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Returning to employment after bereavement



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The effect of bereavement on workplace performance has received little attention from academics, the caring professions, support agencies or employers. Employers, in particular, could be expected to have a vested interest in appropriate support measures since the return of bereaved members of staff to full and effective working has to be of economic benefit to their organisation. This study examines the effectiveness of employees after the death of a close family member or friend and the support offered to them at work.

Two surveys were conducted in February 1996 as part of this research, one of Ministry of Defence (MOD) welfare officers and one of a sample of the author's clients. A significant response rate of 71% and 95% respectively was achieved. The clients were at various stages of bereavement, and some had originally approached the welfare service with a different presenting problem. The views of the individuals were examined, the support measures available were evaluated in detail, and work performance before and after bereavement was analysed.

Bereavement policies of the MOD and some other organisations were compared.

SURVEY OF OCCUPATIONAL WELFARE OFFICERS

The survey was of all 62 MOD welfare officers, taken from official listings during February 1996. The officers were responsible for 116,100 industrial and non-industrial staff out of a total Civil Service population of 516,900[1]. Of the 44 officers who responded, 36% were male and 64% female.

The credibility of the survey was greatly enhanced by the wealth of experience of the respondents. Half of them (50%) indicated that they had been serving welfare officers for over six years. During 1995, the total number of death-in-service cases handled by respondents was 169 (the average per welfare officer was just under four). The number of cases of a client seeking support following a family/close bereavement in 1995 was 197 (average per welfare officer, 4.47).

Training to administer bereavement counselling was recorded as adequate by 50% and good by 32%. The majority (57%) gave bereavement counselling a high priority in their everyday duties. Two-thirds (66%) considered that line managers had a fair understanding of the problems associated with bereavement and made sufficient allowances for a decline in performance of a member of staff so affected.

Comments from welfare officers

'In my experience this recovery (in the work sense) is linked to the effectiveness of the bereavement process. If grief is

EDITOR'S NOTE

Few papers on the topic of returning to work after bereavement have been submitted to *Bereavement Care* despite the importance of this topic. This paper illustrates the role of the welfare officer and suggests that there is a need for better training and research in this field. While the adoption of a 'bereavement protocol' might strengthen the welfare officer's arm in ensuring that bereaved employees get the help that they need, it is hard to imagine a protocol which would be sufficiently flexible to meet the varied needs of all bereaved employees. Nevertheless, the initiative is a welcome contribution towards this goal.

suppressed for any reason (eg being busy with related admin. tasks, or the bereaved person being constantly consoled by relatives/friends) then it is lengthened and becomes erratic. This affects both attendance and work performance.'

'Often employees are far less effective following their return to work after a bereavement. Generally line management and colleagues are supportive but this tends to drop off rapidly after 2/3 months when they feel the bereaved should now manage/pull themselves together. Quite often this is the time when the full impact sinks in and they need more, not less, support.'

'Some bereavements can be a relief (eg someone who has nursed a terminally ill person may find it easier to attend work and concentrate). It really depends on the nature of the bereavement.'

SURVEY OF CLIENTS OF THE WELFARE SERVICE

A representative sample of 20 clients was taken from the author's MOD case load over a two-year (1994-1995) work period. Of the 19 clients who responded, 26% were male and 74% female. Nearly three quarters (74%) of clients had been bereaved for 12 months or more and, of these, 90% had been absent for between one and three weeks afterwards. The longest recorded period was 11* weeks. The majority (74%) considered the timing of their return to work had been right. The same proportion (74%) rated the support given by their line manager as either very good or good, while even more of the client sample (84%) rated the support of colleagues this highly. Of those who stated a view (37%), the majority found it easier to express their true emotions to a counsellor, rather than to a family member or close friend.

Comments from clients

'From my own personal experience, I believe a phased return to work should be permitted if appropriate. This would need to be incorporated into a MOD manual or similar, in order for it to be available as a right and not a concession!'

'The most important help I had was that my welfare officer visited me at home very soon after my bereavement and helped me go through the official maze, which would have been very much delayed if I had not had that support. It was easy to go back to work knowing that he would be available if needed.'

'I feel a reduced working day should be offered to staff. This would greatly enable them to re-acquaint themselves with the workplace and colleagues after a bereavement. I know from my own experience I felt both physically and emotionally shattered when I first returned to work.'

CORPORATE BEREAVEMENT PROTOCOLS

An Institute of Personnel Management study of special leave policies of 65 companies in 1988[2] revealed that all participating organisations allowed employees to take leave of absence on the death of a close relative. The majority of organisations (83%) had a corporate policy on bereavement leave, and in the remaining 11 companies such leave was discretionary. Between one and five days' leave was granted by 77% of the employers surveyed and 15% were prepared to allow specified amounts of additional unpaid leave, ranging from one to 48 days.

Often bereaved employees need to leave work early, or to not attend on 'bad' days, while others develop workaholic tendencies, burying (ie denying) their emotions in work

As part of the study reported here, the relevant workplace regulations of the Civil Service, local government and national/multi-national companies were researched. The MOD staff regulations allow up to five days' special paid leave in the event of the death of a close relative or dependant. This may be extended (for up to another five days) at the discretion of the civilian personnel management authority, and additional time may also be granted for essential travelling. Authority for these decisions can be delegated to local line management. Annual leave is protected since its main purpose is to give staff a break from work and regular periods of rest and recuperation. The role of the welfare officer in these matters is to advise on and assist employees with applications for special leave. Line/personnel management may also ask for investigation and the production of a written report following such a request. In addition, the MOD, through the welfare service, provides counselling and general support. No concessions, however, are made for business arrangements arising out of the estate or the affairs of the deceased.

The comprehensive Civil Service regulations were not matched by the other organisations in this survey. Somerset County Council permits up to a maximum of 10 paid working days as compassionate leave in any one year and staff would have to have the approval of their chief officer for this. In cases of an application for an extension of paid or unpaid leave the chief officer is required to refer the matter to the county personnel officer. External counselling is also available. IBM have a structured hierarchy of staff responsible for approving special paid leave: up to five days, line manager; up to 10 days, operating unit or its human resources manager; over 10 days, director of human resources. Shell UK provide up to four working days; if a longer leave of absence is required the supervisor refers the case to personnel. The outstanding annual leave entitlement of an employee is also taken into account.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The client survey revealed that almost half (47%) considered that their line manager did not make performance concessions on their return to the workplace. In marked contrast, two-thirds (66%) of welfare officers took the opposite view. Surprisingly, these findings were almost totally reversed when the question of a lower annual staff report (ASR) marking in the year of bereavement was considered. Nearly three quarters (71%) of welfare officers believed that ASR markings were at least quite likely to be lower, whereas over half (53%) of the client sample stated that their actual performance marking had not been affected.

A large number (42%) of clients indicated that it took them between one and six months to become fully effective at work. Despite this, only between one and six counselling sessions were being allocated by most (93%) welfare officers. The professionals, however, were responsible for only an average of 16% of disengagements. This is an area which may require re-examination, looking in particular at an extension of counselling and various diary bring-ups at poignant times (eg anniversaries), as advocated by medical protocols. At present this is routine for only 9% of welfare officers, but a recognition of the long-term value of the practice should encourage more to adopt it.

There is a widespread perception that bereavement can affect performance (particularly in the short term) and ASR markings. Line managers contemplating giving a lower ASR marking should, in their capacity as the first point of welfare, address the problem with the bereaved individual. Employees need to be encouraged to use the welfare service; despite a high awareness (89%) of what it offers, and recognition of its helpfulness by clients, its usage is low (42%). The narrowing of this discrepancy, through general staff training forums to promote the welfare service and

suitable amendments to organisational protocols, is the central recommendation of this paper.

Counselling bereaved employees

A trained welfare officer should be able to exercise his or her counselling skills to the benefit of the client. The degree of empathy achieved will largely determine the level of progress likely to be made. To the bereaved of today's death-denying generation, the spiritual message that death is natural and not a failure or disaster often brings comfort[3]. If matters become too complex, or a need for long-term counselling is identified, then a referral to an external agency such as Cruse Bereavement Care may be appropriate. It is not recommended practice for simultaneous counselling to be administered, although in some instances a welfare officer may provide counselling as a holding measure if there is a waiting period for the external agency. Civil Service counselling skills training are based on the Egan model, a three-stage process: Stage 1, Beginning (Explore); Stage 2, Middle (Understanding); Stage 3, End (Act). In this model the counsellor assists the client to make use of his or her own skills in order to move on and become fully functioning again.

All counsellors should have access to adequate supervision and be removed from bereavement counselling for a time if they themselves become bereaved. The core attribute for this work is the capacity for empathy and those who administer bereavement counselling should have resolved their own associated issues.

The view of a senior medical officer of the Civil Service Occupational Health and Safety Agency[4] was that counselling should be recommended to anyone still experiencing feelings of morbidity six months after bereavement. The author's doctor[5] acknowledged the importance of recording a bereavement in family case notes. He found that his patients often sought recognition of their loss at various anniversary points.

SUPPORTING THE RETURN TO WORK

Those who have suffered a bereavement may feel that their work gives them a sense of purpose as something which is still part of their life and which has not been lost. The need to talk to colleagues and friends at work is not always fully appreciated, especially if the bereaved person does not have adequate support from family or friends, and is without spiritual conviction. Conversely, bereaved employees may 'close off', particularly if they are feeling devalued, and become increasingly marginalised, or they may insist on attending when they are lacking an interest in their work. They may be on automatic pilot, 'going through the motions', and unable to cope with complicated tasks. Some bereaved people are liable to make mistakes[6], often acting illogically and out of character.

A desire to make a fresh start, by asking for a transfer, resigning or moving house for instance, could lead to a multiple loss and should be discouraged. Often bereaved employees need to leave work early, or to not attend on some 'bad' days, while others develop workaholic tendencies, burying (ie denying) their emotions in work.

The attitude of the employer is crucial in determining the timescale for a return to regular and effective working. A fine balance has to be achieved in the allocation of work, encouragement and support. Questions such as, 'How long do I carry a passenger?' and, 'At what point do I criticise inferior work and stop making allowances?' are likely to arise. The line manager should encourage continuing support from the welfare service and liaise with the welfare officer if appropriate. A fall in performance should be qualified with a reference to bereavement on ASR markings.

The research confirmed that more support could and should be made available to those returning to employment after bereavement

Welfare officers are not, unfortunately, all-powerful in the workplace; they may advise, but do not necessarily have the authority to make decisions about bereavement leave or to amend ASR markings. There is no doubt that delegating the discretion to approve special paid leave or to re-evaluate staff performance records in cases of bereavement, to line managers and personnel, without clear guidance, is unhelpful and adds to the anxiety of the bereaved. No price can be placed on the peace of mind which results from the knowledge that a set policy, such as that which has long been established in the Civil Service, is in place at a time of devastation. The costs to employers of not understanding the value of such measures, through sick absence or reduced production, are considerable.

This research confirmed the initial hypothesis that more support could and should be made available to those returning to employment after bereavement. The wealth of statistical data compiled has to be balanced against the fact that every case is unique and should be treated and respected on its own merits. Indeed, emotion is much more compelling than statistics. Nevertheless, it is the author's view that the processes of adapting to loss would be best served at the workplace by a greater sense of collective (ie individual/corporate) responsibility and that, ideally, this should be structured through a bereavement protocol.

This project formed part of the author's Certificate in Occupational Welfare course at the University of Bristol, submitted in 1996. The research involved contact with the medical profession, clergy, personnel officers, Cruse Bereavement Care and others, and he would like to thank them all, together with his own colleagues and clients, for their help and co-operation.

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editors

I was pleased to see your feature on 'The loss of a twin' by Joan Woodward (Winter 1997 issue), whose very special form of bereavement has only recently been recognised.

At the Multiple Births Foundation we are equally concerned by the special, and no less complex, grief suffered by the parents of a single surviving twin, particularly if he or she dies at birth. Not only do the parents have a constant reminder of their loss in the surviving twin, but the problem of having both to celebrate and mourn at the same time. Moreover, because they still have a baby, their grief is often understated, even ignored, by other people.

We offer help to such parents but also welcome contact from the professionals caring for them.

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FORTHCOMING EVENT

Sudden Death: conference arranged by nine organisations concerned with helping the bereaved. Speakers include Colin Murray Parkes, Bob Wright, Paul Forrest and Geoffrey Markham.
16, 17 October 1998. Birmingham, UK.
Contact Bereavement Support Services.
☎ 01278 760066.