



Queen Margaret University
EDINBURGH

**Supporting Staff Dealing
with Bereavement and
Grief:** Advice for line
managers

Coronavirus and dealing
with bereavement and grief



During the global coronavirus pandemic we are facing a tragic loss of life, often under very difficult circumstances.

Bereaved staff members may have to deal with increased trauma, and may be cut off from some of their usual support network. Those who are already struggling with bereavement, or whose relatives or friends die through other causes will also be affected.

To support a member of staff dealing with bereavement and grief, the line manager should:

In the early days of an employee's bereavement, it is good practice for the manager to:

Offer their condolences.

Ensure that the bereaved staff member knows that work comes second and they must take what time is needed.

Recognise that the staff member may be feeling numb or distressed during the initial conversation and may not be able to take in or provide much information – a follow up call or email may be appropriate.

Be calm and empathetic in all communication will ensure staff members feel supported, and minimise their anxiety about returning to work.

Managing bereavement in the workplace

- Begin a dialogue with the staff member, asking how they would like to stay in contact. Is phone or email preferred? Are there particular times to avoid? Be aware that in the first few days, they may not wish to speak to anyone as they may be in shock. Be careful not to pressurise the staff member into making decisions at this point.
- Ask how much information they wish their team to have about the death and remember that this information is private under data protection legislation and to stick strictly to the facts.
- Consider what action needs to be taken if the death is in the media; particularly if the press contact the workplace or approach team members for interview.
- Ask if the staff member wishes to be contacted by members of their team.
- Be conscious of diversity within the workforce and the impact this may have on, for example, days taken to allow the staff member to fulfil religious or cultural expectations such as mourning rituals.

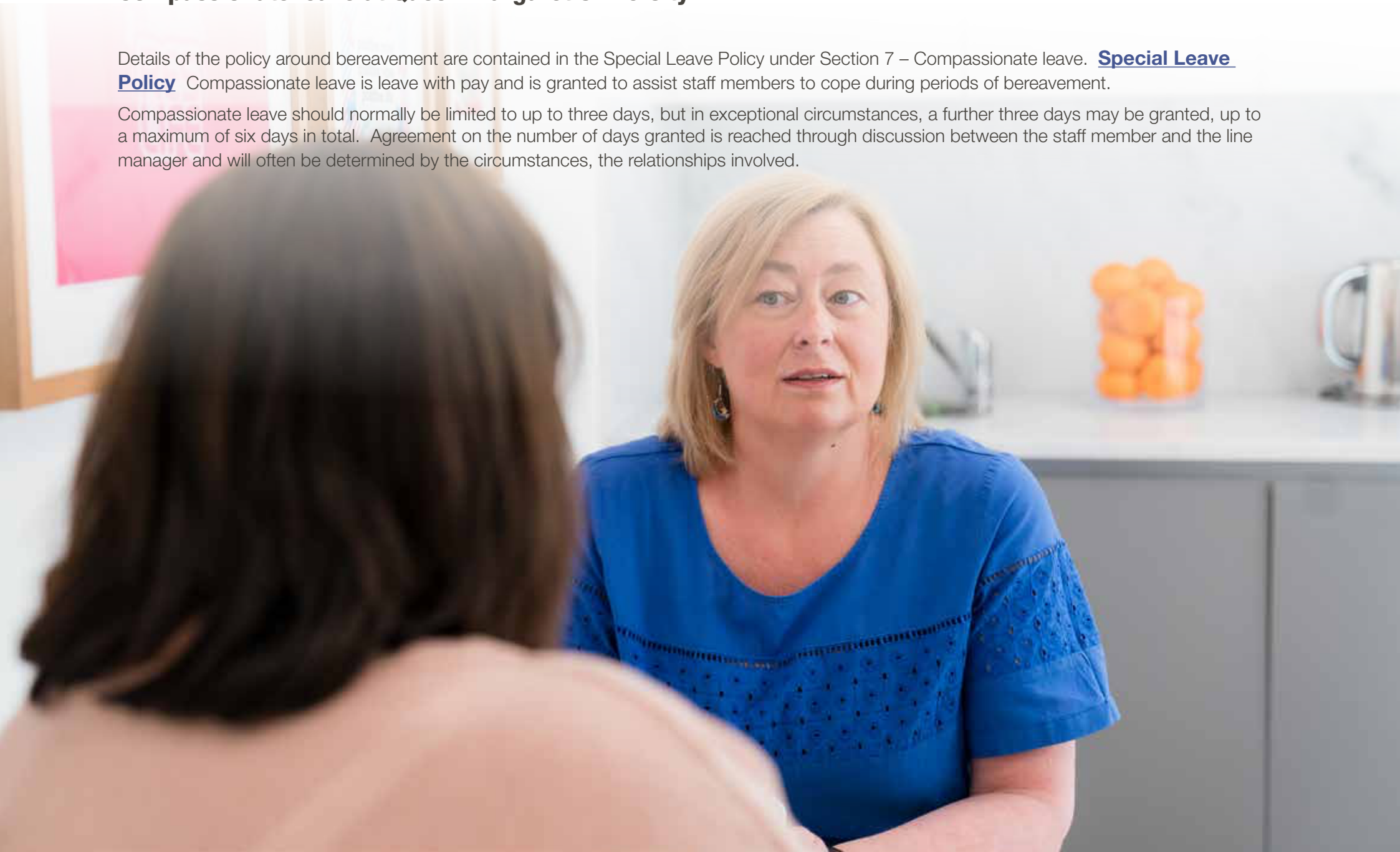
Be mindful that funerals are being handled differently and only 'immediate family' are able to attend, and they must abide by social distancing rules. Staff members may be in isolation and unable to attend, and funerals may be delayed which can be very distressing.

Be open to revising and reviewing the situation with the staff member. Keep the dialogue open.

Compassionate leave at Queen Margaret University

Details of the policy around bereavement are contained in the Special Leave Policy under Section 7 – Compassionate leave. [Special Leave Policy](#) Compassionate leave is leave with pay and is granted to assist staff members to cope during periods of bereavement.

Compassionate leave should normally be limited to up to three days, but in exceptional circumstances, a further three days may be granted, up to a maximum of six days in total. Agreement on the number of days granted is reached through discussion between the staff member and the line manager and will often be determined by the circumstances, the relationships involved.



Managing bereavement and returning to work

The guidance below refers to workplace, however given the current circumstances 'the workplace' is currently home.

- A conversation about when the staff member anticipates returning to work may not be appropriate in the first few days of bereavement. However, it is important to start a dialogue which will allow an open discussion around how the staff member is coping, the policy on compassionate leave, when they might return to work, and any adjustments that might help with this (eg a phased return).
- Sickness absence leave should not be used as an alternative to compassionate leave. Sickness absence leave is only appropriate for employees who are suffering from a health problem or illness and would apply if the staff member is unable to return to work for health reasons. **Sickness Absence Management**
- As every circumstance will be different, some staff members may feel able to return to work very swiftly, whilst others may need more time. It is often difficult for bereaved staff members to judge how they will feel in the workplace, and a swift return to work does not necessarily mean that a staff member will not need support.
- Consideration should also be given to supporting a member of staff working from home and put in place regular catch ups and support.
- It should be recognised that the full emotional impact of the bereavement may not be felt for some time.
- Regular catch ups will allow the manager and the staff member to discuss and agree strategies or adjustments which may be needed to enable them to return to work and to support them in the workplace after their return.
- Remind the staff member of the **Employee Assistance Programme - Be Supported** for counselling support. Support can be offered over the phone on (Freephone) 0800 0727072 or online at **besupported. (username: Information password: Supported)**
- Be aware that significant days such as anniversary or birthdays can be difficult times and sensitivity around these times, particularly when considering requests for specific days off will help staff members to manage their grief.

In summary , as a manager you need to be able to respond compassionately and professionally when a staff member suffers a loss. Additional resources are available in the Managers guide of the Employee Assistance Programme. [Manager Guide: Supporting a bereaved employee](#)

Cruse Bereavement Care have prepared resources which cover some of the different situations and emotions bereaved people may have to deal with who may be affected by this pandemic as below. [Coronavirus: dealing with bereavement and grief](#)

Grieving and isolation - Being bereaved can be a lonely time, and isolation due to the current situation can make it more difficult.

Traumatic bereavement - If someone dies of coronavirus, it may be particularly traumatic for family and friends.

Funerals - Under the current rules funerals are limited and may be delayed. Many bereaved people will not be able to attend.

Anger and blame - Feelings of anger and blame are common after any bereavement. When someone has died under sudden or traumatic circumstances it can make these feelings worse.

Feeling guilty - Feeling guilty is very common when someone is bereaved. No-one is perfect and sometimes blaming ourselves can be easier than blaming the person who died or others.

Feeling your bereavement is not a priority - There can be a strong spoken or unspoken feeling that certain deaths are more tragic than others. But every death can be a tragedy for friends and relatives left behind.

Children and young people - Children and young people will be affected by what is going on around them, and may have many fears about the situation and the coronavirus.

Coping with talk of death and dying - At the moment it is impossible to avoid of discussion of death and dying. This can bring up difficult

feelings for those with anxiety and mental health issues. It can also bring up difficult feelings and memories of past bereavements.

Cruse Bereavement Care have also prepared easy read fact sheets on:

Grief and isolation

Grief and trauma

Coping with talk of death and dying

Funerals and memorials

[Coronavirus easy read fact sheets](#)

Useful links

[Employee Assistance Programme - Be Supported](#)

Cruse Bereavement Care
[Cruse](#)

Mental Health Foundation tips which are constantly being updated and also include information on how to look after your mental health during the coronavirus outbreak

[Mental health during the coronavirus outbreak](#)

The Samaritans
[The Samaritans - if you are worried about your mental health during the coronavirus outbreak](#)