

Sometimes managing a team means dealing with difficult situations regarding a team members' wellbeing. You should always speak to your own manager or human resources for help and support. This guide looks at how you can support members of your team who are seriously ill or bereaved.

Supporting a team member experiencing serious illness

Someone in your team may have a serious illness or condition. Depending on the nature of the illness, will depend on if you have time to plan ahead.

As a manager, you can anticipate and prepare for an unexpected team member being ill by taking these steps:

Ensure you are up to date with Force policies – the team member dealing with a serious personal or family health problem may have urgent questions about benefits, insurance or medical leave. Staying up-to-date will enable you to provide accurate and timely information.

Find out what resources are available – make sure you know what resources your Force offers so that you can provide information quickly when the need arises.

Listen carefully – when the individual approaches you with news that they have a serious illness, give them your full attention. They may feel guilty about needing leave so reassure them that you understand that they need to make their health their first priority. Ask what you can do to help.

Respect their privacy – find out what the team member would like you to share with the rest of the team about their condition. Some people choose privacy, others want the team to know right away.

Talk to your manager privately – let your manager know that the team member has health concerns and ensure that they know if the individual has requested confidentiality. Your manager might provide you with information on how to handle the situation or suggest helpful resources.

Consult HR – ensure the HR team are told about the situation immediately. Policies and procedures relating to team members serious illness are complex, so they will be able to help you.

Stay in touch when a team member is on medical leave – even if their illness prevents you from talking to a team member for more than a few minutes, it's important to stay in touch without discussing anything that could make them feel pressured into coming back to work.

Watch for signs that people are doing too much – other team members often do too much to help cover for a colleague who is sick so keep an eye on the wellbeing of colleagues.

Encourage other members of the team who may be upset or affected to seek support.

Supporting colleagues returning to work following a long period of absence

Returning to work from an extended period of leave may be emotional for some colleagues, even if they are looking forward to being back in the workplace. You therefore need to ensure the process is a positive experience.

Most returning employees who have had a long period of leave whether this is following parental leave, long term sickness or following a suspension, will need time to get used to the changes that have occurred whilst they were away. They may need:

- introductions to new team members
- explanations of changes in policies and procedures
- training in how to use any new or upgraded software or other equipment
- a chance to catch up with teammates

Think about what your team member will need and the best way to achieve them. Here are some tips on what steps to take when your team member returns:

Welcome – make a point of greeting and welcoming them back.

First day meeting – plan to meet privately with them on their first day back to find out how they're doing and update them on events at work. Arrange another meeting to talk about their duties after they've caught up with their colleagues. Try to have the meeting within a day or two. Follow up with a team meeting if you think it would be helpful.

Be available – unless it's unavoidable, don't be away on their return date. Your manager may want to have a meeting with your team member if you can't.

Information overload – avoid burdening them straight away, they will need time to get used to being back. Don't try to bring them up to speed on everything all at once. Focus on what's most important to both of you to get them back into their role as soon as they can.

Assumptions – don't assume what they will and won't want to do when they return. Get their input about their responsibilities and workload first.

Overschedule – let them settle back in before scheduling too many appointments.

People manager – if the returning colleague is a people manager, encourage them to catch up separately with their own direct reports.

Support – ensure you find out what support they need, if they are returning after an illness they may need time to rest and struggle working full time hours. This could be solved with a gradual return to full duties. Look at your employee's individual needs, the nature of their work, and Force policies. If you can't offer them a flexible working arrangement on a long-term basis or they don't want this, you may still be able to give them the option of doing one of the following during a brief transition period:

- work part time
- have a flexible schedule
- work at home one or two days a week
- check which shifts would work best for them.





Managing a team member who has lost a loved one

It is difficult for managers to know how to best support a team member when they have lost a loved one. People handle death and bereavement in different ways, so it's important to be sensitive while also supporting them. The following guidelines may help:

Immediately after a death – supporting the team member through a time of bereavement is not just about explaining the Force bereavement policy. You also need to be emotionally supportive and willing to be flexible to meet their needs and the needs of their family where possible.

Let them know that work comes second – this will show that you understand this is a time for them to be with their loved ones.

Ask what information they would like to be shared with the rest of the team – the bereaved may choose to share details about a funeral, memorial, or wake or may prefer confidentiality, respect their wishes.

Contact the funeral director – you or a Force representative should check what is appropriate, should flowers be sent or a donation to a charity.

Be sensitive and flexible – work with the HR team regarding the Forces bereavement leave policy.

Support – signpost the bereaved to available support services such as the Force EAP service, police chaplain and bereavement charities.

When the team member returns to work – ensure the team member doesn't feel isolated or pressured to share emotions and experiences they would rather keep private.

It is important though to acknowledge what's happened. Let the bereaved lead the conversation.

Remember everyone's grief is different, so ensure your support is given as long as it's needed. Be mindful of anniversaries.

When a colleague has died

We spend a significant amount of our waking time in the workplace and build up strong personal and professional relationships with our colleagues especially if we work within a team.

When a colleague dies the impact of their death can be huge on those around them and sometimes across the wider 'Police family'. No one is ever fully prepared for the death of a valued colleague. Whether it was a sudden death or if the person had been sick individuals may find it hard to accept that the person is really "gone". Within the Police context the death may have been violent or hostile with colleagues witnessing the incident and death.

When a colleague dies individuals may feel numb or shocked at first. If they have worked closely with the person, they may feel as though tragedy had struck a member of their own family.

As a manager you need to be able to respond compassionately and professionally to a death within your Force. An important first consideration is 'are you the best person to deal with this?' especially if the death has also affected you.

There will be Force policies and procedures to follow, depending on whether the death occurred on or off duty. This will cover notification of death; Force funerals; flag flying as well as welfare considerations including support for the family, pay and pensions, and sources of practical and emotional support for colleagues.

HR, OHU, Force Chaplains and Staff Associations may be able to assist you.

It is important to remember that the families/next of kin wishes are paramount and it may help to appoint a Single Point of Contact for the family/next of kin. If the death has occurred in hostile circumstances, it is likely that a Family Liaison Officer will be appointed.



A close-up photograph of a hand holding a silver pen, poised to write on a document. The document is a checklist with several items, each preceded by a small square box. The text on the document is partially legible, showing words like 'Drive' and 'Mass'. The background is blurred, showing more of the document and possibly other people in an office setting.

As a manager some considerations are:

- **Do you have sufficient understanding of the circumstances to share information in the workplace, authorisation and the family's permission to do so?**
- Depending on the circumstances there may be restrictions on what can/cannot be said due to ongoing investigations. Some information may be widespread in the public domain.
- **Who is/are the appropriate next of kin/family members? Personal circumstances can be complicated and it is important to be mindful of this.**
- Are there things you need to consider, e.g. the family may wish to contact other family members or those living abroad before news of the death is made public? This can be difficult if people are active on social media and guidance may need to be issued.
- **When would be an appropriate time to visit the family/next of kin and who should make this and subsequent visits, i.e. Senior Officer; Manager; Colleague; Chaplain?**
- Are there members of the team on leave, absent or away on courses who ought to be informed? Are there vulnerable colleagues that you are aware of, e.g. have recently suffered a bereavement, relationship difficulties or illness?
- **In addition to immediate colleagues are there other colleagues who worked alongside the individual who also need to be considered.**
- Consider creating an appropriate space in the office for remembrance, e.g. a table with a Book of Condolence, a photograph of the person with a candle. Increasingly Forces also create an 'online' tribute page where messages posted can be collated and, in due course, given to the family/next of kin.
- **If the person had a particular desk/workstation/locker it is important to deal sensitively with this. At some stage the desk will need to be cleared and personal belongings returned. When to do this and by whom is important, should be handled sensitively and communicated to colleagues.**
- If someone new will occupy the role of the deceased, it can be helpful to reorder the desk configuration for the remaining staff and the newcomer.
- **Make a diary note of the date of death so that you are aware of the anniversary and how that might affect individuals. A caring employer would acknowledge the anniversary with a card to the family and a wise manager would acknowledge the day with their team.**
- Grief is a natural response and it is important not to 'medicalise' the situation. However, some people may require additional support. This will be available through OHU, Welfare Departments; Staff Associations; Force Chaplains or Employee Assistance Programme. Ensure you have the information to pass on.

Funerals

- The families/next of kin wishes are paramount and it is important this is understood by all involved.
- If it is a situation where a 'Force funeral' is to take place this must be agreed with relatives. It is vital that you seek guidance and support for this and no definite arrangements should be made until this has been done. This allows for the necessary operational requirements to be put in place, consideration given to the place for the funeral, participation in the service by Force personnel, use of Force drape, horses, vehicles, agreed timings etc. These matters will, in part, be covered by established policy but each circumstance will have some unique features that will need to be dealt with in conjunction with the family or next of kin. Useful contacts will include the Force Operations Department, Force Chaplaincy and the Chief Constables office.
- If it is not an official Force funeral but is open to colleagues then often attendance is significant. There may also be Police 'elements' in the service. This means consideration alongside the family about venue, timings, who they wish to lead/speak at the service etc. are important. The Chaplain will be a useful point of reference.
- Consideration will need to be given to who from the office/department will attend the funeral?
- If someone from the Force is asked to speak at a funeral who should this be? (Chief Officer, friend, or colleague). Is this a reading or a short eulogy? If a eulogy, is this a personal reflection or is it to speak of the deceased's career and service? Who can supply any required factual/anecdotal information?
- Different cultures and faiths have their own traditions. Some will want the funeral and burial to take place quickly, often within 24 hours. In such circumstances and if there is not to be a Memorial or Thanksgiving Service at a later date consideration could be given for an 'in Force' Act of Remembrance to allow colleagues to acknowledge the death. Again, this should be done in consultation with the family/next of kin.

Acknowledge the feelings of your staff – let people know that you share their sense of loss.

Expect symptoms of grief – after a death, your team may make mistakes; become irritable; or have trouble sleeping, eating or concentrating. These symptoms usually pass as the grief becomes less acute. Depending on their personal situation or temperament, some employees will be more strongly affected, so be prepared to suggest helpful resources to employees.

Remember that coping with grief takes time – there are no quick fixes to grief. It may take your team weeks or months to fully adjust to the loss. Be thoughtful on anniversaries, such as the day an employee died or a traumatic event. These kinds of anniversaries may trigger strong emotions, just because time has passed it doesn't mean that grieving has ended.

Give your team extra support if the death occurred in the workplace – a death that occurred on the job is extremely traumatic. In addition to having all the usual feelings of grief and sorrow, the team may face additional emotional burdens. They may feel guilty that they couldn't have prevented the death. Work with your HR team and OHU to give colleagues the support they need. Your team may need to work with your Trauma Support Programme or a counsellor.

Help your employees remember their colleague – Discuss the following ideas with your manager and HR:

- Have a fundraiser for a cause the employee or their family supported. There are many charities including specific [Police related charities](#).
- Put together a book of memories to give the family.
- Encourage your team to share their memories in a department or Force newsletter.
- Post a bulletin-board tribute to the individual.

Feelings of grief don't end with an employee's funeral. In the days and weeks after a death, you can help your employees adjust to life without colleague.

For more information, read our bereavement guide [here](#).

Taking care of yourself

It's extremely important for you to look after your own wellbeing as well as that of your team. Supporting someone can be very stressful, so don't underestimate the effect on your own wellbeing. Find ways of reducing immediate stress. Find someone to talk to about your experiences and write your own support list. This should include eating healthily, getting enough sleep, exercising regularly and taking time to do something you enjoy.

Self-care should not be seen as a 'selfish' activity. If we don't look after our own wellbeing, we won't be effective in supporting and helping others. Remember you can't pour from an empty cup.

Resilient managers, like resilient people, are more likely to be able to bounce back from adversity, stay focused and productive and make the best of challenging situations. They're also able to deal with uncertainty and react positively to change.

Police Mutual Services

Worrying about money can be extremely stressful and may lead to mental health conditions. Police Mutual are here to help. We want to break down the stigma surrounding debt and get people talking about money.

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