twin triplet support

Returning to Work for Employers and Colleagues

This leaflet is written with the help of bereaved parents who have sadly experienced the death of a baby or babies from a twin or triplet pregnancy.

It is for employers and work colleagues who are supporting a parent after the loss of one or more of their twins or triplets. It offers advice on how to support an employee both while they are on leave and when they return to work.

The importance and long-lasting impact of how employers and colleagues act and the language they use during someone's journey after loss cannot be underestimated. It can have a significant impact on someone's grief. It is important to consider this advice whether your employee is the mother or the father/non-birthing partner. Both will be grieving this significant loss and will need support.

When one or more of a family's twins or triplets die it can be a very traumatic time for the parents. Sometimes it will be expected and other times it will be sudden and unexpected. Losing one or more babies from a twin or triplet pregnancy can be complicated and this complexity may be hard for people to understand.

Having an employer who shows compassion and kindness during this time can make such a difference to an employee's grief journey but also to their ongoing relationship with their work. If they feel that work is a supportive and welcoming place it can help them to move forward. If it feels like an unsupportive or upsetting environment it will add to the stress and grief that they are experiencing and make it more difficult for them to contribute effectively to their workplace.

This returning to work information can also apply to parents who are returning to college, university or other study after the loss of their twins or triplets.

Your employee may have experienced the death of both twins or all of their triplets, or they may have a surviving twin or triplet(s). This may have happened during pregnancy at any stage or after birth. Their specific context will affect the support that they need, their rights to leave and the way they may feel about their loss. Whatever the situation, this will be a significant loss and your employee will be grieving. It is important to be compassionate and supportive to aid their recovery and ability to re-engage with work in a productive and valuable way.

"I returned to work 9 months after my twins were born. I had sent my manager a message after Matthew passed away to let her know what had happened. On my first day back, my manager wasn't in. No one was aware what had happened, despite the fact I had asked her to share with the team. Even 9 months after returning to work, I still get questions from staff who haven't seen me since I returned."

It will be a difficult time for all involved around them as well as it can be hard to know what to say. Some colleagues will say the right things and others won't. Some may stay silent which may feel even worse. It is important for managers to support not only the returning employee but also those who work with them to help them understand what support their colleague may need.

"It would have been nice to have the support from my manager on day one, and also to have either had everyone aware, or be prepared that they weren't aware, before I returned."
From a mum with a twin that died and a surviving twin.

SUPPORTING AN EMPLOYEE IN THE EARLY DAYS AFTER THE LOSS

In the early days after the loss it is important to **communicate** with your employee to offer your condolences and support but make sure it is supportive and not focused on work. In an ideal world the communication would also offer them as much time and space as you can to grieve before asking them to re-engage with work.

Make sure you say you are sorry that their baby/babies have died and **ask to hear about their story** when and if they are ready to share it. The bereaved parent may say no but know it is important to **acknowledge their babies**. Make a note of the birthday(s), date of death and funeral dates of the children who have died so that you can check in the weeks before AND on those dates. Try not to offer platitudes and avoid any sentence that includes the word 'at least'.

"I was allowed two weeks paid bereavement leave over the anniversary of his death, which was very necessary. This allowed me to return with a much clearer mind than if I had had to push through and work."

Ask them about their preferences in terms of colleagues getting in touch and whether or not they would like to receive cards and gifts. This will be very individual and will be a huge comfort to some but others may find it intrusive or upsetting or want to wait.

"My manager collected cards from colleagues and let me know she was keeping them for me until she came to see me a few weeks after we lost our twins. I found it very difficult to receive cards in the early days. I know it was people's way of showing they cared but it felt quite overwhelming and intrusive early on so I appreciated her waiting to give me these later."

Next we have included a snippet from our 'Advice for Friends and Family' leaflet on some ideas about what to say and what not to say. Please see below to read our other leaflets.

Support Services >

Advice for Friends and Family >

Advice for Healthcare Professionals >

Employees Returning to Work >

WHAT TO SAY

"I don't know what to say but I am here for you/thinking of you."

"I am feeling unsure how I can help...is there anything I can do?"

"I can't begin to imagine what you've been through or what you're going through."

"If you ever need/want to talk about it, I'll be here to listen."

"What can I offer to do that might help you at the moment?"

I also loved it when people actually asked normal questions about them. "Did they look alike?" "How much hair did they have?" "What are their names?" "What did they weigh?"

WHAT NOT TO SAY

"Well it is quite common isn't it?"

"At least"...avoid any sentence that starts with at least. "At least you have one. At least you can try again. At least you know you can fall pregnant. At least with just one it'll be easier. At least it happened early."

"God picks the best ones as angels. God wouldn't give you more than you can handle."

"Thank god you have ..... (surviving twin or triplet(s))"

"They were so small, they would have had so many complications."

"Everything happens for a reason."

BE AWARE OF YOUR EMPLOYEE'S RIGHTS

Make sure you are aware of your employee's rights to different types of leave so that you can help guide them through this. It will benefit the relationship with work if they know that you have taken the time to inform yourself and are willing to support them. There are some useful links below but also speak to your HR department. Be aware however that the legal position has changed significantly in the last few years and may continue to do so, so make sure your knowledge and that of your HR colleagues is up to date.

How much time your employee chooses to take off will be an individual decision based on how they feel, what they have been through and their own particular circumstances.

If your colleague is having a significant period of time off (eg. maternity leave) talk to them about how often they would like to be contacted and make sure your communications are supportive but not intrusive. Be guided by them as to how much they want to know about work and when they would like to start re-engaging.

PREPARING TO RETURN TO WORK

Your employee's return to work may be just days or weeks after they have lost their baby or babies or it may be a year or more afterwards, depending on the circumstances. However long it has been your employee is likely to be exhausted and a changed individual after the death of their baby or babies. They have not only lost a baby but all their hopes for the future for those children. The more support and compassion you can provide, the easier it will be for them to re-engage with work in a valuable and positive way.

Organise a **pre-return to work meeting** well in advance - this could be virtually or face to face, depending on the employee's preferences. Make sure you inform yourself about what you can offer them in terms of support before the meeting so you can offer some concrete ideas when you talk. You will want to cover the following in the meeting:

- Ask your employee **how they are feeling** about the return to work, what they are looking forward to and aspects they may be worried about. This will enable you to think about whether you can tailor the areas of work they get involved in to start with to make the transition as easy as possible.

- Offer them a **phased return** - this could be a decreased number of days, shorter hours, a temporary change in certain responsibilities and/or incorporating working from home days. It depends what is most important to the individual. You may also want to suggest a meeting with occupational health if appropriate to the organisation.

- Talk about **how the employee would like to be supported** when they do return and give them information about any support available to them such as counselling, coaching and employee assistance programmes.

- Ask them if they have **someone at work they could talk to** and/or somewhere they can go to take a break if needed. If not, offer to support them with finding these.

- **Offer to talk** to any team members or wider colleagues who may not know about their situation and ask them what they would like you to communicate to them.

- Offer some **returning to work days** or some social meetups beforehand. Have a plan for the first day.

Try to judge how much to cover in that first meeting and make sure that it doesn't become overwhelming for the employee. You may want to cover more of the detail at a later date.

There may be other things to cover depending on the individual's circumstances.

- They may be themselves recovering physically as well as psychologically or they may still be pregnant with one or more babies from the pregnancy.
- If they have a surviving twin or triplet(s), the child may have ongoing health issues.
- It is also possible if they have had a significant time off that they may be pregnant again.

All these circumstances have their own particular challenges. Try to be sensitive to these and listen to what the employee may need.

For some, their work may contain **particular triggers.** For example those who work in healthcare or teaching/childcare so a conversation about whether there are any specific triggers which can be reduced is important.

"They have a phased return planned for me which I am leading, I have reasonable adjustments put in place and I'm being given protected time to get my work done."

Organise a meeting with team members or colleagues who work closely with the individual in advance of their return. This will give you an opportunity to convey any requests the individual had of their colleagues and will give their colleagues opportunity to talk about their own worries or concerns and ask questions about how they might be able to support their colleague. They may have their own emotions about the situation so offer any other support that you can if they need it.

"I asked a trusted friend at work to send out an email to my whole department to let everyone know about the twins' birth and Oscar's death quite soon afterwards. She sent it to me to approve first and it really helped knowing I didn't have to have that initial conversation with anyone."

"My line manager has stayed in contact and speaks of both my boys, that makes me feel very validated and to be honest she's a big part of the reason I'm going back to work. I know she supports my journey."

WHEN THEY RETURN

Be **welcoming**. Be pleased to see the person. Try not to be awkward and don't completely ignore the twin or triplet loss. Offer support if possible.

The nicest thing anyone said to me was simply 'It's really good to see you back' and I still think of that often.'

Be **flexible** and don't expect too much of the person returning to work. It can be difficult to concentrate.

Please let the bereaved person know if someone is going to share pregnancy news so that they can be prepared.

Please don't assume that everything will be back to normal in a few months. Ask them how they are even months later.

"I found that the loss wasn't really acknowledged by the time I returned because I ended up taking a long time off work. Everyone asked about our survivor but many people chose to just ignore the loss altogether which was so tough as I struggled to find ways to talk about my lost son as well as my survivor even though I really wanted to by that point."

DADS AND NON-BIRTHING PARTNERS

It can often be assumed that dads and non-birthing partners don't need as much support. They are grieving for their twins or triplets and need to be shown the same understanding. Ask them how they are, not just how their partner is doing.

"Myself and my partner work for the same large company and he was treated very differently as a father. Aside from the lack of acknowledgement of his loss there was no occupational health referral, phased return, offer of support. Even his flexible working request wasn't dealt with correctly. It wasn't until I returned much later that we realised how stark the difference was." - Bereaved mum where one twin died

We asked some of our dads from our group to share some things that they found helpful and unhelpful.

“I thought my colleagues would perhaps be more understanding than most, showing compassion etc, and it was the opposite, a lot bar a small few didn't acknowledge it.” - Bereaved twin dad

"It would have been helpful for them to acknowledge not just my wife’s loss but my own loss too, everyone asked how their mum was doing.” - Bereaved triplet dad

"Don't assume someone's circumstances. Don't do things assuming that you're helping, such as reducing someone's hours or taking away work tasks. Just ask what would be helpful and provide options of support that are available.” - Bereaved triplet dad

"Additional time to complete tasks and flexibility when possible, or flexible work arrangements." - Bereaved dad

"What would be helpful would be if the employer is able to help to provide a bit more structure when the person is not able to think clearly, such as when things are due or prioritising the workload.” - Bereaved triplet dad

Other links you might find helpful

www.maternityaction.org.uk
Rights to time off and pay

Find out more

www.acas.org.uk
Parental Bereavement Leave

Find out more

www.workingfamilies.org.uk
Rights at Work

Find out more

Our Support

At Footprints Baby Loss charity we offer peer-to-peer support which can be incredibly helpful to talk through transitions such as returning to work with someone who has been there too www.footprintsbabyloss.org

Our support is provided by those who have had firsthand experience of twin or triplet loss. We understand the value of having a safe space to be able to communicate with someone who has been through something similar, and provide a kind, caring and inclusive approach with our bereavement services.

Thank you to our Footprints families for their contributions to the leaflet.
You may also wish to read our 'Returning to work - For Employees' Leaflet.

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