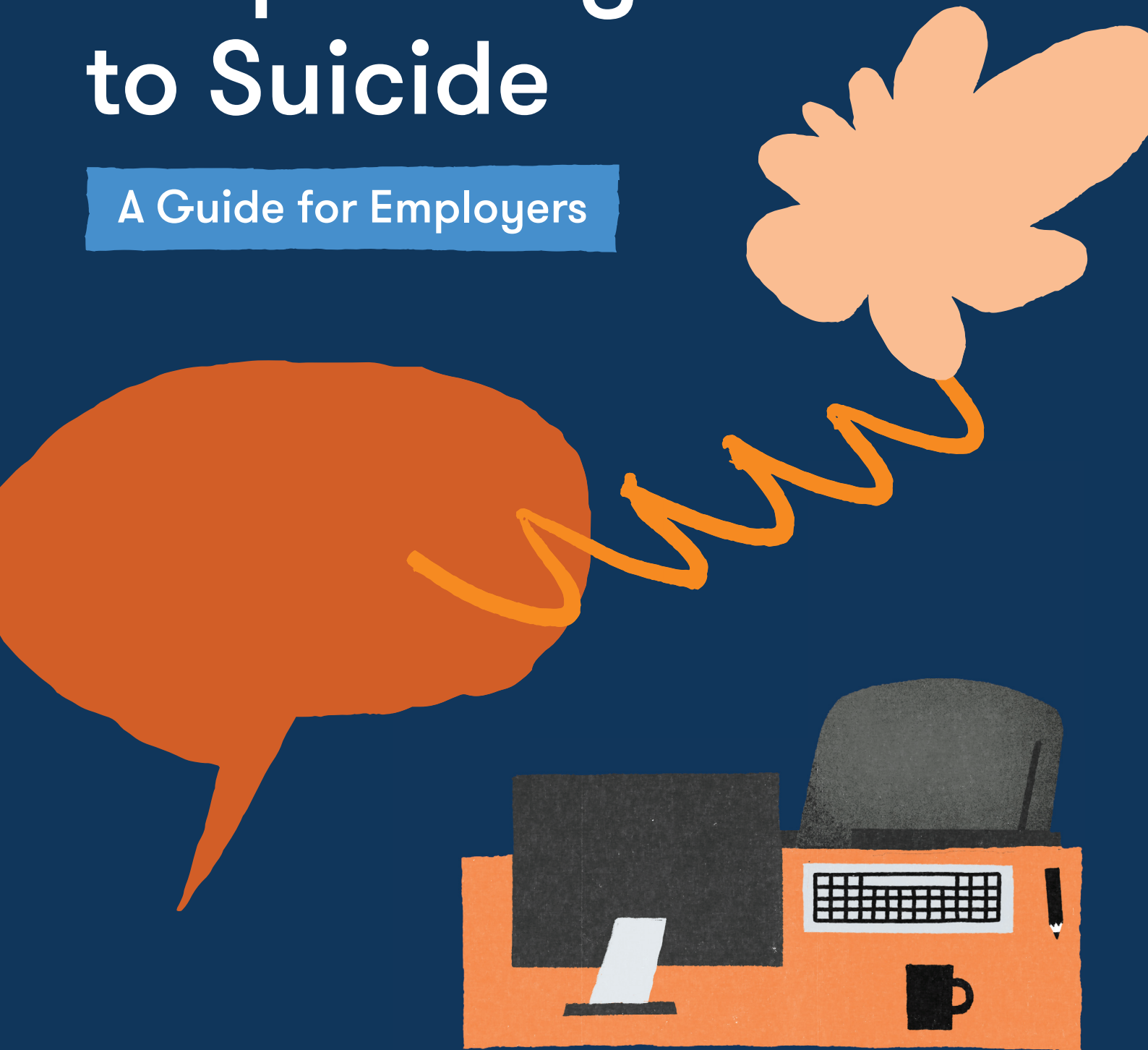


# Grief in the Workplace

# Responding

# to Suicide

A Guide for Employers





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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ..... 4

Foreword ..... 5

Introduction ..... 6

    Stephen’s story ..... 6

## SECTION 1

Supporting employees bereaved by suicide ..... 9

    Responding to suicide in the workplace ..... 9

    When things don’t go so well ..... 14

    Claire’s suggestions and tips for employers ..... 15

## SECTION 2

When an employee or contractor dies by suicide on-site/off-site ..... 17

    When a current employee/contractor dies on or off site ..... 17

    Ray’s story ..... 20

    When a person dies by suicide on site ..... 22

    When a former employee dies by suicide ..... 22

    Summary ..... 23

## SECTION 3

Developing a bereavement policy for dealing with suicide in the workplace ..... 24

    Sample bereavement policy ..... 24

    Considerations for implementing a bereavement policy ..... 26

    Summary ..... 26

Appendix 1 – Suicide support organisations and resources ..... 27

 Advice on responding to a suicide in the workplace ..... 27

 Media guidelines for reporting suicide..... 28

 Suicide bereavement support ..... 28

 Resources for suicide bereavement ..... 29

 Workplace bereavement support training..... 29

 Suicide prevention ..... 29

 Suicide and mental health support..... 30

 General workplace support contacts ..... 30

Appendix 2 - Forming an incident team ..... 31

    Forming an incident team - roles and tasks..... 31

Appendix 3 – Suggested CEO/senior manager checklist ..... 33

Appendix 4 – Communicating sensitively about an employee’s death ..... 34

Appendix 5 – Sample internal notification of death of employee..... 35

Appendix 6 - Frequently asked questions on supporting someone who is bereaved by suicide ..... 36

Appendix 7 - Glossary and abbreviations ..... 38

Appendix 8 - References ..... 40

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# Foreword

## Grief in the Workplace Responding to Suicide

### A Guide for Employers

Suicide is a tragic and shattering event which not only brings a life to an untimely end but also has a devastating effect on family, friends, colleagues and the person's wider community. People often feel a sense of guilt wondering if there is something they could have done to prevent it. All efforts must be made to reduce suicide, improve mental health and wellbeing and support individuals having thoughts of self-harm.

A person can spend up to half their waking hours in work, with many forming important relationships with their colleagues. When the worst happens, the person's workplace and their former colleagues will of course, require help as they grieve.

Being supported appropriately in the workplace when grieving a loss, is an important part of staff wellbeing regardless of the cause of death. This is especially so when someone dies by suicide.

I commend this initiative by Irish Hospice Foundation, the National Office for Suicide Prevention, Ibec and ICTU to help employers to respond appropriately and effectively to suicide.



"Responding to Suicide" 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 our part in helping to reduce the pain which comes after suicide. This pain is first and foremost for a loved one who has died. It takes compassion and courage in the workplace to respond effectively to suicide. This guide provides an excellent support to employers to help them do this in a sensitive and informed way.

Tánaiste Leo Varadkar (2021)

# Introduction



## Scope of this guide

This guide deals with employees who have been impacted by suicide. Responding to suicide warning signs in the workplace is not the focus of the guide – however, sources of support in relation to mental health and suicide prevention are contained in Appendix 1.

In this guide, for simplicity, the terms ‘employee/contractor’ are used to refer to anyone who may die by suicide in the workplace. This can also include agency staff, visitors and members of the public.

In Ireland, according to the Central Statistics Office between 400-500 people die by suicide every year (though it is commonly accepted that actual numbers may be higher). 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, 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. the National Office for Suicide Prevention [www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.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, people may find it difficult to know how to support someone bereaved by suicide. For that reason, it is vital to draw on the experiences and resources offered by others in order to respond compassionately and effectively when an employee or a workplace is impacted by suicide.



## Stephen’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 Stephen'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 peoples' experiences to suggest ways that workplaces can respond in compassionate and informed ways to the challenges that suicide presents to employers and staff alike. Although suicide is a difficult and painful reality when it visits a workplace, there are approaches that can be helpful and make a difference in a positive way.

### Context of the guidelines

This guide is designed specifically, with employers and union representatives in mind. It aims to help organisations to increase their understanding and confidence in responding to suicide in the workplace.

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 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. It is recommended that any guidelines on responding to suicide would be developed collaboratively with the full participation of workers and their representatives.

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

1. When an employee is affected by the suicide of someone who is close to him/her (i.e. in his/her personal life). See **Section 1 Page 9** of this guide.
2. Where an employee or former employee or contractor dies by suicide on or off-site. See **Section 2 Page 17** of this guide.

This guide is divided into 3 Sections:

- **Section 1** focuses on supporting employees who are bereaved by suicide in their personal lives.
- **Section 2** looks at how to respond when an employee, contractor or member of the public dies by suicide on or off site.
- **Section 3** looks at suggestions for developing a bereavement policy to deal with suicide in the workplace.

Finally a list of useful contact details and guidelines for responding to suicide in the workplace are provided in the **Appendices**.

The guide can be read as a complete document or you can dip into the sections that are most relevant for you.



# Section 1

## Supporting employees bereaved by suicide



### Responding to suicide in the workplace

Responding *appropriately* to the experience of suicide in the workplace whether through an employee affected by suicide in their personal lives, or the death of an employee on-site or off-site, requires compassion and courage.

Best practice suggests that when employers or those in responsibility handle these situations well, there is a positive impact on other employees' reactions to the loss and the resulting long term effect it may have on them.

### Practical guidelines for supporting employees who are bereaved

Every workplace should support its employees who are bereaved, whether the death is from suicide or another cause. This involves a compassionate and informed approach which provides support not just around the time of the death but also in the medium and longer term. There is good support and information available on how to do this (see [hospicefoundation.ie](https://www.hospicefoundation.ie) for details of resources and training on supporting employees who are bereaved).

As an employer, it is important to include bereavement within the organisation's policies (See **Section 3 Page 24** for guidelines on developing a bereavement policy). Given the added dimension to bereavement by suicide, extra flexibility or discretionary time off may be appropriate.

The following are practical guidelines for supporting employees bereaved by suicide:

1. Be prepared
2. Focus on the person who has died not on the manner of their death
3. Reach out for support
4. Communicate calmly
5. Understand common grief reactions to suicide
6. Provide short term support - bereavement first aid
7. Manage the return to work
8. Be aware that people will be impacted in different ways
9. Provide ongoing support
10. Know about different bereavement support needs
11. Culture and diversity
12. Take care of yourself

### 1. Be prepared

Given every organisation will have varied capacities and structures in place, the level of preparedness for handling suicide bereavement, or suicide, 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 Suicide Support Organisations and Resources).

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 (see **Appendix 1** for a list of Suicide Support Organisations and Resources).
- Gather information on the range of suicide supports and services and make this available to employees (see **Appendix 1** for a list of Suicide Support Organisations and Resources). For example, Helplines, support groups, counselling services, emergency services etc.
- Ensure your organisation has a suitably developed policy on bereavement in the workplace (See **Section 3 Page 24** for guidelines on Developing a Suicide Bereavement Policy for your 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 (see **Appendix 1** for a list of Suicide Support Organisations and Resources).

**2. Focus on the person who has died not on the manner of their death**

Sympathise with the bereaved person (or family) about the loss of their loved one, rather than focusing on the manner in which they died, and encourage others to do the same.



**3. Reach out for support**

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** for a list of Suicide Support Organisations and Resources).

**4. Communicate calmly**

Calm, clear and compassionate communication is vital in effective bereavement support. Everyone’s grief is different and as a manager you are not expected to know everything that is required. Talk to the person who is bereaved and ask how you can best support them. Take your lead from them. This is also the case when communicating with the family members or colleagues of an employee who has died by suicide.

**5. Understand common grief reactions to suicide**

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

|                    |          |             |
|--------------------|----------|-------------|
| • Shock & Numbness | • Anger  | • Despair   |
| • Fear             | • Shame  | • Isolation |
| • Depression       | • Denial | • Guilt     |

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.

## 6. Provide short term support

### 6.1 Bereavement first aid

In the immediate aftermath of a death it is important to acknowledge what has happened, validate the grief reactions of the employee and support them as they adjust to their loss. This is called bereavement first aid, and involves the three steps of:

1. **Acknowledging** the death
2. **Validating** the feelings and reactions of the employee who is bereaved
3. **Supporting** the employee appropriately and signposting them to other supports as required.

(For more information on Bereavement Support Training for workplaces see **Appendix 1**).

### 6.2 Remote/hybrid working

The post pandemic workplace has seen a rapid rise in the growth of remote and hybrid models offering people the opportunity to better manage their work life balance. In times of crises, employers will need to consider their communications and support plans where their workforce is more dispersed and how they will be able to support colleagues. It may be appropriate to organise additional contacts with remote workers to 'check in' as well as scheduling on-site meetings as an opportunity for colleagues to come together as appropriate.

## 7. Manage the return to work

While grieving is the process which enables people to come to terms with, and to adapt to, their tragic loss, it can be very challenging.

Although a quick return to work after bereavement may be important, it is also important to balance this with the employee's specific needs. It can be helpful to discuss with her/him 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). Best practice suggests that one person from the organisation liaises with the person who is bereaved by suicide. Ideally this will be the person's line manager or it could be someone from human resources or staff support. Their main role is to be a single point of contact for communication and information between the person who is bereaved and the organisation.

An employer can also provide valuable support by preparing work colleagues for the return of the employee who is bereaved. This should be done in an inclusive and sensitive way, asking the person before they return to work, what would be helpful for 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.

For more details on handling the return to work of an employee bereaved by suicide that could be included in a workplace Bereavement Policy see **Section 3 - Page 24**.

## 8. Be aware that people will be impacted in different ways

People may experience very different severities of emotion over very different time periods. Their unique response will depend on a variety of factors including the individuals differing styles of coping; their previous personal experiences of death and loss; their supports outside the workplace and their particular relationship with the deceased. It can be a complex and on-going journey. It is important to continue to check in with the person who is bereaved about how best to support her/him.

### 9. Provide ongoing support

The grieving process is not over in a couple of weeks or months. In fact, often after this initial period (3-6 months) the full impact of the loss is only beginning to be felt. Good bereavement support in the workplace needs to take account of this. 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.

### 10. Know about different bereavement support needs

Employees who are bereaved by suicide can require different types of support that can be divided in to 4 different Levels. This is represented by the Pyramid of Bereavement Care (see Fig. 1 below).

The role of the workplace is to provide LEVEL 1 supports and have pathways or protocols in place to access LEVELS 2, 3 and 4 as required.

|         |     |
|---------|-----|
| LEVEL 1 | ALL |
|---------|-----|

All people who experience a bereavement by suicide have some Level of need. In the workplace, this includes the need for the death to be acknowledged and a compassionate response from the organisation, managers and colleagues.

LEVEL 1 support involves Bereavement First Aid and is the type of support that managers and colleagues can provide to someone who is bereaved by suicide. (See **Appendix 1** for a list of Bereavement Support Training Options for Managers and Staff).

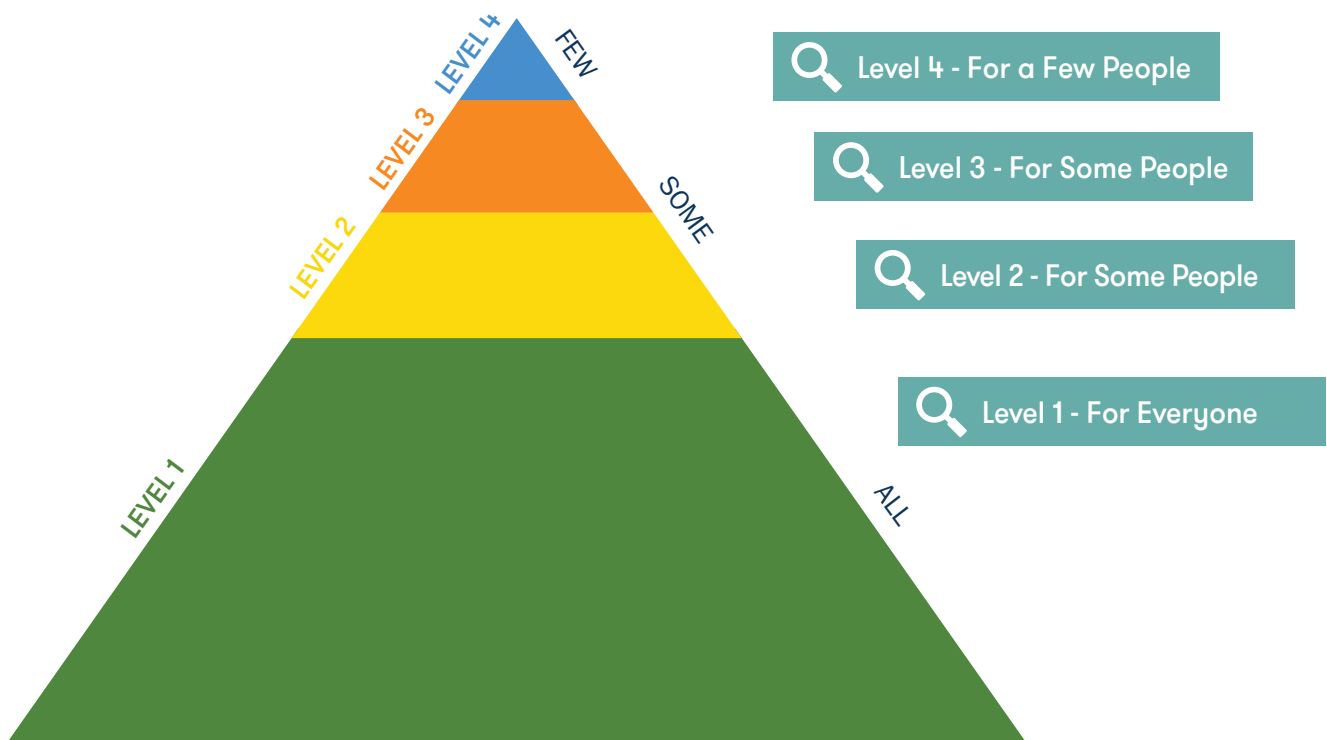


Fig. 1 Pyramid of Bereavement Care

## LEVEL 2

## SOME

Some people may need additional support to that provided by their natural network or workplace. The person may feel unable to cope, or not have access to a natural support network.

LEVEL 2 support is generally provided by non-professional volunteers who themselves have had some experience of suicide grief. Examples include support organisations such as HUGG ([www.hugg.ie](http://www.hugg.ie)) and Anam Cara ([www.anamcara.ie](http://www.anamcara.ie)) (see **Appendix 1** for a list of Suicide Support Organisations and Resources).

## LEVEL 3

## SOME

At LEVEL 3, the needs of the person bereaved by suicide may be more complex and intense. Their coping resources may be so stretched that the person may require specialised bereavement support by accredited counsellors and therapists.

LEVEL 3 Support may be available in house, but in many cases the normal procedure would be to refer people to outside providers as required. Suicide bereavement support at Level 3 is quite specialised, and it is important when making referrals to ensure that the professional providing the service is suitably qualified and experienced to work with suicide bereavement. If you are unsure, contact one of the suicide bereavement support organisations such as Pieta ([www.pieta.ie](http://www.pieta.ie)) directly for advice (see **Appendix 1** for a list of Suicide Support Organisations and Resources).

## LEVEL 4

## FEW

The needs of the person bereaved by suicide at LEVEL 4 are more complex and impact on their day to day functioning and work. Their needs may present as acute and require immediate intervention, or chronic – in that the bereavement may exacerbate a pre-existing mental health issue.

Professionals providing support at LEVEL 4 require specialist bereavement training and can include Psychologists, Psychiatrists and Psychotherapists.



Suicide bereavement support at LEVEL 4 is very specialised, and it is important when making referrals to ensure that the professional is suitably qualified and experienced to work with suicide bereavement. If you are concerned that an employee may require LEVEL 4 support, encourage them to contact their G.P., and/or get advice from a suitable suicide bereavement support or mental health organisation (see **Appendix 1** – for a list of Suicide Support Organisations and Resources).

## 11. Culture and Diversity

Different cultures and groups have different approaches to death. It is important to be aware of these differences and to respect them when considering your responses. If you are unsure about what to do/not do or any issues that could be relevant, it is good to check with someone from the same culture/group as the person who is bereaved and ask for advice. Suicide bereavement support organisations can also be helpful (see **Appendix 1** for a list of Suicide Support Organisations and Resources).

## 12. Take care of yourself

Suicide is an emotive subject. Whether faced with a suicide in the workplace, or indirectly through a bereaved colleague, everyone can be impacted. 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. For information on supports around suicide bereavement see **Appendix 1**.

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 Suicide Support Organisations and Resources).

## When things don't go so well

Unfortunately, sometimes employees who are impacted by suicide in their personal lives, can encounter difficulties in their work environments as Patricia's story below highlights.

### Patricia's story



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 Patricia felt a great discomfort and awkwardness with most of her colleagues.

Suicide is very difficult for anyone who is impacted by it, and it can give rise to very strong fears and emotions. This is the case in families, personal relationships, workplaces and communities. However, it is really important to meet people impacted by suicide with compassion, sensitivity and courage.

It is particularly important in workplaces to create a safe and supportive environment around employee grief by suicide. This includes referring to the name of the person who has died in a sensitive way.

In the following case study, Claire, an employee whose sister died by suicide a number of years ago, provides some more tips and suggestions for employers that may be helpful.

## Claire's suggestions and tips for employers

Claire's sister died by suicide a number of years ago. Claire reflects on the experience of being an employee and being impacted by a death by suicide in her personal life. She provides some suggestions and tips below for employers on how to support a staff member that is impacted by suicide. She answers a number of key questions that are often asked.



**What is the most important thing for an employer to do when an employee is directly bereaved by suicide?**

Treat the person with kindness and as another human being first and foremost, before their role as an employee.



**What is one change that you would like to see around how people bereaved by suicide could be supported in workplaces?**

Training for people on suicide bereavement (not just on suicide prevention) so that they can support their colleagues in a sensitive manner.



**What advice would you give employers in relation to supporting someone directly bereaved by suicide (what helps/what to avoid)?**

My overarching advice would be for employers to learn about suicide bereavement and to facilitate and encourage others on the staff to do the same. To recognise that suicide bereavement is a trauma which shatters the person's world and can make them feel very unsafe, fearful and rejected.

There are lots of things that employers can do to help and most of them come from a position of kindness, compassion, flexibility and patience.



## At the time the suicide occurs

### What helps

- Sympathising with the bereaved person about the loss of their loved one, rather than focusing on the manner in which they died. The worst part is still that the loved one is gone.
- Taking care of practicalities e.g. rescheduling or finding someone to cover the employee's tasks, particularly ones that were due to be done soon after the death.
- Providing time off – for the funeral and afterwards – where possible, without any pressure to return by a specified date.

### What to avoid

- Asking questions or making judgements about what happened, e.g. 'were there any signs?'
- Saying nothing / not acknowledging the death.
- Using language such as 'committed' suicide which suggests a crime has occurred.

## When the person returns to work

### What helps

- Being flexible about the employee's return to work and understanding that different people need different things.
- Asking the person what might be helpful and what they would prefer, where there is flexibility around work arrangements e.g. working from home, part-time hours, change in duties/role, the possibility to take breaks at short notice when needed.
- Being aware that break times in a communal staff area may be difficult for the person as they may feel judged.

### What to avoid

- Putting someone on the spot to talk about what has happened.
- Assuming that time will make it easier to cope – the initial shock and disbelief of the suicide can provide a protective barrier initially. When this wears away, the person may experience difficulties with coping, including carrying out work duties.
- Assuming that because they are back to work, they are able to cope and do their job as before.

## Longer term (1-2 years after the death)

### What helps

- Checking in with the person to see how they are getting on and asking them if they require any additional support. If they do, having information available to provide regarding employee support services, counselling and suicide bereavement support services.
- Being aware of anniversaries (death, birthday) and that the employee may need additional support or time off at that time.
- Staff training on suicide bereavement (as well as suicide prevention).

### What to avoid

- Assuming the person is a spokesperson for suicide bereavement. Some people may wish to talk about their experience while others may not. Ask the person.
- Assuming that the person has 'recovered', is 'over it', has 'moved on'. It is not something people get over.
- Avoiding the topic of suicide or assuming what a person bereaved by suicide might need.

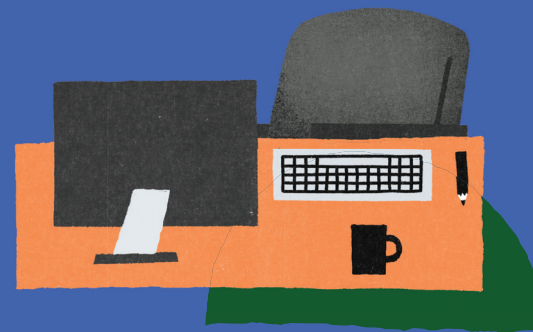
## Summary

### If you are supporting someone in your workplace who is bereaved by suicide:

- Sympathise with the bereaved person (or family) about the loss of their loved one, rather than focusing on the manner in which they died
- Talk to the person who is bereaved and ask how you can support them
- Seek help from those experienced in dealing with bereavement by suicide
- Be aware that people bereaved by suicide have different needs and cope in different ways
- Reach out for support and take care of yourself

# Section 2

## When an Employee or Contractor Dies by Suicide On-Site/Off-Site



The death of someone by suicide is a tough situation for anyone to deal with. This is also true in the workplace. This could be the result of an employee, contractor or member of the public dying by suicide on site; or when an employee or a former employee dies by suicide off site.

A death by suicide is rarely the result of a single event but rather an accumulation of a complex set of circumstances or experiences in a person's life.

The impact of a death by suicide can be significant and wide-ranging, especially in what can be the close community or team setting of a workplace.

### When a current employee/contractor dies on or off site

There are effective steps that you, as an employer/manager, can take when responding to a suicide situation in the workplace:

1. Respond calmly with compassion and competence.
2. Form an incident team to coordinate the response.
3. Contact and support the family.
4. Communicate clearly and sensitively with employees about what has happened.
5. Provide support to employees, team members, and anyone affected.
6. Reach out for help to statutory and support organisations (see **Appendix 1** – for a list of Suicide Support Organisations and Resources).
7. Be aware of the impact on you and your team – take care of each other.

These steps will now be described in more detail. A sample checklist for CEO's or senior managers on dealing with the suspected suicide of an employee off site is provided in **Appendix 3**.

### 1. Respond calmly with compassion and competence

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 Gardaí.

### 2. Form an incident team

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, Communications, Human Resources, Union/Staff Representatives (where applicable), Staff Support, 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 (see **Appendix 2** for information on forming an Incident Team and the key tasks to be done).

### 3. Contact and support the family

It is important to communicate clearly and sensitively with the family members of an employee who dies by suicide and to offer sincere condolences and support on behalf of the company. Outline what help you can provide and ask if there are any specific things that the family would or would not want colleagues to know. Best practice suggests that you appoint one person from the Incident Team who will be the contact person for all communications with the family.

The employer should be aware of data protection ensuring any data that is being provided is being done so appropriately and ensuring the organisation are providing the data to the appropriate parties who have the authority to request such data etc.

### 4. Communicate clearly and sensitively with employees about what has happened

When 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 (see **Appendix 5** for sample wording that can be used to inform staff of the death of a colleague).

The delivery of such news can in itself, be very stressful, therefore a second nominated person supporting this role will also help. Some general tips include:

- Consider different circles of closeness to the person who has died. Some people may have been very close to the person while others less so. You may consider informing people in tiered or different ways.
- Rehearse or plan what is to be said.
- Bring bereaved employees together; find a place that is comfortable and suitable (this may include online if necessary).
- Structure and boundary the session.



- Request colleagues and friends in the workplace to limit their social media communication until official death notifications have been made to the extended family and community.
- 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.

### 5. Provide support to employees, team members, and anyone affected

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.

Given that different members of the team will have had varied relationships with the person who has died, their reactions to the death will also vary. For example, some colleagues may have been very friendly with her/him 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.

## 6. Reach out for help to statutory and support organisations

Dealing with the death of a colleague by suicide is not something that anyone would wish for. It is a very challenging situation for any manager or employer to have to deal with and you are not expected to know about everything. There are very good statutory and suicide bereavement organisations available with a lot of experience and knowledge who can help you in your response (see **Appendix 1** for a list of Suicide Support Organisations and Resources).

## 7. Be aware of the impact on you and your team – take care of each other

The death of an employee by suicide is a difficult and demanding reality for you and your colleagues to deal with. 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 will need support. This means acknowledging openly with each other the demands of the situation and making sure that each person including you, has access to appropriate support (see **Appendix 1** for a list of Suicide Support

Organisations and Resources). It also means keeping an eye out for each other and ensuring that no one person is carrying too much responsibility.

### Honouring the memory of the person 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. Over 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 safe, appropriate and sensitive memorials.

# Ray's Story

In the case study that follows, staff from a Public Sector Organisation speak about their experiences around the death of their friend and colleague Ray.



## What happened

Recently, the unthinkable happened and our wonderful friend and colleague Ray died by suicide.

Ray was a talented musician, an avid sports fan, above all he was a family man. He had a history of enduring mental health illness and spoke openly about his challenges, his illness, his journey to recovery and the importance of his wellness supports. The COVID-19 pandemic removed his access to many of his wellness support such as football, gigging, meeting friends, meeting his wellness support group and going to work.

Ray was a valued staff member in a large public sector organisation. He occupied a key role and worked in the company's headquarters in Dublin. He is very much missed and often spoken about fondly.

## What we did

### Communications

The devastating news of Ray's death broke over the weekend and as a management team we immediately put a plan in place of how we would communicate the sad news and ensure staff were supported. Our approach was of one tiered communications to different groups of staff.

The first people that needed to be informed were those that worked closely with Ray and a personal phone call was made to inform each of them of Ray's death. We tried in earnest to reach all those that we could in the immediate hours after his death was known to us.

### Supporting staff members

The second step was informing the wider staff cohort and on Saturday evening, the CEO sent an email to all staff informing them of the tragic death of Ray and signaling to staff the support available to each of them through the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). We were very conscious that while not all staff knew Ray, the sudden

death of a colleague by suicide would potentially trigger the emotions of other losses for staff and directing them to practical supports was important. The decision to send a staff email as opposed to posting a note on the staff intranet was deliberate to ensure that all staff received the news directly to their inbox at the same time.

In the days that followed Ray's death there were a number of actions that we took specifically to support staff,

- At the time of Ray's death, the majority of staff were working remotely so supporting each other in a virtual world was a challenge. One of the first things we did for the team that worked closely with Ray was to meet (social distanced) in the office where he worked and to light a candle at his desk. Afterwards we simply took some time to talk and share the many stories of a valued friend over a cup of tea. This casual gathering of a few of Ray's close colleagues, while simple in nature, allowed people an opportunity to share the initial shock with each other and remove some of the fear of returning to the office.
- As a company we immediately reached out to the mental health and suicide support services through the National Office for Suicide Prevention, including the HSE Resource Officer for Suicide Prevention in Dublin, Pieta and See Change for whom Ray was an ambassador. We gathered all of this advice together and created a page on our intranet where staff could access a range of mental health supports and in particular suicide resources.
- Due to COVID-19, the opportunity for staff to share their condolences in person with Ray's family were not there so we established an online book of condolence for staff, where people could leave messages. This was subsequently printed and bound and given to Ray's family.



- In addition to the usual items on a staff members desk, there were also a number of personal belongings on Ray's desk that we wished to return to his family. Instead of this being arranged corporately, we organised for a few of Ray's closest colleagues and friends to go into the office to pack up his desk, again allowing those who worked alongside Ray an opportunity to grieve together. This was not done immediately but a few weeks after his death. Instead of using a standard filing box, a special box was purchased for his belongings to ease what was a difficult process. This was delivered in person to his family alongside the book of condolence.

- Conscious of the tragic circumstances of Ray's death, a specific counselling session with our Company EAP was set up in the weeks following his death for those that worked closest with him. This half day session allowed staff a space to grieve, share memories and receive practical support.
- In the weeks following Ray's death, all staff were encouraged to actively check in on each other through calls and emails.

### Linking with Ray's Family

- On the day when we became aware through social media that Ray was reported missing and his family were concerned he was a risk to himself we rang his family to ask if there was anything we could do to assist in the search for Ray. We agreed who the link person was with Ray's family with whom we would stay in touch. Ray's family rang back that evening to tell us he had been found and that he had died.
- A small group of us who worked closely with Ray stayed in touch with the family and attended the funeral home. Of particular importance to his family was to meet with people who knew him, shared office space with him, and spoke to him prior to his death.
- While attendance at Ray's funeral was not possible due to COVID-19, we did seek permission from his family to conduct a socially distanced guard of honor outside the church. Again, this was a way for colleagues to show their support and feel like they were doing something.
- In addition to being present for his family, the practical aspects of supporting Ray's family were also considered. We provided an option for them to meet with a

financial / pensions advisor as a support if they needed it. We also ensured they knew when Ray's final payroll was due and ensured this included all entitlements that were due to him.

- Earlier this year we took part in Pieta's Darkness into Light in memory of Ray and raised much needed funds.
- When COVID-19 restrictions are lifted and it is safe to return to the office we do plan on holding a memorial service for Ray.

### What was difficult

Coming to terms with Ray's loss and the nature of his death has been really challenging for those in our team who worked most closely with him. It made many of the team 'second guess' the last number of times they had been with or spoken to him.

Dealing with loss in normal times is challenging, managing this in a pandemic and Level five lockdown was really challenging. The normal rituals of comfort were denied to his family and it impacted on the team also.

### What we have learned

We learned that communicating openly, truthfully and honestly about the nature of Ray's death was really important. This honesty has helped us as an organisation to honour his memory in actively engaging with our employees on their wellbeing and in our work to combat mental health stigma.

Communicating with people personally who knew him and worked with him directly was very important, as was communicating directly with a message to all staff members so the entirety of our staff team were aware. We also made sure our Board, former members of staff who had worked with him and other agencies who would have had regular contact with him as part of his role, were informed.

Staying in touch with his family following his death has been important to us as a team, we hope and believe it has been helpful to his family to know that we have not forgotten him or them, and are honouring his legacy as we are.

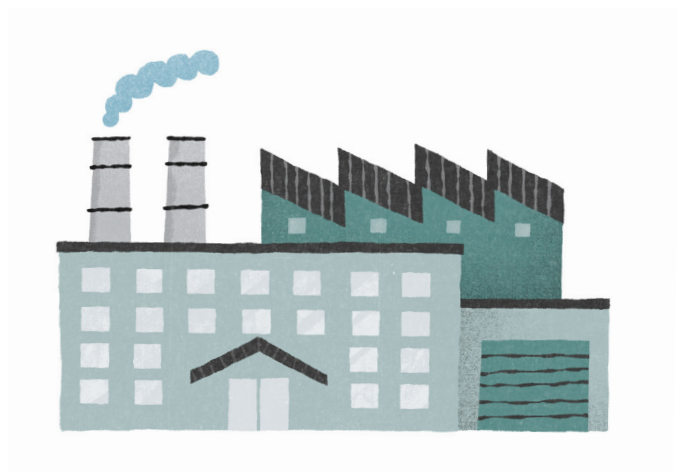
## When a person dies by suicide on site

Ray's story is an example of how to respond well to the very challenging circumstances of an employee who dies by suicide off-site. The principles and approach adopted by this organisation are examples of good practice which can be applied in similar situations such as when an employee dies 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 1** for organisations that can advise on these matters). Smaller employers could make reasonable plans and protocols appropriate to their size and Level of resources (see **Appendix 2** for information on forming an Incident Team).

The key factors to consider when the death of the employee occurs on site are:

1. Contacting the Emergency Services as soon as you become aware of the death.
2. Acknowledge the shock and trauma of what has happened and seek advice from those with experience of dealing with these situations on how to proceed. (See **Appendix 1** for a list of suicide bereavement support organisations).
3. Establishing the facts – What has happened, who was involved, when it happened, how it happened, where it happened.
4. Securing the immediate safety of the area of where the death occurred.
5. Communicating with staff about what has happened. (see **Appendix 5** for sample wording that can be used to inform staff of the death of a colleague).



6. Requesting colleagues and friends in the workplace to limit their social media communication until official death notifications have been made to the extended family and community.
7. Media and Social Media communications – handling enquiries and reporting the death to the wider community (see **Appendix 1** for guidance on reporting of suspected suicide).
8. Identifying employees who may require medical or mental health interventions. For example, employees who may have witnessed the death or discovered the body.
9. The authorities or the Gardaí will usually advise on how best to handle the scene of death. The use of outside facilities services will reduce the potential for further traumatising of colleagues. Also, the timing should be thought through so as to avoid a sense that the organisation wishes to “cover up” quickly or return to work as if nothing has happened.

Depending on the circumstances the Health and Safety Authority may also be required to investigate such cases. Where this occurs, relevant staff may be interviewed. Time and support should be provided to staff in such instances. Any pertinent documentation, notes, phone or other records of the employee, should be preserved and made available to the relevant statutory authorities.

## 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;

### 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 **Appendix 4** for details on how to communicate sensitively 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.

### 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.

### 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 and/or be guided towards additional supports at Levels 2, 3 or 4 (see Page 12). As before, it can be helpful to seek advice from appropriate suicide bereavement support organisations (See **Appendix 1**).

## Summary

Dealing with the death of an employee on or off site is challenging and requires a considered and informed response from workplace leaders. Key aspects of responding effectively include:

- Remaining calm
- Forming an Incident Team and planning a response
- Seeking support and advice from appropriate organisations
- Communicating clearly and thoughtfully about what has happened
- Communicating with, and supporting the family
- Ensuring that everyone who is affected including you, has adequate support
- Honouring the memory of the person who has died
- At a suitable time, reviewing the organisational response.

# Section 3

## 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. The following sample bereavement policy can be used as a guide. It can be modified and adjusted to fit the culture and context of each individual organisation as required. It is also important to remember that the contents of the sample policy are presented as suggestions rather than prescriptions. It is recommended that any policy would be developed collaboratively with the full participation of workers and their representatives.



### Sample bereavement policy

This policy is a sample and it should be amended by an organisation to suit their specific needs

In the unfortunate event, that someone close to an employee dies, the organisation is here to support the employee.

#### Leave

*\*(If the organisation has a bereavement policy or compassionate leave policy it should refer to this and the below regarding bereavement leave may not be relevant. The below is likely only relevant where an organisation does not have an existing bereavement policy or a compassionate leave policy)\**

Bereavement leave is a paid leave of absence granted to employees where time off is required in the event of a death of a family member.

In the event of the death of an immediate relative, *[Insert]* day(s) paid leave may 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.

In the event of the death of a mother/father-in-law, grandparent, grandchild, uncle/aunt, son/daughter-in-law or friend, *[Insert]* day(s) leave may be granted.

In the case of suicide or unnatural death, because of the requirements of the state authorities (e.g. the Gardaí, Coroner etc.), the funeral arrangements may be delayed beyond the leave outlined above. Furthermore, the employee affected by the suicide or unnatural death, may be required to attend an inquest which can take place some time after the death. In such cases additional paid leave may be considered on a case-by-case basis. Where appropriate, the employee may also be facilitated with the taking of annual leave or unpaid leave.

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.

When the employee informs the organisation of their bereavement, the employee will be asked by the Organisation if they would like for their colleagues to be informed and if they approve of a bereavement notice to be shared.

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## Return to Work

The organisation recognises that it can be a challenging time for an employee returning to work following the death of a relative. Before an employee returns, the organisation will contact the employee to support them with their return to the workplace, offer support and address any concerns.

An employee may wish to temporarily amend their working arrangement, and this can be considered in line with the organisation's *[Insert policy names for example flexible working, part-time working policies etc]*.

---

## 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.

Traumatic death such as suicide may give rise to intense grief responses which may require specialist support. In such situations the organisation will seek advice from appropriate bereavement support professionals on how best to respond.

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## Health and Safety

The health and safety assessment of the workplace connected with the employee returning to work following a bereavement will include a consideration of the impact of bereavement on the employee, their duties, and the context in which they are working. *[Insert details as to the system the organisation has dealing with bereavement]*

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.

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## Training (Optional Clause)

*(Insert details of training for example bereavement sensitivity training, training managers on bereavement support and what resources are available, mental health and wellbeing training etc). (See Appendix 1 for details of training available)*

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## Conclusion

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.

---

## Resources and Supports available

(See **Appendix 1** for a list of suicide bereavement supports and organisations)

## Considerations for implementing a bereavement policy

### 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 or 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.

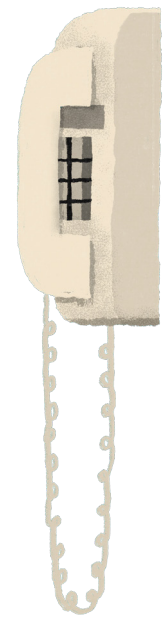
#### Cultural Diversity

- Policy interpretation should allow for flexibilities relating to the multi-cultural nature of the workforce. 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.

## Trends in bereavement leave support

Irish Hospice Foundation conducted research in 2018. When asked what was the most important support that an employer could provide to an employee who is bereaved, 75% of respondents said they would like to be treated with compassion. This was followed by leave entitlements (61%) and flexible work policies (57%).

Recognising that the grieving process extends beyond the immediate period of loss, some organisations, are offering workers the option of more paid time off when faced with such circumstances. The number of days leave will vary between companies and will be informed by individual company policies. Where no formal policy relating to leave exists, this should be agreed in discussion with the employee.



### Summary

It is important for each workplace to support its staff around any bereavement that they experience and particularly when the death is suicide related. A Bereavement Policy is a key building block in this support. It provides:

- a minimum base standard on which an effective and equitable response can be built
- guidelines for managers on how to respond to employee bereavements in a consistent way
- shows that the organisation takes grief as part of Employee Wellbeing seriously

For more information on developing a workplace bereavement policy contact Irish Hospice Foundation [hospicefoundation.ie](http://hospicefoundation.ie)

# Appendix 1

## Suicide Support Organisations and Resources



### Advice on Responding to a Suicide in the Workplace:

#### 1. Suicide Bereavement Liaison Officers (SBLO)

The Suicide Bereavement Liaison Service is a free, confidential service that provides assistance and support to families and individuals after the loss of a loved one to suicide. This service is provided by different agencies throughout Ireland, for details contact:

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/nosp/suicide-bereavement-liaison-officers/>

<https://www.pieta.ie/how-we-can-help/bereavement-support/suicide-bereavement-liaison-service/>

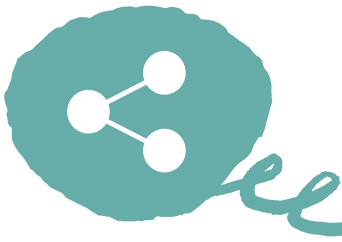
[www.vitahouse.org](http://www.vitahouse.org) (Roscommon)

[www.thefamilycentre.com](http://www.thefamilycentre.com) (Mayo)

#### 2. Irish Hospice Foundation [hospicefoundation.ie](http://hospicefoundation.ie)

Provides resources, training and information on responding to bereavement in the workplace including suicide.

Grief in the Workplace programme – 01 6793188 <https://hospicefoundation.ie/our-supports-services/bereavement-loss-hub/grief-in-the-workplace/>



## Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide

### 1. Samaritans [www.samaritans.org/ireland](http://www.samaritans.org/ireland)

Samaritans' media guidelines for reporting suicide and online resources reinforce industry codes of practice, supporting the highest standards of coverage of suicide.



## Suicide Bereavement Support

### 1. Pieta [www.pieta.ie](http://www.pieta.ie) Levels 1,2,3,4

Pieta provides free individual counselling, therapy and support for people who have been bereaved by suicide and for people who are thinking about suicide.

24 Hour Free Phone Helpline: 1800 247 247 / Text: HELP to 51444  
(standard rates)

### 2. HUGG [www.hugg.ie](http://www.hugg.ie) Levels 1,2

Provides information, telephone support and local peer support groups to people bereaved by suicide led by volunteers with lived experience.

### 3. Barnardos [www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie) Levels 1,2,3,4

Helpline offers information and support relating to bereavement and children from 10 am to 12 noon Monday to Thursday.

Helpline: 01 473 2110

### 4. Irish Hospice Foundation [hospicefoundation.ie](http://hospicefoundation.ie) Level 1

Provides a **Bereavement Support Line 1800 80 70 77** and a range of resources, training and information on bereavement and loss in the workplace.

### 5. Irish Childhood Bereavement Network

[www.childhoodbereavement.ie](http://www.childhoodbereavement.ie) Level 1

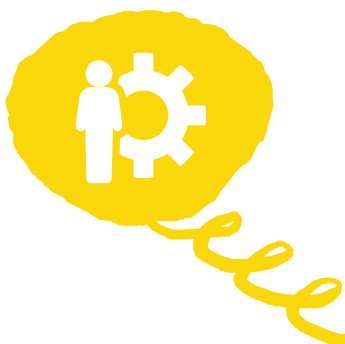
Provides information on grief in children, adolescents and families. On their website you can find a list of resources and tools to help and support you and your family.



## Resources for Suicide Bereavement

### 1. HSE – You Are Not Alone, the National Suicide Bereavement Support Guide

A support guide for people who have been bereaved by suicide.  
<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/connecting-for-life/publications/national-suicide-bereavement-support-guide.html>



## Workplace Bereavement Support Training

### 1. Irish Hospice Foundation [hospicefoundation.ie](http://hospicefoundation.ie)

Provides training and support to workplaces through our Grief in the Workplace programme.  
<https://hospicefoundation.ie/our-supports-services/bereavement-loss-hub/grief-in-the-workplace/>

### 2. National Office for Suicide Prevention [www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie)

Provides a range suicide bereavement support training courses for communities and professionals.  
<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/connecting-for-life/training/types-of-training/>

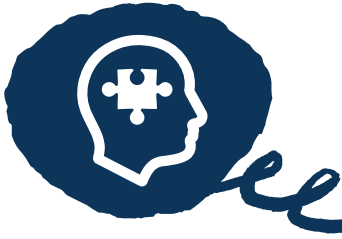


## Suicide Prevention

### 1. National Office for Suicide Prevention [www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie)

The HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) was established to strategically lead on suicide prevention across the HSE and in collaboration with multiple sectors. The work of the office has been underpinned by Connecting for Life, Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide. A full list of contact details for local Resource Officers for Suicide Prevention (ROSP) is available on their website. <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/nosp/resourceofficers/>

It also provides a range of training programmes on suicide prevention. <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/connecting-for-life/training/types-of-training/>



## Suicide & Mental Health Support

### 1. Aware [www.aware.ie](http://www.aware.ie)

National organisation providing free support, education and information services to those impacted by anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder and related mood conditions.

### 2. Samaritans [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

Samaritans provide emotional support to anyone who is struggling to cope and needs someone to listen. Local branches can be visited during the day.

24 Hour Free Phone Helpline: 116 123 / Email: [jo@samaritans.ie](mailto:jo@samaritans.ie)  
[www.samaritans.ie](http://www.samaritans.ie)

### 3. Shine [www.shine.ie](http://www.shine.ie)

Offers a wide range of support services for people living with mental health difficulties and their families.



## General Workplace Support Contacts

### 1. Ibec [www.ibec.ie](http://www.ibec.ie)

### 2. IMI (Irish Management Institute) [www.imi.ie](http://www.imi.ie)

### 3. ISME (Irish Small & Medium Enterprises Association) [www.isme.ie](http://www.isme.ie)

### 4. CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development) [www.cipd.ie](http://www.cipd.ie)

### 5. ICTU (Irish Congress of Trade Unions) [www.ictu.ie](http://www.ictu.ie)

### 6. HSE (Health Service Executive) [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

### 7. HSA (Health and Safety Authority) [www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie)

# Appendix 2

## Forming an Incident Team

### Forming an Incident Team – Roles and Tasks

If an employee dies on site or off site by suicide, a calm and considered response is helpful. When faced with a situation like this it is recommended that the employer forms an Incident Team to coordinate the response which should include Union/Staff representatives where applicable.

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



1. **Team Leader** – responsible for establishing the facts of the situation and coordinating and directing the activity of the team. Team Leader should, at all times, ensure careful consistency of information and its delivery so as to avoid rumours and unhealthy speculation.
2. **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.
3. **Staff support/link 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.
4. **Communication and information contact person** – responsible for coordinating communications within the organisation and with outside parties, media, customers, etc. It is important that any information shared is accurate and appropriate, as this helps to prevent rumours which could add to people's distress. The employer should be aware of data protection ensuring any data that is being provided is being done so appropriately and ensuring the organisation are providing the data to the appropriate parties who have the authority to request such data etc.
5. **Emergency services and statutory agencies contact person** – responsible for liaising with emergency services – the Gardaí, Fire Service – and statutory agencies – Health and Safety Authority, HSE etc.
6. **Scene of death** – responsible initially for the securing and preservation of the workplace location where the death occurred, and then for sensitively restoring it, once the body has been removed.

## Key tasks of the Incident Team will include:

### For a death occurring on site

1. Contacting the Emergency Services.
2. After the Emergency Services have confirmed that the person is dead, taking advice on how the body is to be taken care of.
3. Securing the immediate safety of the area of where the death occurred.
4. Establishing the facts – What has happened, who was involved, when it happened, how it happened, where it happened.
5. Reaching out for support from Suicide Support Organisations (see **Appendix 1**).
6. Communicating and offering support to 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.
7. Communicating with emergency services and relevant agencies or departments (Health and Safety, Employee Assistance, Unions etc.).
8. Communicating the death both internally to employees and externally to authorities. Request colleagues and friends in the workplace to limit their social media communication until official death notifications have been made to the extended family and community.
9. Media and Social Media communications – handling enquiries and reporting the death to the wider community (See **Appendix 1** for guidance on reporting of suspected suicide).
10. Identifying employees who may require medical or mental health interventions. For example, employees who may have witnessed the death or discovered the body.
11. Sensitively restoring the workplace location where the death occurred after the body has been removed.

12. Returning personal items of the employee to the family or next of kin.

### For a death occurring off site

1. Contact the family/next of kin/authorities to confirm the death and any necessary details and facts. For example, the full name and current address of the person who has died. Offer condolences and support to the family/next of kin.
2. Reach out for support to statutory and Suicide Support Organisations (see **Appendix 1**).
3. If the death occurs in another country contact the Dept of Foreign Affairs for guidance and assistance.
4. Provide family/next of kin with the name of person from your Incident Team who will liaise with them.
5. Find out what information the family or next of kin want shared and keep all other information confidential.
6. Communicate with emergency services and relevant agencies or departments (Health and Safety, Employee Assistance, Unions etc) as appropriate.
7. Communicate with Media and Social Media – handle enquiries and reporting the death both internally to employees and externally to authorities, family and/or the community. Request colleagues and friends in the workplace to limit their social media communication until official death notifications have been made to the extended family and community.
8. Identify employees who may require medical or mental health interventions. For example, employees who may have worked closely with the person who has died or who may have witnessed the death or discovered the body.
9. Returning personal items of the employee to the family or next of kin.

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

# Appendix 3

## Suggested CEO/ Senior Manager checklist

Based on Ray's story earlier in this guide, the following is a suggested checklist for CEO/Senior Managers for dealing with the death of an employee by suicide off site. Please note that the list below is not sequential.

### Communication

1. Establish the facts.
2. Establish contact with the family.
3. Family link person. Identify a named person from the organisation who will communicate and link with the family. It can also be helpful to have the family (next of kin) identify one person who will be their spokesperson and link with the organisation.
4. Identify the key people who need to be told personally about the death.
5. Draft and issue an email to all staff members setting out the known facts and signposting supports that are available.
6. Share funeral arrangements with staff members.
7. Agree company attendance at funeral with the family.

### Staff Support

8. Contact EAP service and ensure they are aware and ready to support.
9. Contact professional mental health support services for advice and confirmation of steps proposed to support the staff teams.
10. Collate available mental health resources in a shared place available to all team members.
11. Arrange an early support meeting with the immediate staff team impacted.
12. Meet again with the staff team to bring together any personal effects in the workplace.
13. Provide a follow-on professionally supported debriefing session with staff team impacted as an optional support.



14. Provide the option (through EAP) of any one to one supports required for staff members who may need this.

### Family Support

15. Provide practical follow up on pension entitlements and where possible provide independent financial/ pension advice supports for the family.
16. Ensure no hiccups in payroll and death in service benefits.
17. Set up an online book of condolences in the company and print to share with the family, keeping a copy in the company.
18. Personally bring the person's workplace personal effects to the family in an appropriate box not a standard filing box.

### Honouring their Memory

19. Honour their memory appropriately when the time is right. A memorial services, a picture on a wall.
20. Remember their anniversary.

# Appendix 4

## Communicating Sensitively About an Employee's Death



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.
- Request colleagues and friends in the workplace to limit their social media communication until official death notifications have been made to the extended family and community.
- 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.

# Appendix 5

## Sample Internal Notification of Death of Employee

The following are two sample texts that may be used either as an email or as a memo to inform staff of the death of a colleague by suicide or suspected suicide. Amend this sample text as appropriate.

### Sample Text 1

Date:

To: Staff

From: [Name of CEO]

Re: Death of [name of employee] RIP

[Company] is saddened to learn of the death of [employee].

The tragic and sudden circumstances of [employee's] death may cause a range of reactions among our workplace, so with the family's permission we are sharing the facts as we know them and are offering support for those who might need it.

[Employee] worked for [workplace] for the last [number] years. He/she died on <day/date>. [DO NOT MENTION PLACE OR METHOD USED FOR SUICIDE].

We may never know all the factors leading to this tragedy; however, experts agree that in these sort of tragic circumstances, there is no single cause or simple explanation. [Employee's] memorial service will be held on [day/date/time], and all employees who wish to attend may be excused. The family would like to welcome all of [his/her] friends and colleagues who wish to share in the celebration of [his/her] life.

Some of you may be having difficulty coping with the sudden loss of one of our workplace family.

We have arranged for the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) professionals to facilitate a debriefing on [day/date/time]. During this group meeting, counsellors will be on hand to support us and answer any questions we may have. Others may prefer individual support at this time. If so, please contact our EAP program by calling [insert number]. The family has requested that instead of flowers, those who wish to do so may donate to (e.g. a company nominated charity or a charity as shared by the family) memory.

For those who would like to talk about what has happened, our HR team is available to you.

### Sample Text 2

Dear Colleagues,

It is with great sadness that I write this email to inform you that one of our colleagues, xx, was involved in a fatal incident on the evening of xx. X was a valued member of the XX team in the XX Business Unit and was well respected and admired by all of her colleagues.

We are in contact with X's family to offer all the help that we can at this very challenging time. We are also helping the teams that worked closely with XX to ensure they have all the support that they need.

Funeral arrangements will be communicated as soon as they are available.

Our thoughts, prayers and support are with X's family at this very difficult time.

Kind Regards,

XX

# Appendix 6

## Frequently asked questions on supporting someone who is bereaved by 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 a work colleague by asking 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 die by 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 persons 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 the Gardaí or staff at the Coroner's 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 one 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, 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).

- **How do I handle it as a manager if a person or family is angry at me over a suicide?"**

It is important to remember that anger is a normal part of grieving. However it is not that easy if you are encountering it directly from someone in relation to a suicide. It is helpful to remain calm, acknowledge what you are hearing from the person and try to be helpful. E.g. "John, it sounds like you are upset and angry right now - that is very understandable. How can I help you best at the moment?" It may be that the person is finding things difficult at the moment but at the same time you don't have to put up with abusive behaviour either. Remaining calm and being as supportive as you can may be as much as you can do right now with this person.

# Appendix 7

## Glossary and Abbreviations

### Suicide

The WHO refer to suicide as *the deliberate act of killing oneself*.

### Bereavement

The period after a loss during which grief is experienced and mourning occurs. The time spent in a period of bereavement is undefined, although it often depends on how attached the person was to the person who died, and how much time was spent anticipating the loss.

### 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

Grief that is complicated or prolonged by other disorders, major depression, substance abuse, or post-traumatic stress disorder for example. 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

Depression is a mental health condition which can affect our thinking, energy, feelings and behaviour. It can vary from mild to severe and can have a profound impact, affecting every aspect of ourselves, our relationships, family and work life. Depression is a very common condition, which affects 1 in 10 people at any one time, which is 450,000 people in Ireland alone (ref: <https://www.aware.ie/information/depression/>). Any one of us, irrespective of age, gender or background can be affected. Recovery is possible, early recognition and ongoing support are key to a positive outcome. It is possible to minimise the impact of depression by accessing information and support, and finding ways to manage the condition.

### 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.



## Coroner Service

The coroner service is a network of Coroners located throughout the country. The Coroners' core function is to investigate sudden and unexplained deaths so that a death certificate can be issued. This is an important public service to the living and in particular to the next-of-kin and friends of the deceased. The coroner service not only provides clarity for those bereaved suddenly but also performs a wider public service by identifying matters of public interest that can have life/death consequences. Full details can be found at: [www.coroners.ie](http://www.coroners.ie)

## Inquests

An inquest is an inquiry held in public by a Coroner, sometimes with a jury. Full details can be found at [www.coroners.ie](http://www.coroners.ie).

If the Coroner considers the cause of death may be due to unnatural causes, they can hold an inquest, sometimes with a jury. Evidence is taken from witnesses who can assist in answering questions for the Coroner's enquiry. At the conclusion of the inquest, the Coroner will read out a formal verdict in which the identity of the deceased, how and when the death occurred is recorded. While the Coroner or jury may make a general recommendation designed to prevent similar deaths, they do not decide whose fault it was or whether there was a criminal offence.

It is important that people who attend the inquest are aware they can ask questions at the inquest and the Coroner will facilitate. A copy of the inquest can be obtained for a fee.

## 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 clients 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

|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| <b>NOSP</b> | National Office for Suicide Prevention           |
| <b>CISD</b> | Critical Incident Stress Debriefing              |
| <b>EAP</b>  | Employee Assistance Program                      |
| <b>ICTU</b> | Irish Congress of Trades Unions                  |
| <b>Ibec</b> | Irish Business Employers Confederation           |
| <b>IHF</b>  | Irish Hospice Foundation                         |
| <b>ISME</b> | Irish SME Association                            |
| <b>IMI</b>  | Irish Management Institute                       |
| <b>HSE</b>  | Health Service Executive                         |
| <b>HSA</b>  | Health and Safety Authority                      |
| <b>CIPD</b> | Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development |
| <b>SBLO</b> | Suicide Bereavement Liaison Officer              |
| <b>ROSP</b> | Regional Officer for Suicide Prevention          |

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To die and grieve well wherever the place

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