Time Working Policy.

## **3. Employee Support**

The organisation acknowledges that bereavement leave is intended to support employees in the immediate period around the death of a relative. However, the process of grief, the natural reaction and adjustment to loss and change, may take a significant time to work through and will be personal to each individual.

An employee with any concerns about the grieving process impacting on their work performance, should discuss this in confidence with either their line manager or the Human Resources Department to ensure necessary support is in place. Union representatives will also be able to help.

The organisation recognizes that the majority of people do not require counselling to cope effectively with their grief. However, for employees wishing to avail of professional help in coming to terms with a significant loss, the organisation will cover the cost of up to six counselling sessions with an independent counselling practice. This is a confidential service and can be accessed directly through Human Resources.

Traumatic death such as suicide, road traffic accidents etc. or the death of a child may give rise to intense grief responses which require specialist support. In such situations the organisation will seek advice from appropriate bereavement support professionals on how best to respond.

#### **4. Health and Safety**

The health and safety assessment of the workplace should include a consideration of the impact of bereavement on the employee, their duties, and the context in which they are working.

Any employee concerned about their ability to safely conduct their duties in the weeks following the loss of an immediate relative, should discuss this with their line manager.

Line management reserves the right to request an employee to meet the organisation Doctor before resuming full duties.

#### **5. Concluding Remarks**

The organisation acknowledges the personalised nature of bereavement and grief and understands that specific situations such as suicide or unnatural deaths may require considered support. The organisation is committed to supporting employees in practical and reasonable ways. Any queries or requests should be directed to your line manager in the first instance, or the Human Resources Department.



## Appendix 4

# Guide for implementing a bereavement policy (McGuinness 2007)

### Interpreting the Policy

#### Flexibility

Unlike some other policies, a degree of flexibility is needed in interpreting a Bereavement Policy.

- Circumstances will differ and no two employees will have the same experience or needs at a time of loss. The death of an aunt could represent the loss of a primary care-giver to one employee and merely a distant relation to another. The death of a child may be experienced very differently to the death of an ageing parent.
- No assumptions can be made and no 'one size fits all' policy is possible.

#### Consistency

- However, consistency in policy interpretation is important to ensure a fair approach to different situations.
- Ideally guidance on policy interpretation should be provided by one person. In larger companies this responsibility usually sits with HR, in smaller companies the senior manager or manager with responsibility for personnel matters could guide any discretionary action.

#### Cultural Diversity

- Policy interpretation should allow for flexibilities relating to the multi-cultural nature of the workforce. Non-Irish nationals now comprise 10% of the population, and different cultures respond to death in significantly different ways.
- If unsure of how to respond to a bereaved employee from a different culture, it is best to ask the person or someone else from their cultural group about what is appropriate.

## Introducing a Bereavement Policy

It is worth putting some time and thought into the introduction of a Bereavement Policy. The following steps provide a simple guide on how this can be done.

Figure 2.  
Introducing a Bereavement Policy



### Establish a working group

This group could include representatives for employees, management, trade unions, cultural diversity and someone with responsibility for policy. It is worth considering employees who themselves have had some experience of bereavement and have negotiated the grieving process, to be members of this group.

### Review current practice

Review current practice for bereaved employees in the organisation and do an audit of both short and long-term supports currently in place.

### Identify gaps

Identify where current policy and practice could be developed and expanded.

### Draw up a draft policy

Draw up a draft Bereavement Policy that is appropriate to the organisation. See Appendix 3 for sample text for a bereavement policy that can be used as a starting point.

### **Consult with employees**

Distribute the draft policy to members of staff from all areas of the organisation for feedback and comments.

### **Make changes based on feedback**

There may be good suggestions which the working group has not thought of. It is important to be open to these and to make changes as appropriate.

### **Draw up plan for introducing new Bereavement Policy**

This will include preparing key staff on their roles in relation to the policy.

### **Introduce the policy**

This will involve ensuring that all members of staff are aware of the Bereavement Policy and its contents.

For advice on developing and implementing a bereavement policy contact the Irish Hospice Foundation  
[www.hospice-foundation.ie](http://www.hospice-foundation.ie)



## References

McGuinness, B. (2007). Grief at Work - Developing a bereavement policy. Dublin, Irish Hospice Foundation.

National\_Institute\_for\_Clinical\_Excellence\_NICE (2004). Services for families and carers. Improving supportive and palliative care for adults with cancer. The Manual. . London, Author.

Petrus\_Consulting, U. Bates, et al. (2008). Review of General Bereavement Support and Specific Services Available Following Suicide Bereavement. Dublin, HSE



**Console**

(CHY 15402), Console House, 4 Whitethorn Grove, Celbridge, Co. Kildare  
Tel: 01 610 2638 Fax: 01 610 2642 Web: [www.console.ie](http://www.console.ie)



**The Irish Hospice Foundation**

(CHY 06830), Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin 2.  
Tel: 01 679 31 88 Fax: 01 673 00 40 Web: [www.hospice-foundation.ie](http://www.hospice-foundation.ie)