

How to Support a Co-worker Whose Baby Has Died



Written by Carol McMurrich
for [Empty Arms Bereavement Support](#)

When the hustle of a co-worker excited about their pregnancy or new baby turns to sadness, most friends and co-workers are unsure of how to support this bereaved parent in the work environment. What is appropriate? What to say, and what not to say? This document is written to help those who care to help the bereaved parent have a smooth transition back into the workplace after their baby has died.

What Should I Expect?

First, it's helpful to understand the normal experience of infant loss. Parents are biologically wired to focus their inner resources towards their child. When a baby dies, parents' bodies are literally in crisis. Emotionally and psychologically people typically struggle intensely to determine what forward momentum will look like. This biological reaction to a baby's death makes recovery and readjustment quite different from the death of an older person. Biology affects both women and men in different ways.

While during the early days and weeks it may feel nearly impossible for the parent to cope, after a period of time most bereaved parents will return to work and will resume other "normal" daily activities. This period of time ranges from only a few weeks to several months. **Resuming normal activities does not mean that this person is feeling better.** Even after many months have passed, one must not mistake "going through the motions" and an appearance of normalcy to mean that the person truly feeling healed. Bereaved parents need a great deal of love, support and patience as they return to the world, and it is

typically well over a year before thoughts of the baby no longer consume parents for the most part of their day.

What Should I Do First?

The most important thing that one can do when a baby dies is to acknowledge that the loss has occurred. A handwritten card (or longer, *personal message* on a pre-made sympathy card) is often the easiest both to give and to receive. If possible, a card should be sent in advance of the person's return to work. In a handwritten card, statements such as "My heart aches for you" or "I feel so sad for you and your family" are far more meaningful than statements such as, "Thinking of you" or "You will make it with the love of family and friends". Always use the baby's name, if you know it. Honor their pain with your words. The purpose of this message is to validate that something very sad has happened, and that you understand that the parent is grieving. While society typically likes to try to ward off sadness by offering platitudes, immediately following the death uplifting messages will *never* make a person actually feel better. The most soothing words are usually those that allow an aching heart to grieve and demonstrate that you, the giver of the card, understand that the parent is truly struggling.

Easing the Return to the Workplace

Eventually it will be time to "welcome" this grieving person back to the workplace, but this must be done carefully and is best accomplished when the grieving person has a great deal of input about how this re-entry will look. Many parents whose babies have died are very overwhelmed to be back at work, yet having a focus for the mind that is separate from the grief can often be helpful. As a workplace, strategize to see if it's possible for the grieving parent to start off working shorter days, or on a reduced schedule of some sort so they can gradually adjust to focusing their mind away from their baby and towards their work. If this is possible, offer this accommodation to the parent and along with that offer, acknowledge that re-entry will be difficult and it is your hope that a reduced schedule or shorter days will help them to adjust to being back.

We also suggest that bereaved parents identify a point person at work with whom they feel most comfortable. If there is a person who has a closer friendship with the grieving person this pairing might be obvious, if not, determine who among you is willing to hold space for sadness and might be able to step up to be a support person in the workplace. That person can meet with the grieving person and together they can determine what supports would make the grieving co-worker most comfortable when they return to work.

What supports might my co-worker need?

We can't answer that. Each person is an individual, and when returning to work there are a variety of ways in which people wish to be supported and interacted with. For example, some parents find that it's easier for them to return to work if people do not talk to them about their baby's death at all. These parents might find it easier to function if they are treated "normally".

In contrast, many other parents find that they are unable to comfortably interact with co-workers until they have had a face-to-face acknowledgement of the death. Some parents need to both hear and say their baby's name out loud, they need to look into a co-worker's eyes and be seen as a parent and as a person who is still actively grieving. Even if you have sent a card, these parents need to hear you say, "I'm sorry, and I know this will be hard."

Whatever their preference, **you need to ask the parent**, even though this may seem awkward and/or intrusive. It shows respect. Then, their preferences need to be communicated in advance so that co-workers know how to share space with them at work. Co-workers either need to know that it's OK to express their condolences in the workplace and that, rather than hurting, such mentions of the baby will actually help their grieving co-worker, or they need to know that it's appropriate to not bring up the baby and the loss, and to carry on as normal. The goal here is to let the grieving parent guide their co-workers in what would feel comfortable being said to them

The designation of a point person who can talk this through with the grieving parent and figure out what will make them feel most comfortable will allow the entire staff to be clear on what the bereaved person feels most comfortable with and can allow co-workers to "plan" their first encounter. Being clear on what would feel most supportive to the bereaved parent should allow everyone to feel less anxious about early encounters.

If there are pregnant co-workers or those with young babies, it is courteous to ask the newly bereaved parent if they would prefer to not be working in the direct vicinity of such triggers. However, one should not assume—but one should always ask. Saying something like, "I imagine it may be hard for you to see (pregnant colleague) when you get back. Would you prefer not to be scheduled with her, or would it help for me to speak with her about how you'd like to interact with her?".

As Time Goes On

In general, as co-workers and friends the most important thing to remember is that long after bereaved parents "look" okay, they do not necessarily feel OK. It can take years for life to feel "normal", as each brush with the new reality often circles that parent back to how life "should" have been with their baby. Some of the moments that parents have shared they

are most touched is when, months later, a co-worker mentions that they know life must still be difficult. These acknowledgements can mean so much as parents continue to heal. In particular, grief may be difficult on the anniversary of the death (either the day of the month or the actual birthday) and around other milestones- first Thanksgiving or any other major holidays the family may celebrate, or Mother or Father's Day. An acknowledgement of these difficult times can be touching for a bereaved parent, and can be communicated in any way that feels comfortable—with a card, a mention in the break room, or even in a text message or phone call.

Pregnancies among other staff members—even if significantly after the person's loss—can be difficult. Think about how to privately share pregnancy news with a bereaved parent, and as a staff, avoid lengthy conversations about baby showers, pregnancy, etc. This is a small gesture that will make an enormous impact on the mental health of your bereaved co-worker.

When in doubt, honesty and candid conversations tend to be more powerful than silence. If you're not sure what to say, or if you should say something, you can communicate that honestly by saying something like, "I'm not sure how comfortable you feel talking about your baby, but I want you to know that I always think of her when I'm with you." Or, "I don't know what, or how much to say to you, but I feel so sad for you and your family." It's never wrong to send a note months later, or to send a second note. Written language is often easier than spoken, and it's NOT a cop out.

Here, you'll see a list of suggested things to say (and not to say) compiled and edited by bereaved parents. These words may not be true for every parent, but many of them will be true for many parents. It's our hope that reading through them will help you to think of the right words to share with your co-worker.

What to Say

"I'm so sorry and sad for you."

"This must be so unbearable."

"I'm here, and I want to listen."

"Please take your time. I am here for you, and I will be for as long as you need me to be."

Avoid the temptation to follow these phrases with words of comfort. What you are going for is an acknowledgement that the person is suffering. **This is what bereaved people typically find to be the most helpful: words that simply acknowledge their truth.** You can say, "I am so sorry

for what you are going through”, and mean it, but as soon as you tack on something like, “But I know you’ll get through this together”, or “at least you have your other kids”, the acknowledgement is lost. **Now is not the time to reassure: now is the time to acknowledge.** Your co-worker WILL get through this, but it will be most helpful to them if you let them settle into the reality of this loss without empty words of comfort.

What not to say

This list comes from a collection of words that have felt difficult to most families who have used Empty Arms.

Everything happens for a reason. *There will never be a reason that seems right or fair to explain why a baby died.*

It was God's will. *Grieving people often struggle with their faith, and a suggestion that God took their child is often unwelcome.*

God needed another angel/ now you have a guardian angel. *No parent wants their baby to be an angel: they want their baby here.*

Your baby is in a better place. *Where could be better than with his family here?*

At least the baby did not suffer. *While parents may comfort themselves with this knowledge, when it is said to a grieving person it feels like it is diminishing the impact of the loss*

You're lucky you didn't get to know the baby better. *All parents would give anything for more time with their baby. There is nothing lucky about a premature death and knowing the baby for a short time does not make things easier.*

It could have been worse. I heard a story... *Nothing is worse to this family than the death of their own child right now.*

At least you have other children. *These parents want to have all their children with them. The presence of living children, and a parent’s gratitude for them, does not cancel out the pain of loss.*

You're young, you can have more. *This baby was a unique person who cannot be replaced. Mentioning potential future pregnancies is dismissive of the baby who has died and also can create anxiety because there are no guarantees.*

At least you know you can get pregnant. *Many bereaved parents have extreme anxiety that they will not be able to be pregnant again.*

I know how you feel (even if you are a bereaved parent under similar circumstances) *Each grief is unique—get to know theirs.*

You will feel better in time. *These parents are struggling to make it through today.*

It's time to get on with your life. *This is their life now, working through their grief is a part of what they have to do in order to get on.*

You're so strong. *The strength you see is the result of there being no alternative but to go on.*

I could never handle that. *This parent didn't ever imagine handling it, either. Please don't point out that you, fortunately, don't have to face this, and they do.*

In general, it's best to avoid all phrases that begin with "At least" or "Thank goodness that...".

Right now, families who are bereaved are not searching for reminders of what they should be grateful for, they are looking for acknowledgement and validation that they are suffering. Supporting them in their grief will help to give them the space to gather the tools they need for their own healing. In time, they will begin to rebuild and will weave this baby's story into the fabric of their life.