

## Available Services

### Queensland

Survivors of Suicide  
Bereavement Support  
Association Inc (SOSBSA)  
PO Box 334

#### Springwood Qld 4127

Telephone: 1300 767 022

#### Bundaberg Qld 4670

Telephone: (07) 4155 1015

#### Cairns Qld

Telephone: (07) 4045 2955

### Suicide Support Group

Lifeline Brisbane North  
Telephone: (07) 3250 1856

The Compassionate Friends Qld  
Inc

PO Box 1930

#### New Farm Qld 4005

Telephone: (07) 3254 2657

### ACT

Support After Suicide

#### Canberra ACT

Telephone: (02) 6292 6847

### Western Australia

Survivors of Suicide Support  
Group

#### Subiaco WA 6008

Telephone: (09) 9381 5555

### New South Wales

Support After Suicide Group

#### Burwood NSW

Telephone: (02) 8584 7800

Support After Suicide

#### Sutherland NSW

Telephone: 0412 522 140

Support After Suicide

(02) 6921 4470/6926 1177

#### Wagga Wagga NSW

### Victoria

Support After Suicide

PO Box 79

#### Richmond Vic 3121

Telephone: (03) 9427 9899

Southern Fleurieu

Bereavement Group

#### Victor Harbour SA 5211

Telephone: (08) 8552 6522

### South Australia

Bereaved Through Suicide

Support Group

PO Box 151

#### Kent Town SA 5071

Telephone: (08) 8332 8240

## Facilitating a Bereaved Employee: Guidelines for Employers



Olwen Schubert



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## Other SOSBSA Publications

*The Nature of Words: Guidelines for Communicating  
with the Bereaved by Suicide*

Olwen Schubert, author, 1999

ISBN No 0 9586313 1 x

*First Aid for Emotional Hurt* a pamphlet edited by Bruce  
Dimmock and the SOSBSA Management Committee,  
1999

*Self Healing Tools*

Olwen Schubert, author, 2000

*Suicide: The Aftermath*

Olwen Schubert, author, 2003

ISBN No 0 958 6313 6 0

*Feeling Suicidal? Thoughts on Self Help*

Bruce Dimmock, author, 2000

ISBN No 0 958 6313 3 6

# Picking Up the Pieces

Picking up the pieces  
bits of memories  
scattered like jigsaws  
a puzzle of yesterdays

Picking up the pieces  
a still-life image  
a picture delimited by creases  
disconnected to the whole

Picking up the pieces  
of disorientated thoughts  
a jumble of 'ifs' and 'whys'  
guilt grasping onto sanity

Picking up the pieces  
of sense and reality  
accepting the tomorrows  
and letting go of yesterdays

Olwen Schubert  
5/1/2000

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# Message from the Premier of Queensland

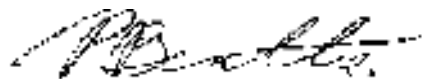
The Queensland government is committed to initiatives that will assist employers to recognise the special consideration required in order to ease the grief and bereavement journey of bereaved employees when returning to work.

Most of us have been confronted with a colleague, friend, partner or family member who has been in despair over the death of a loved one — have we known what to say or what to do or how to help over a long period of time? Consider how difficult it may be for a bereaved person, under such trying circumstances, to return to work and face the various reactions of colleagues.

For the bereaved person a suicide death of a loved one may result in enormous guilt thereby creating low self-esteem, so for these employees it may be a long and sometimes lonely road to self-recovery.

The employer and the organisation is therefore encouraged to nurture their bereaved employee's return to full and satisfying employment. It is with a genuine concern that I entrust employers to consider the management of bereaved employees.

This publication has been long overdue and I strongly recommend that it be part of each and every employer's Human Resource Management manual.



Peter Beattie  
Premier of Queensland

## Recommendations

### The Do's

- √ Do provide your bereaved employee with a forum in which he/she feels free to discuss their thoughts and feelings.
- √ Do be prepared to listen.
- √ Do take the initiative by suggesting counselling for your bereaved employee and his/her colleagues.
- √ Do ensure that at least the bereaved employee's colleagues are counselled.
- √ Do ascertain whether your bereaved employee is capable of the tasks required to ensure that undue stress does not occur.
- √ Do employ flexible working hours if that helps your bereaved employee.
- √ Do allow your bereaved employee to cry. It may only be a tear or two or it may be a flood. Whatever the case, it is a necessary release for him/her.
- √ Do let your bereaved employee talk about the person who has died. If you or his/her colleagues also knew that person, share some memories with him/her.
- √ Do include these guidelines in your Human Resource Management procedures and policies.



### The Don'ts

- Don't place a timeline on the 'grief' your bereaved employee is experiencing.
- Don't expect your bereaved employee to function like he/she did prior to his/her tragedy.
- Don't mouth inanities, such as 'I know how you feel'. Remember that all loss and grief are very individual.
- Don't think that death puts a ban on laughter. There is much healing in laughter.
- Don't be a judge and jury on the bereaved employee's relationship with the deceased.

# Introduction

As an employer, it is necessary that you discover if the bereaved employee has a close friendship with one or more of his/her colleagues and sees him/her socially. If this is the case, then the bereaved employee's loss of their loved one will doubly impact on the work environment, as his/her friend will also be in a state of shock, as well as being emotionally fragile.

Work colleagues will also be unprepared for dealing with the bereaved employee. If they have not experienced 'grief', they cannot be expected to fully understand the enormity of their colleague's bereavement.

- ◆ As an employer, to aid all concerned and your organisation as a whole, would you be prepared to provide in-house counselling for the bereaved employee's colleagues, in order that their support may be of greater value?



Counselling can also help to offset the detachment, depression and isolation so often experienced by the bereaved employee. Because of the loneliness associated with bereavement, this work is particularly suited to groups.



- ◆ As an employer would you be prepared to suggest group counselling for both the bereaved employee and his/her colleagues?
- ◆ As an employer whose staff is their greatest resource and perhaps their bereaved employee may be one of their best assets, is it not, therefore, prudent to nurture their employee and his/her colleagues in order to hasten a smooth transition back into the workforce?

As Secretary for the Survivors of Suicide Bereavement Support Association Inc (SOSBSA) it has given me a great sense of satisfaction to have written this much needed booklet *Facilitating a Bereaved Employee: Guidelines for Employers*. I wish to acknowledge with thanks members from SOSBSA and also from The Compassionate Friends (Brisbane) who, through listening to the difficulties some of them experienced on their return to work, that I undertook to write this booklet.

As a bereaved parent, who lost her only son, Christian Paul Schubert, at the tender age of 21 to suicide, I fully comprehend the tribulations that a bereaved person may experience from employers and colleagues. It is, therefore, hoped that by reading these guidelines, that employers will include it in their Human Resource Management policy and procedures in order to be able to approach a bereaved employee with sensitivity and understanding. Hopefully this booklet will also provide employers and the bereaved employee's colleagues with an insight into 'grief' and 'bereavement' and the implications that may arise for them personally and their organisation as a whole.

I recommend this booklet to all employers, their supervisors and colleagues — not only for the bereaved employee's benefit — but also, for the organisation itself. As the more understanding of 'grief' and 'bereavement' is made possible, the organisation and its employees can not only benefit in monetary terms, but also from a more cohesive workforce.

Olwen Schubert  
Secretary, SOSBSA



## Questions for the Employer

- √ As a chief executive officer, manager and/or supervisor how would you relate to a person suffering an agonising pain called 'grief'?
- √ Do you expect your employee to 'get over' this grief?
- √ Do you expect a certain deadline for this 'grief' to end? If so, how long would your timeline be?
- √ Do you expect your employee to perform his/her tasks with the same efficiency/dedication before suffering from 'grief'?
- √ Would you provide assimilation back to the employee's particular position within your organisation?
- √ Do you think it necessary to ask his/her colleagues if they would be willing to offer him/her appropriate support?
- √ Do you think that it is far better that you or his/her colleagues not mention the person who has died?
- √ Would you or his/her colleagues treat the employee differently if he/she was bereaved by the suicide death of a loved family member or close friend?
- √ Would the suicide death of someone you or your employee's colleagues loved affect you or them differently?
- √ Do you or your employee's colleagues believe that a suicide death is caused by that person's mental illness?
- √ Would you or your employee's colleagues view the death of a child/sibling/mother/father/partner/friend of the employee in a different way?
- √ Choose someone whom you love dearly and try and imagine what your life would be without that person. Do you think it would be a tragedy?

- ◆ 'It was for the best'
- ◆ 'You're young and you'll find someone else'
- ◆ 'God only bestows trials that He knows that you can cope with'
- ◆ 'You can have other children' or
- ◆ 'You're lucky you've got other children'.

At times it may be difficult for employers and/or colleagues to know how to handle the situation; and even the bereaved person may be reluctant to speak about his/her feelings for fear of becoming too emotional. It is important to remember that as a society we lack understanding and are 'fearful' regarding the subjects of death and bereavement, and even more so, when it happens to be a suicide. Yet it is important that the bereaved person needs to feel comfortable talking about their loved one's life/death and/or death by suicide.



Persons who are grieving over a loved one's suicide are perhaps more vulnerable, as they usually bear an incredible amount of guilt. Colleagues may think that the death was a result of the employee's relationship with the person who suicided. Therefore colleagues' reactions to them, may unwittingly increase their feelings of guilt and worthlessness.

It is important to understand that the bereaved employee is at risk for future physical, emotional and social problems, especially if they have difficulty in coming to terms with their grief and reinvesting in the future.

Did you understand that it would be better to ease this employee's return to work by providing:

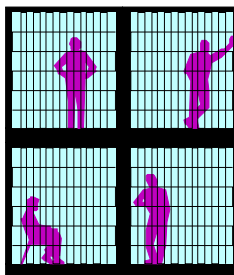
- (a) less stressful position;
- (b) shorter hours; and/or
- (c) work with a colleague on a particular non-urgent project?

to recovery. It augurs well for employers to gauge the emotional situation of their employee and, if necessary, take action and suggest flexible working hours or offer the bereaved person a special project to keep their mind focused.

Some bereaved persons feel that returning to work definitely helped them. It restored some measure of normalcy for some in performing a daily routine. It helped others by wearing a mask of pretense — smiling, saying ‘hello’, answering ‘fine’ — that the pretense slowly became a reality. Other problems for the bereaved person may seem minuscule in comparison with death and it may be hard for your employee to be objective regarding other people’s dilemmas. Anger for the bereaved person is a normal outlet, as it is perhaps the only one, true emotion that he/she is capable of venting and may vent without fear of criticism. Also be aware that while in the stages of acute grief, your employee may be unable to make rational decisions. Their confidence may also be shattered resulting in low self-esteem.



The bereaved person’s feelings are greatly heightened in a work environment as it involves a commitment over a specific number of hours each day. Regardless whether they are bereaved or not, most people want to do the ‘right thing’. However, it may seem to a few bereaved persons that, as they have returned to work and, within their own expectations, they consider that the ‘work day’ is a precise measure of hours and subsequently there is no ‘escape’.



It is important for both the employer and the employee’s colleagues to acknowledge the bereaved person’s loved one who has died. It is to be remembered that that person once lived and sharing memories will always validate his/her existence. It is also important to remember not to mouth inanities, such as:

## This Thing Called ‘Grief’

What type of employee suffers from this thing called ‘grief’? Is it only office workers that mope around for days? Is it the professional who is always confused and cannot make any decisions, let alone the right one? Is it a tradesperson who isn’t up to the task? Is it a hospitality employee who cannot seem to stay awake?



First and foremost you need to understand what ‘grief’ really encompasses. The dictionary describes the word ‘grief’ as: misery, sorrow, pain, unhappiness, angst and woe. Ask yourself one question: do all these words mean exactly the same thing? Take the definitions of these words as an example:

- ◆ ‘misery’ = Depression
- ◆ ‘sorrow’ = Regret
- ◆ ‘pain’ = Ache
- ◆ ‘unhappiness’ = Melancholy
- ◆ ‘angst’ = Agony
- ◆ ‘woe’ = Sadness

What do the first letters of this last list spell? **DRAMAS!** One of the definitions of the word ‘drama’ is **TRAGEDY!**

When a person suffers from ‘grief’ its effects on that person depends not only on the particular family/partner or friend who has died, but also the relationship your employee had with his/her family member/partner or friend. Nonetheless, your employee will still suffer ‘grief’ no matter who has died nor the circumstances of that death.





Grief is a suffering of the heart, mind and soulbody. It is excruciating mental and physical agony. This thing that is 'grief' may manifest itself in the breakdown of a person's immune system; it may subject the bereaved to migraine-like headaches; it may eventuate as longer-term fatigue; it may be a significant contributing factor in the development of depression, a serious and often debilitating condition in itself; it may be driven by some unknown, energetic force that propels the

sufferer to 'overload' on work.

## On Suicide

Contrary to popular belief, the majority of people who suicide do not actually want to die, it is the person's confused and ambivalent state of mind that precedes the decision to suicide. It is the expectation of that person that suicide is a solution to their particular insurmountable problem. Often an overwhelming sense of hopelessness can trigger depression and at a specific time, a person's despondency may develop suicidal thoughts. Yet it seems the pain of emotional suffering diminishes once the person has made the decision to suicide.

Usually, no matter who or how a person dies, your employee may feel a certain amount of guilt. If, however, that person has suicided, your employee may carry an enormous amount of guilt. They may even be ashamed of the fact that their loved one chose to suicide.

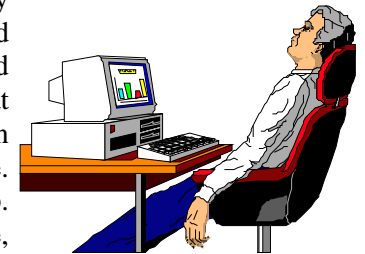
It is also pertinent to remember that just as cancer and AIDS once carried a stigma, so even now as we are on the threshold of a new century, 'suicide' also bears the stigma: the *sui* and *cide* of 'self' and 'murder'. Individuals, politicians and the media still refer to a death by suicide as 'he/she committed suicide'. Its origins began when society first, as a religious belief taught that only God could take a life; and then, also when it became law that a suicide death was regarded a crime. We are so ingrained with the two words 'committed suicide',

## Returning to Work

For the bereaved persons whose jobs are more routine in nature may be able to cope more easily. Returning to work for others may be difficult and can usually be viewed with apprehension. Questions such as:

- ◆ 'How will I cope?'
- ◆ 'How can I remain cheerful all the time?'
- ◆ 'Will I cry all the time?'
- ◆ 'What will I say?'
- ◆ 'How can I say "good morning/good afternoon" on the telephone, to colleagues?'
- ◆ 'How will I last a whole day?'
- ◆ 'How will I react to what I see as "inconsequential" problems?'
- ◆ 'How will I cope with trivial arguments?'

The length of time will vary from person to person regarding the 'right time' to return to work. Grief is as unique as a set of fingerprints. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' time to go back to work; it is only 'right' when that person is ready to return to work. Even then, grief may cause both mental and physical fatigue, the bereaved person may suffer lack of concentration. A bereaved person will have 'good' times, 'bad' times and 'extremely dreadful' times. The reality of what has happened comes in waves and when brought to bear, hits with tremendous force. The bereaved person experiences a time warp. The mindbody is in shock. Meanwhile, through all these oscillating emotions, the sufferer is trying to come to terms with his/her grief.



It is unfortunate in a majority of cases for employees, that reasons beyond their control, such as economic necessity or employer's unrealistic expectations, will dictate their return. However, timing can play a crucial role in returning a person to work. For some that have to return to work a few days or weeks after the death of a loved one, may suffer emotionally for many years, as their grief process has been interrupted. For others, a quick return to work is a salvation, as they use their work as a tool for their road