

Death and grief during the COVID-19 pandemic

Supporting each other following the death of a colleague



Coping with the death of a colleague in a new context

We are currently facing tragic loss of life, often under very challenging circumstances. We are adapting to a new way of living and are often surrounded by fear, anxiety and sickness. Coping with loss during this unprecedented time can be extremely difficult.

Grief at any time is difficult and painful, and even under normal circumstances the death of a colleague can be challenging and represent a significant loss. While you will experience all of the normal pain of loss and separation, deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic may present additional challenges to the grieving process. The death of a colleague may be related to COVID-19 itself or may occur for other reasons during the pandemic. However, the societal changes and restrictions on bereavement procedures will impact on each of us, our families and all of our normal support networks.

Some new challenges to grieving the death of a colleague may be related to the restrictions arising from social distancing, for example:

- **You may be unable to attend their wake,** funeral or memorial service in traditional ways.
- **You may have limited physical contact** with your family, friends and other colleagues who may have otherwise provided invaluable support. This may lead to further feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- You may be **in living in isolation with others who cause tension** and resentment.
- **You have more 'thinking' time** because of limited access to outside hobbies

Additional challenges because of grieving during this pandemic may include:

- **You may be experiencing intense feelings of worry** about the current situation in the world. This may distract you from fully expressing and processing your grief.
- **High levels of uncertainty and instability** about the current situation, making future planning more difficult.
- It is common to **see, hear or feel the deceased's presence** following a traumatic bereavement.
- You are **surrounded by reminders about illness and death**.

The impact of the death of a colleague

Understanding grief

Different members of the team will have different levels of relationships with the person who has died and will respond to loss in very individual ways. Our other colleagues can be supportive in our grief, or at times their reactions and their own grieving response can be challenging to us.

It is important to remember that grief and reactions to loss are deeply personal experiences, which are influenced by our previous life experiences, by our own personality and personal beliefs, and by our relationship with the deceased.

It may be particularly challenging if you were close to them. You may feel additional anxiety and guilt if your final interaction with them was unpleasant in any way, or if they died within their workplace.

It is important to remember that grief is a normal, essential response to death. It is our natural way of healing. Nevertheless, grief can be incredibly demanding, and you may be surprised at the different ways it can affect you, and the impact this may have, particularly during this current crisis.

Grief is a unique and very personal process. However, some of the common impacts of loss include:

Cognitive impact

- disbelief
- denial
- confusion
- thinking it is not fair
- difficulties with concentration
- difficulty making decisions
- making more mistakes than usual
- finding it difficult to get 'back on track'

Shock, numbness or disbelief can be common, especially immediately afterwards when people often report difficulty accepting or believing what has happened. This may be especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic, when you may not have the opportunity to see your colleague/friend at the time of death or afterwards. You may have been working in different areas due to the COVID-19 working pattern changes and this may increase those feelings of disbelief.

The busyness of work and changed work environments may allow some of that disbelief to continue for longer than usual. This means that the reality of the loss may not be experienced until a more “normal” living routine returns. Alternatively, if you are self-isolating or less busy in your daily routines, you may feel more overwhelmed by your feelings.

Emotional impact

Emotions associated with grief may come in waves with some waves feeling more manageable than others. Common emotions you may experience include:

- numbness
- regret
- fear
- sadness
- anger
- loneliness
- guilt
- anxiety
- emptiness

Anger, irritability, and the associated questioning of “Why did this have to happen?” may be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly if related to concerns about staff protection and wellbeing.

Guilt may be more significant during the COVID-19 pandemic with increased feelings of “survivor guilt”. If you have worked closely beside your colleague questions like “why them/not me?” can understandably occur but may become increasingly intrusive.

Worry or fear might be more significant in relation to your own health and that of your other colleagues, or for other family members concerning COVID-19 infection. Your own family may have heightened concerns for your wellbeing and this can put additional stress on your day.

Physical impact

A strong emotional response following loss can have a direct and often negative impact on your physical health. This may cause increased anxiety when you are more vigilant to worries about infection and signs of illness generally.

Physical impacts of grief may include:

- tiredness and lack of energy
- feeling faint
- difficulties sleeping
- a hollow feeling in your stomach
- changes in appetite
- tightness in your chest or throat
- aches and pains
- oversensitivity to noise
- weight loss or gain
- feeling more tense and irritated

Behavioural impact

Loss has a direct impact on our behaviours, even more so in the current crisis. Some behavioural responses may include:

- crying
- overeating
- undereating
- preoccupation with death or avoiding thinking about it.
- avoiding contact with others
- wanting to be around people more than usual
- drinking alcohol or taking prescription drugs

Spiritual impact

You may be trying to find meaning in what happened. Common spiritual reactions can include:

- questioning
- searching for meaning
- trying to make sense
- faith challenged
- faith strengthened



Looking after yourself following the death of a colleague

Grief is a natural process that requires time. It can be easy to neglect your own needs during the grieving process. The feelings above are normal and may ebb and flow as your experience of the loss adjusts and adapts into your life.

Below are some tips for looking after yourself while grieving in the current crisis:

- **Be kind to yourself:** give yourself permission to feel whatever you feel.
- Keep **regular contact** with others through texts, calls, video calls, emails etc.
- **Share your feelings:** make use of support from the people around you, as you might find it helps to talk through how you are feeling.
- Try to **eat well**, even if you don't feel like it.
- Get some **rest**, even if you can't sleep.
- Try to keep a **regular routine** of getting up, dressed, eating meals at the usual time.
- Try to get **fresh air** every day if you can – even opening a window can help.
- Take some **gentle exercise** even around the house while during chores.
- **Do something creative** to express your feelings (eg write, paint, make a scrapbook, or play a musical instrument).
- **Accept help** if offered.
- **Don't feel guilty** if you are struggling.
- **Try not to turn to 'quick fixes'** that may cause additional distress.
- Try to **avoid increased substance use** such as alcohol, medications or drugs.
- You may wish to **post condolences and support messages online**.
- You may wish to consider joining a **support group online**.
- **Journaling: keeping a personal record or diary** may be a helpful way to process thoughts and experiences.
- **Understand triggers to your grief** and prepare for those triggers (eg on a day that holds painful memories of your colleague, plan to take a day off work or let your friends know that you'll need extra support).
- **Be patient with yourself.**

Coping with work after the death of a colleague

The death of a colleague may have a significant impact on your work and working environment. In this unprecedented time you may find these suggestions helpful:

- **Share your feelings:** remember your colleagues may be experiencing similar emotions as you. Some people find it helpful to share their thoughts with others, particularly those going through a similar process. This mutual support can be done virtually and may bring a sense of comradeship.
- **Take advantage of support available:** you may find that the best support comes from those around you. In the workplace, managers are able to offer signposting to supports. Additional supports are listed at the end of this document.
- **Allow for changes:** try to accept that your work may be affected, and it will take time before a 'new normal' is established.
- **Consider marking their death** through a memorial at work (or at home, if you are working from home). For example, placing a photo up of the deceased, lighting a candle, sending a sympathy card to the family, planting a bush or tree.
- You may wish to **share memories or photos virtually** with other colleagues.
- Other memorial activities could be planned for the future when the current crisis ends. One such example may be to hold a remembrance service for staff which can be a helpful way to commemorate our colleagues who have died.

Above all, be compassionate towards yourself and those around you. Managing loss is hard, and we all will make that journey in our own way and in our own time.

In grief you can only do the best you can

Useful contacts

Psychological helplines

All psychological helplines are open to staff from within the Trust, local GP practices, and independent care providers.

While all NIAS Occupational Health Services are provided from BHSCT, each Trust has agreed that local NIAS staff can also avail of the local Trust helpline.

All Trust helplines are available at the following times:

Monday to Friday, 9am to 9pm

Saturday and Sunday, 2pm to 6pm

Northern HSC Trust

028 9441 3644

South Eastern HSC Trust

028 9250 1332

Southern HSC Trust

028 3756 2600

Western HSC Trust

028 7161 1281

Belfast HSC Trust

028 9615 1888

Some HSC organisations have access to the Inspire Employee Assistant Programme. Staff from these organisations can contact Inspire 24/7 via their Helpline on 0808 800 0002 for telephone support or referral into structured telephone video e-counselling. Check with your HR or Occupational Health team if you're unsure whether you have access.

CRUSE bereavement care has a range of resources and a 24 hour helpline.

www.cruse.org.uk

0808 808 1677

Anyone who is in crisis and experiencing distress or despair can call the Northern Ireland crisis response helpline, Lifeline, on 0808 808 8000.



**Public Health
Agency**



**Bereavement
Network**

Public Health Agency

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.

Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).

www.publichealth.hscni.net

Find us on:

