

# Returning to work

Grief is very personal and everyone responds to it in a different way. This section explores some of the experiences which bereaved colleagues have shared with us, but your situation may be different.

Throughout this section the word 'manager' is used. This means a more senior person in your workplace who is directly responsible for you. Depending on where you work this could be a head of department, a commanding officer, or simply the person you call your 'boss'. If you are self-employed you may find it useful to read the practical advice in the Sands Bereavement in the Workplace guide and toolkit for managers [insert link alongside the suggestions here](#).

Medium to large employers and organisations will have HR departments who can provide advice, and some workplaces also have dedicated employee assistance programmes, welfare officers, chaplains or others who can give support. If you are not sure whether this is the case where you work, you can ask your manager.

## Telling your employer and colleagues

Pregnancy loss and baby loss is a very personal experience, and it is completely up to you what to share with colleagues. Your manager and HR department (if you have one) will need to know why you are off work, but beyond that you can share as many or as few details as feels comfortable.

Many bereaved colleagues find that it is helpful if others know what has happened, as they are more likely to behave in a sensitive manner and be able to offer support which otherwise they would not know was needed. However, other bereaved colleagues want and need more privacy.

There may be others in your workplace who have also experienced pregnancy loss and baby loss, but have never disclosed it.

Even if you are clear that you want your colleagues to know what has happened, you may be uncertain about how to share the news. If you do not want to do so yourself, you can ask your manager to tell other people on your behalf. There are template emails in the Sands Bereavement in the Workplace guide and toolkit for managers insert link which they may find helpful. Agree with your manager what information they should share, when they should share it, and who they should tell. For example, if you named your baby, you may want your colleagues to be told their name and be reassured that you would like them to use it. Similarly, if you do not want others to know, make sure that your manager knows this.

## **Being honest with yourself and your manager**

The early stages of bereavement can be very challenging. Above all, be kind to yourself, but also be honest with yourself and your manager about the work you are able to do. They should not make assumptions about how you are feeling based on what happened to you, the length of the pregnancy, whether you have given birth or are a partner.

There may be times or dates which you find especially difficult, such as your baby's birthday, due date or anniversaries. The build up to these can also feel challenging. You may wish to take annual leave around these times to give yourself some space. The feelings which can surround these key dates are not a sign that your grief is getting 'worse', as it is normal to have many different emotions when bereaved, and to move between different emotions quickly.

You may need to attend medical appointments following your pregnancy. If a medical review or investigation is taking place to find out why your baby died, this can also be emotionally challenging.

If you tell your manager what is happening and when you need time off, they will be better able to understand and support. If you feel that you are not being supported well at work, your employer may find the Sands Bereavement in the Workplace guides for managers and colleagues useful. We also offer training for employers. Many managers are grateful to be given guidance, especially if they have not previously worked with colleagues who have experienced pregnancy loss and baby loss, but if you need support in communicating your needs to your manager or employer, the Sands Bereavement Support Services Team may be able to help you think through the best way of doing this.

## When to return to work

Returning to work can bring up a range of different emotions: some bereaved colleagues look forward to getting back to work as a way of distracting themselves or representing a sense of 'normality', whereas others find the prospect very daunting.

Surveys show that:

- Women need up to 8 weeks off work following a miscarriage
- 10% of parents remain off work for 6 months following their baby's stillbirth
- 38% of mothers and 21% of partners reduce their working hours following their baby's stillbirth

So it is important that you take as much time off as you need. Many bereaved colleagues find a phased return to work or reduced hours helpful. A good employer will realise that it is best for everyone if you return when you are ready, that if you try to do too much too soon you will not work effectively, and that you may also need to take more time off in the longer term.

There are some occupations which may present additional challenges. These may include physical work when your body is recovering from giving birth or you are experiencing the tiredness which can come with grief, work which brings you into contact with situations which are emotionally draining or which mirror your experience of pregnancy or birth, working in healthcare or with young children, or work which requires you to travel and be separated from your partner or other family members. Again, it is important to be as honest as you can with your manager, and to explore different tasks which may be easier or more appropriate for you to do.

“My return to work was completely my own decision and I felt it was the right time to try, on the basis that upon returning I might find that it was too soon and I would need some more time off.”

Andrew

Some employers will offer you the minimum legal entitlements, but others will be more generous and flexible. There are slightly different entitlements across the different nations of the UK, and laws also change, so do check the latest information and ask your manager what leave, pay, benefits, and adjustments you are entitled to.

With so much to think about, you may find it difficult to remember details, so also ask your manager to put it everything in writing for you so that you can look over what has been said, and take time to make decisions.

## Workplace celebrations

It is important that you give yourself permission to 'opt out' of workplace celebrations which you find difficult. You may have colleagues who are pregnant or who have new babies, and who want to share their excitement. Social gatherings, especially at sensitive times such as Christmas, other religious festivals, or coinciding with anniversaries, may also be a challenge.



At the same time, if you feel isolated, either because you work remotely, or because your colleagues are trying to be thoughtful and are unsure whether or not to include you in conversations or activities, speak to your manager. Your manager should be checking in with you regularly when you return to work.

Your work space needs to feel safe for you. If you work at a desk you may choose to have a photograph, or something with your baby's name on it, so that they feel close to you. This may be particularly important if it is not something you can do at home. You may share a space with others who are apprehensive about seeing photographs. This could be for a variety of reasons. Some bereaved colleagues

prefer not to have anything on public display which feels private, or may not have a work space where this is possible, but there are other ways of keeping memories close, including wearing a special piece of jewellery, or carrying something personal to your baby in a pocket or wallet.

## Showing emotions

Some bereaved colleagues worry that if they show their emotions, they are not being 'professional', but any good manager will want to support you as best they can. You may find it helpful to go into your workplace to see colleagues informally before you return to work, as this can help overcome any concerns you have about seeing them for the first time.

If you are concerned about crying in front of a colleague or manager, try to imagine how you would react if it was one of your colleagues who was bereaved and crying in front of you. You would want to support them, so remember that other people will want to support you. They may not always know the best way to do this, and sometimes they may get it wrong, but most people will be genuinely concerned, want to help, and happy to take the lead from you.



One of the emotions which can come with grief is a sense of guilt. You may feel guilty or as if you are letting colleagues down if you do not think you are doing your job properly, or if you are not as productive as you were previously. This is another reason why you and your manager need to discuss workload, responsibilities and hours, so that expectations are realistic and the work you are given does not put you or anyone else at risk. Even simple day to day tasks can sometimes feel overwhelming, so try to see each step you take as a positive achievement.

