

PET LOSS AND PHYSICAL HEALTH¹

Grief from pet loss may also lead to physical symptoms, such as fatigue, insomnia, a hollow feeling in the stomach, tightness in the chest, dry mouth, and aches and pains.

Sometimes,

Our reactions to grief can be severe. One woman reportedly experienced “broken heart syndrome” after losing her dog. This condition occurs when one chamber of the heart suddenly weakens in response to an emotional or physical stress.

Its symptoms are similar to heart attack symptoms. While this condition is rare, it highlights the large effect that grief can have on the body.

WHY LOSING A PET IS ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT¹

It's common to think that people don't get that sad after loss of a pet. But research tells us that often, the grief that people feel following loss of an animal companion feels the same as grief following loss of a human companion. In some cases, people report even more intense feelings. This may be because of the special type of relationship we feel with our pets.

Often, it feels like a parent-child relationship, and is associated with unconditional love and acceptance, which we don't always get in our human relationships. Feeling these especially strong feelings after pet loss may take some people by surprise and lead to feeling shame or guilt.

There are many reasons why grieving a pet can be just as or even more difficult than grieving a human:¹

- While everyone can understand and empathize with loss of a person, not everyone can grasp how devastating pet loss can be. Some people may make insensitive comments, such as “you can just get another pet,” which adds to the sense that other people don't understand what we're going through.
- We don't tend to have the same rituals surrounding pet loss as we do with the loss of our fellow humans. This may include not getting as much social support from others. This may lead to feeling like our emotions aren't valid, and feeling even more isolated.
- Because some people don't understand pet loss, we often don't have as much space to process emotions. For example, pet loss is often not considered a valid reason for taking time off of work. People who have just lost a companion may find it extremely difficult to keep up with normal responsibilities, even though they are expected to keep performing as normal.
- Because of stigma surrounding grieving during pet loss, some people may find it hard to talk openly about what they are struggling with. Often, people who have lost a pet feel embarrassed or ashamed at the depth of their emotion.

“Being hesitant to acknowledge or talk about these strong emotions is common. Not having solid support systems surrounding pet loss can sometimes make processing it more difficult. This may mean that the pet grieving process is more complex and it can take longer for us to move on.”

Another difficulty surrounding pet loss that is often unacknowledged is that it leads to changes in a person's routine. Perhaps a person got used to being woken up in the morning by their hungry cat, or getting exercise through walking their dog.

When that pet is gone, a person's whole daily routine may be thrown off, leaving a person feeling even more lost. Small hassles and disruptions to a person's routine can easily add up to be **just as stressful and harmful to health** than bigger events¹

"It was the most tragic, traumatic, and emotionally devastating experience I had ever been through. I didn't know what to do. I cried day and night"
(Dorothy R., Alabama)²

"I never knew anything could hurt so bad. I cried a whole ocean of tears. I went through self-hatred for putting my pet to sleep, to depression, to acceptance. For a long time I couldn't even watch a dog food commercial"
(Cheryl T., Alabama)²

Do these reactions to the loss of a pet touch a familiar chord in your heart? Grief, confusion, anger, guilt and depression are all typical responses to the death of a loved one.

Only recently, however, have researchers come to realize that a pet may also be considered a loved one and a family member, and that its death may evoke similar and often equally intense emotions²

Real Life Example handled

with an employee related to their brother. The same principles apply for pets³

Sam walked up, teary-eyed and with a look of distress across his face. My mind flashed to every possibility. I knew it wasn't good... but I had no idea what it could be.

As we sat down with one another, alone in the conference room, he looked down, took a deep breath, and in a shaking voice said, "I just found out my brother died."

WOULD YOU KNOW WHAT TO SAY IF THAT HAPPENED TO ONE OF YOUR TEAM MEMBERS?³

It's the last thing in the world you want to happen to anyone, but the reality is that sometimes tragedy falls on those closest to us. And when it's one of your own employees, it's important to know how to respond and support them.

Your first response is one of the most important moments after finding out about a team member's loss. You might not know exactly what to say, but if you know how to respond well, it will speak volumes and mean a lot to the impacted team member.

HOW TO RESPOND WHEN YOU FIRST FIND OUT³

Author and speaker Mark Crowley says the best thing you can do after learning that a team member has lost a loved one is to call and offer your support.

“It's tempting to believe employees don't want to be "bothered" by their boss in their time of grief and mourning...But **in moments of deep loss, human beings need to feel supported and cared for** by the people closest to them”

If you're a leader that cares, or as Mark likes to say, **Leads from the Heart**, your words will matter quite a bit to your team member. You may even be the first person in the company they tell.

*"Telling someone directly that **you are profoundly sorry for their loss, and that you empathize with all the pain** they are feeling goes right to their hearts."*

This kind of thoughtfulness makes a big impact and shows your team member know that you're there for them.

Tell them about your company's bereavement policy³

After that initial call or meeting, if you haven't already, check what your company's bereavement policy is and any local laws. This takes the burden off of them figuring it out, so they know how many days they're allowed to take off, as well as other important details.

According to the US Department of Labor, there is no national law requiring any paid leave, but there is *unpaid* time off permitted under the Family Medical Leave Act and to attend funerals. This means their options will really vary state to state and company to company.

Once you know what your company's policy officially is, let your team member know you found the information while you were looking into ways you could help. Best of all, this can potentially get HR or another leader involved to help and show support as well. Especially at smaller companies, you can expect others will want to help and express condolences, too.

Regardless of how much time they take, realize you will need to give them time to get back on their feet.

So what do you do? Here's what Crowley recommends³:

"When a member of your team suffers a great loss, **the leader's job is to circle the wagons**, bring the team together and divvy up the employee's workload until they return.

Even in times of great loss, most people tend to feel guilty about being away. **So what they need in the moment is to hear their boss say, 'Please don't worry about work. We've got you covered.'**

Crowley says that managers often fail to recognize how critical a moment it is for their reputation as a leader:

While no amount of time can completely heal the pain caused by a tragic loss, time off and lightening their burden of work can make a big difference.

What to do while they've gone on bereavement³

While your grieving team member is away, it's important to have a game plan, especially if it could be an extended leave. The smaller your team, the less you can afford to be without a single team member, so it's important to know how to balance being empathetic with making sure the work gets done.

Crowley says he's often seen selfish managers respond to an employee's loss from the perspective of what they're losing— seeing their goals and deadlines slip through their fingers due to the loss of a team member. These managers will say tone-deaf things like:

I know you've suffered a great loss, but do you have any sense on when you might be back at work?

Crowley understands how this can happen, but does not excuse it:

*"You might gasp at this, but workplace pressures seem so great at times that many of us lose sight of what behavior is most appropriate, and **we end up thinking more about ourselves than our employee.**"*

The reality is, all of us will be impacted by the loss of a loved one at different points in our lives. It's important to be as empathetic as possible while thinking about the best way to move forward.



"It's in these critical moments when **people decide if you're a boss worth striving for— or even working for.**" Make sure your response says, "We're here for you."

Plan for while they're gone, and their return³

Being empathetic is important, but it's equally important to not overlook the importance of having a game plan for how you're going to cover the team member's workload while they're gone.

Crowley shared with us a story of a previous manager of his whose five-year-old died suddenly. When she took a two-month leave, her team stepped up and took on the job of managing themselves.

However, over time, he could see that the pressure was taking a toll. Without a proper manager to lead the team, the absence caused a block that affected the team. Making matters worse, when she returned, there were new problems and challenges.

"It quickly became clear she was not sufficiently healed. She would come to work, but close her door. Or she would leave after only a few hours,"

Ultimately, after much patience, things didn't work out. Crowley says that if it happened again, he'd still offer the person the same compassion and support as before. However, he'd have had a better plan for her and the team:

"I will always regret not realizing that I had a business to run...and that when she went out on extended bereavement leave, I could have found a new manager to lead her team."

By finding a replacement to fill the space the grieving manager left, it would have been a win-win: the manager would be given the time they need while the pressure on your end for them to come back is removed. Then, when they do return, he could have found a role that better fit what she was ready for, without the pressure of her full team right off the bat.

*Speaker & consultant, Mark C. Crowley is the author of **Lead From The Heart, Transformational Leadership For The 21st Century**. Connect with him via his [website at www.markccrowley.com](http://www.markccrowley.com)*

How to handle bereavement with a new team member³

What if the employee who experienced the loss is new to the team?

Without any previous connection established, it can make the situation even more difficult to handle.

What to do when they get back³

Now that your team member is back in the office, it's important not to make assumptions, whether that's assuming everything is back to normal or that they want to take it slow.

Everyone deals with grief differently, and often the most difficult part about coming back to work isn't the work itself, but the response from their boss and co-workers.

You need to feel out how they're doing and see how they want to move forward. If you're not sure if they're up for moving forward with their 1-on-1s right now, **ask them**.

- **Did they say yes?** They probably want to get back to work. Work allows us to keep busy and connect with others, both of which can help someone experiencing grief. Find out what they need to feel like they can catch up and feel productive. Prioritize, remove blockers, and lend a hand where you can.
- **Did they say no, hesitate, or pause?** Let them set the pace and give them time to get back into the office flow. If you're already meeting with them and you get the feeling they're not comfortable opening up, throw out the agenda and let them talk about whatever they feel like.

This is where having an emotional savings account built up can really help. If they already trust you, they will know you have their best interests at heart, and will be more willing to open up about how they're feeling.

What can you do? ³

Leadership coach and **Executive Velocity** founder Beth Miller coached an executive in exactly this position.

The executive did everything she could think of: attend the funeral, expressed her condolences, and even offered a donation in honor of the employee's loved one. Those were immediate and thoughtful things she could do.

Unfortunately, it was after this that the difficult part began. As Miller recalls:

"When the employee returned to work, she expressed her sorrow for his loss. She then followed with the question: "Is there anyone that you can talk to about your loss?"

This question demonstrated her concern but didn't commit her to be a grief counselor, and the answer provided her with the name of the person he felt close to in the organization. She also reminded him of the company's EAP, employee assistance program.³

By taking the issue head on from the start, the executive made sure that the employee got the help and support they needed. Then, over time, she kept an eye on how they were doing on their journey of moving forward.

"She then became keenly aware of the employee's behaviors, looking for early warning signs that could impact his productivity such as sick days or disengagement"

In this case, the employee's energy and interaction with other team members did not seem to change.

She also checked in with the employee's close friend, to learn if she was missing anything about the employee's recovery from loss.

During the next few months she sporadically checked in with both him and his close colleague to see how he was doing and if he needed any additional assistance. She believed that having another employee to check in on the grieving employee was critical to success.

And this effort she took to support her grieving employee made a real difference. According to Miller, two years later, the employee is still with the company and has taken on more responsibilities.³

*Speaker and leadership authority Beth Miller is the Leadership **Executive Advisor** and founder of Executive Velocity and Chair with **Vistage**. Learn more about her work at executive-velocity.com*



What Do You Say to an Employee who has Suffered a Loss? ³ _____

One of the most difficult things about this type of situation, before even your response as their manager, is just how to be an **empathetic human being** to someone who has experienced loss.

What do you say to someone who has just had one of the most important people in their life taken from them?

For those who haven't experienced a similar loss, our first response— while meaning well— can be more harmful than anything without us even knowing it.

"I have learned that I never really knew what to say to others in need," Sandberg says. "I tried to assure people that it would be okay, thinking that hope was the most comforting thing I could offer."

Dailey echoed this, expressing that to someone experiencing grief, **words of hope show a lack of empathy** for what the person is going through:

"You carry that weight for the rest of your life. You do not shed it by getting over it. It changes you and becomes a part of you."

The last thing you want is to say the wrong thing, so be careful falling on cliches or saying something that doesn't help them.

What to avoid saying³

A friend of Sandberg's with late-stage cancer once told her that **the worst thing someone could say to him was, "It's going to be okay."**

However, it wasn't until her own experience that she realized what he had meant.

"Real empathy is sometimes not insisting that it will be okay but acknowledging that it is not."

Those who have experienced loss know that it's a pain that will never fully go away. Unfortunately, it's something that's difficult for those who haven't experienced something similar to understand, which is a big reason for this post.

Sandberg says even a well-intentioned, "How are you?" can trigger strong feelings:

"When I am asked 'How are you?' I stop myself from shouting, 'My husband died a month ago, how do you think I am?'"

Similarly, anything that presumes the loss will go away– or tries to make it so– should be stayed away from, including:

- "You're going to be fine."
- "Time is the great healer."
- "They're in a better place."

What if you just found out about a team member's loss– or they just got back in the office– and you want to show your support? What do you say instead?

What to say instead³

Instead of, "How are you," Sandberg says **"How are you today"** is better:

*"When I hear, 'How are you today?' I realize the person knows that **the best I can do right now is to get through each day.**"*

Alternatively, Dailey says,

*"It's odd but I've felt the most comforted when team members and friends say, **'I'm sorry. I don't know what to say.'**"*

Here are a few more ideas of things you can say to express your support to a grieving employee:

- "We're here for you." (Show empathy without trying to change how they're feeling.)
- "What can we do to help you right now?" (Like Sheryl's suggestion, you focus on immediate needs)
- "I'd love to talk if you're up for it. It's ok either way." (Extend the offer without making them feel like they have to respond or commit to anything.)

Support Your Team When They Need it Most³

Having a team member go through bereavement at work is a situation no manager wants to experience.

Unfortunately, it's a part of life – and knowing how to handle it can make the recovery process easier for both them and the rest of your team.

Thanks to Mark Crowley and Beth Miller for their insights. And a special thanks to Travis Dailey for being kind enough to open up about his experience so that others who have experienced loss may benefit (and so that we can support them better).

You can read more from Travis at his personal site: travisdailey.com

“Getting out of bed is a herculean task. Meals no longer seem important. And work? That’s just impossible. Understanding this is important because it is how your employee is feeling.”

When To Ask An Employee To Return To Work⁴

Asking an employee about their return to work after the death of a loved one can be a tricky situation. If your organization already has a well-established bereavement policy, you may be able to look at those guidelines before the employee takes the leave.

With that policy, the framework and expectations are set at the beginning and there is no confusion over the process. You will also need to make sure this policy is included in your employee handbook so that everyone has access to it.

Still, flexibility in this bereavement period is important. The grieving employee may need more time than initially considered and they may not be able to communicate as well as you have come to expect from them.

During the bereavement leave, keep communication brief. Make initial contact after the death, offer condolences, and set into motion any planning for bereavement leave. During this contact⁴, plan a second date and time for contact around the employee’s schedule but do not push for too many details or plans.

During this second planned contact time, you can begin to ask about their anticipated return to work. Granted, you should use your best judgment on when and how to begin this conversation, as you will want to treat the subject with care. Don’t rush them into giving you a date if they do not offer one. Instead, let them lead the conversation initially and see if they have a plan for their return.

If they don’t seem to have a set date or time for their return, you may want to ask some gentle questions to nudge the conversation in that direction.

Questions like "Do you need to have someone cover your next shift?" or "Should we contact [another employee] and give them notes for next week’s project?" may steer the conversation in that direction.

If that doesn't work, it may be time to ask the question directly. Make sure you do so in a gentle manner and give them some time to reply.

You might have to discuss the limits of the bereavement policy, though be prepared for them to ask for additional time off if it seems they are still struggling with grief.

How To Support Employees Through Grief & Loss⁴

When someone dies, that death sends ripples outward among everyone and everything in their lives. It's no surprise this affects their professional lives as well. If you have an employee suffering from such a loss, it can create an often sudden and complicated situation for your organization.

With that in mind, we've created a guide for employers who may be seeking assistance in managing and supporting their employees when the worst happens and offers ideas for when an employee needs time off and how to assist when your employee returns to work. After all, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

SUPPORT IMMEDIATELY AFTER LOSS⁴

When tragedy strikes and loss occurs, the impact it has on a person can be tremendous. Employers can assist their employees in the immediate aftermath of loss by giving them the time that they need with their families and to grieve their loss without the added pressure of work responsibilities.

Depending on their individual policies and procedures, employers have a couple of different options. These are the two most common types of leave offered to employees after suffering the loss of an immediate family member.

Company Bereavement Policy

Bereavement leave is time off an employee can take after the death of a close family member or loved one. From an HR perspective, it is designed to give an employee some time off work to focus on their physical and mental wellbeing in the aftermath of a loss. In most cases, this includes a set amount of paid time following a death in an employee's family.

Bereavement policies are not required by law (except in the state of Oregon), but some states and cities have begun creating legislation that may eventually enact them. However, most companies offer some form of bereavement policy as part of their employee benefits.

If your company does not offer an official bereavement policy, you should consider one. Having a structured policy that addresses an employee's needs offers stability, certainty, and guarantees equity to those who require time off during a difficult time.

It also benefits the company as it grants an employee time to mourn without the pressures of their job and allows them to return to work with better clarity and productivity.

Employee Leave Donation

Some companies create Leave Donation or Leave Sharing programs. These programs allow employees to donate their accrued paid time off (PTO), vacation, or sick leave to other employees who may need emergency time off in the form of medical or family emergencies. Typically, this donated leave time goes into a pool to be used as needed.

Programs like this have been shown to increase employee morale, productivity, and even improve employee retention! If you do not have such a program but are curious about how they work and how to implement them, there are many online guides that provide more details on the topic.

SUPPORT UPON RETURN TO WORK⁴

When your employee does return to work after the death of a loved one, you may struggle with knowing how to support them while still maintaining a productive work environment for the entire company. Here are some tips on how to make this transition as painless as possible for everyone.

Be Patient And Give Them Space⁴

The best way you can show that the employee that you care is to be patient and allow them the time to make any arrangements related to their loved ones passing. This can also include understanding their need for additional assistance (such as a grief counselor or outside help).

Show your concern at the outset but do not overwhelm them with work concerns or even your own condolences. When it comes to their work productivity, you especially need to be patient with any bumps or difficulties along the way. They may need a little longer to get back into their routine.

Offer Resources⁴

One of the best things you can do is to make sure your employee knows what resources are available to them. Can you offer flexible scheduling for a few weeks? Perhaps there are options to work from home until they are able to come back into the office regularly.

You can encourage them to speak to HR or to any counselors your company has on retainer for just such times. Make sure they know what benefits they are entitled to and how to access them.

Respect Their Privacy⁴

Your employee doesn't owe you the intimate details of their situation. Nor should you pressure them into giving more information that is strictly necessary to make arrangements for their leave.

This extends to sharing any details you do know with their coworkers or other people in the company. Your employee has a right to privacy and, as their boss, you owe them that level of respect.

Delegate Responsibilities⁴

Anyone coming back to work after an extended period of time off is likely going to need a little time to adjust. For someone coming back after bereavement leave, it can be even more difficult to catch up on everything they missed.

They're also likely not at their most productive. This may be a good time to delegate some responsibilities to other coworkers until they feel confident enough to handle their previous workload.

Choose A Gift To Express Sympathy & Care⁴

As coworkers, we often want to show that we support and care but aren't really sure what to do. Group or individual grieving gifts such as flowers and a card are wonderful ways to show a coworker that you are sorry for their loss.

And depending on the nature of your relationship, don't be afraid to think outside the box. Personalized memorial gifts such as photo engraved jewelry, memorial bookmarks and memorial coins can be personalized with a memory of their loved one.

Not only are these gifts highly personal but they also provide family, friends and even coworkers with a unique opportunity to show them how much they are cared for and supported during this time of grief.



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