

Returning to Work After a Loss

Coming back to work after the death of a loved one is painful, especially if you've only been given a few days of bereavement leave. While virtually everyone who's grieving returns before they're ready, there are ways to ease the re-entry and encourage your boss and your team to provide the support you'll need.



01

Assess yourself and your workplace.

How are you feeling about going back to work? Are you eager for the distraction and rhythm of the office? Or are you worried about your ability to concentrate? How have your coworkers responded to your loss – helpful and reassuring or missing in action? Is your boss supportive? Will your job allow for some flexibility in hours and responsibilities? Your return may be more complicated if you work in an environment where breaks are at set times, privacy is hard to come by and support is difficult to find. Could you take more time off, change roles or leave your job altogether if you need to?

02

Construct a roadmap for your coworkers.

Most of your colleagues won't know what to say or how to act when you return. Consider sending an email offering them some guidance. Do you want them to bring up your loss?

Ask how you're doing? Invite you to coffee? Or do you want them to refrain from mentioning it and focus instead on work and other related topics? Letting people know what you want may inspire those who might have stayed silent to speak up and discourage those inclined to offer unsolicited advice or ask intrusive questions about how your loved one died.

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Reach out to your boss.

Begin by confirming that everyone knows about your loss. This eliminates the need for you to share the sad news and prevents awkward encounters with colleagues cheerfully inquiring how you spent your time off. Then, discuss options for your schedule. Do you want to start back part-time, work from home a few days a week or have more flexible hours initially? Next, arrange for any accommodations you'll need for funeral arrangements, financial matters, grief support, childcare, etc. Finally, ask if there's any news about the organization, your office, your team, your clients or customers that you should be aware of.

04

Ask your boss or a trusted colleague to serve as your point person.

Even with the best of intentions, your coworkers will make mistakes. They'll bring up your loss or inquire about whether you're doing okay, even if you asked them not to. The person you least want to spend time with will keep cornering you in the breakroom or inviting you out for coffee. Colleagues won't understand why mentioning your loved one's name or asking how your kids are coping just before an all staff meeting or a client presentation is the wrong time. A point person can redirect an overly eager coworker or gently educate your team on how and when to broach your loss.

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Prepare to cry at work.

Grief is unpredictable, and loss triggers are everywhere. Carry tissues with you at all times. If your office doesn't have a door and blinds on the interior windows, arrange for a safe space to retreat to if you need a few minutes alone. A private bathroom, a close friend's office, a rarely used conference room.

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Establish a healthy boundary between work and home.

You're going to need time and space away from the office to process your loss. Ask your colleagues to refrain from calling you during non-work hours, and give them a time after which you won't be checking Slack, texts or email. Let your family and friends know if it's too daunting to focus on your loss at work and request that they only contact you there if the issue requires your immediately attention.

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Help yourself stay productive.

Make 'to do' and daily priority lists so you can focus on getting what's most important done first. Break bigger projects into more manageable pieces and focus on those smaller tasks to avoid getting overwhelmed. At the end of the day, remind yourself of what you accomplished instead of beating yourself up for what you didn't. And if you didn't get anything done, create your priority list for the next day and begin anew in the morning.

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Allow people to help.

If a trusted colleague offers to pick up some of your workload, handle a customer complaint or assemble a proposal, just say ‘yes.’ And ‘thank you.’ If the offer is genuine but not what you need, offer an alternative – “I’m actually doing okay reconciling the invoices. Where I could really use some help is with returning all of these phone calls.”

09

Take breaks.

When you’re grappling with grief, it will take more energy to concentrate and more effort to complete a project. Allow for extra time. Build in space between meetings to stretch, meditate or sit quietly for a few moments. Make a cup of tea or stand outside in the sun. Create a list of mindless tasks that don’t require much concentration but need to get done, and choose one or two to work on until your focus returns.

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Control what you can.

Should colleagues ask nosy questions or begin sharing stories about their losses, consider how you might deflect them. Have a response or two in mind such as “It’s too raw for me to discuss my son’s death at work.” Or, “I have an important meeting this afternoon, and I need to prepare for it.” If you don’t want to close off the conversation completely, defer it by saying “Thank you for asking, but I can’t talk about this right now. Could I reach out to you later in the week?”

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Be honest with your colleagues.

If you're struggling, ask for help. Your boss and coworkers can't support you if they don't know what you need. If you need a decrease in your workload or a different assignment, say so. If you're struggling with errors, ask a colleague to doublecheck your figures or proof your report. If the anniversary of your loved one's death is coming up, ask for the day off.

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Create calming rituals.

In those early weeks and months after a loss, grief can overwhelm you without warning. An idle question about your plans for the holidays, a story about a coworker's child graduating or getting engaged or a song on the radio can have you sobbing in your office, too upset to function. Identify ways to soothe yourself that you can employ at those times. Take a series of deep breaths. Put on some scented hand lotion. Go for a short walk. Play some relaxing music. Sit outside in the grass.

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Know that your needs will change over time.

Your grief will ebb and flow. The acute pain will ease, but you will still get blindsided by sadness. Keep your boss and point person updated on how you're doing, what you're finding doable, what you're finding difficult, where you need extra help or support. They won't know anything's changed if you don't tell them. Or, if you appear to be doing well, they may conclude that everything is fine, and you're back to your former self.

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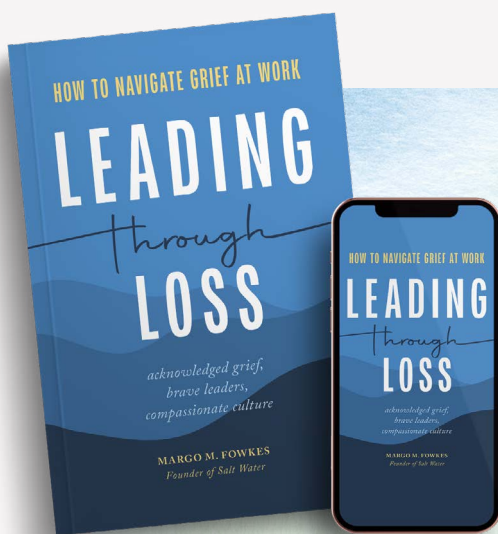
Give yourself grace.

Weighed down with grief, you'll find yourself snapping at a colleague or bursting into tears during a team meeting. You may feel stressed, anxious and emotional. Your productivity will probably dip. You may make mistakes, miss deadlines or struggle to finish an assignment. This is normal and to be expected. Conversely, you may discover that work is a safe haven from your grief. A place where you can joke with a colleague, distract yourself with a project and briefly put your loss out of your mind. Either way, remind yourself that you are doing the best you can navigating a hard, painful time.

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Offer your colleagues grace, too.

Well-meaning coworkers may say something hurtful. Others may say nothing at all. Expect a range of behaviors and responses to your loss. Know that most people are trying to show their support the best way they know how.



For more advice on navigating grief in the workplace, visit leadingthroughloss.net.

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