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## Returning to Work



## **Returning to Work**

At some point, most parents have to face going back to work. If you are grieving for your baby, returning to work may be the last thing you feel like doing. It may seem like a terrible and frightening hurdle. While you have been living in a world of pain and uncertainty, other people's lives have gone on regardless. Your boss, colleagues and clients will almost certainly have no idea what you're going through.

No one can tell you the 'right' time to go back to work, though don't be surprised if everyone you meet has an opinion. Only you can really decide, but it will help if you talk it over with people who care for you and that you trust.

Be prepared for the fact that others may think that going back to work will 'cure' you of your grief. There may be some truth in this, for some bereaved parents; returning to a routine can help to bring a focus to days that may otherwise seem endless.

Equally, returning too soon can cause further problems. Be aware that you may not react how you think you'll react; you may find it harder than you thought you would. Of course, hopefully, you'll find it easier than you thought. Whenever you do feel ready, talk it over with your boss. It might be a good idea to explain that you think you are ready but prepare them that if you react differently from how you expect to, you might need a little more time.

Be aware that there are certain aspects common in grief that could affect you at work:

- Loss of concentration.
- Tiredness.
- Hyper-sensitivity.
- A feeling of difference.

Bereaved parents often feel 'different' from their colleagues and a different person from the person they were before their baby died.

Here are some suggestions that other parents have found have helped their return to work.

Find out if your employer will let you phase your return to work, perhaps with some part-days or working a bit from home. Initially, 9 to 5 or a full shift can be very intimidating. Also think about if you'd like to

## **Photographs at work**

If you have a photo of your baby, it's quite natural that you might want to display it on your desk or by your locker. This may be a sensitive issue at your workplace: some colleagues may think you are being morbid. Pregnant women or expectant fathers at work may find your photo a source of anxiety.

On the other hand a photograph may help colleagues realize how significant your loss is. Either way, try not to be disappointed if people do not react as you would like them to.

## **Dates and anniversaries**

There may be particular dates that are important to you which could be especially difficult at work, such as your baby's due date or their first anniversary. Consider taking a day's leave and spending it with your partner, family or friends. Equally, you might prefer to be at work and not to make a big deal out of a particular date. Either way, go with your instincts and remember to do what's best for you.

There may be someone who is pregnant at work. Don't feel bad if their pregnancy upsets you. It is a normal response to your grief. Your loss is possibly a source of anguish for them. There may equally be someone who has been on maternity/paternity leave and returns to show off her/his new baby. Just as it is perfectly natural for you to have complex and difficult feelings in relation to others' new babies, it is also perfectly natural for them to want to share their excitement.

### **One day at a time**

Remember to be gentle to yourself and take each day as it comes. Coping with your grief is all about little victories. It's quite normal to feel okay some of the time but feel overwhelmed at others. Pain can come in waves, for no apparent reason. It does not mean you are not coping; you are just grieving.

These are some suggestions of how to cope in the workplace

When you feel you need one, find a place to be alone for a few moments. Try not let your feelings build up before you do this - prevention is often better cure.

If things are really getting on top of you, don't be afraid to leave and go home. Your colleagues will understand.

Try not to be afraid to cry. We all get embarrassed if we cry in front of our colleagues or boss but it is important not to bottle your feelings up. Perhaps the fear of crying is what's making you anxious.

As they struggle to understand and ease your pain, colleagues and friends are sure to say the 'wrong' thing. Everyone will want you to be 'better' as soon as possible. Direct them to Sands website where there's support in understanding bereavement.

Encourage colleagues or your boss to contact Sands direct. The helpline staff will talk to them about the kind of issues that you might face.

try part-time working for a while. You have a legal right to have a request for part-time hours properly considered by your employer. Further advice on employment rights can be got from [www.workingfamilies.org.uk](http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk)

### **Letting Colleagues Know**

Write to your boss and colleagues (this may be easier than trying to do it face-to-face). Explain some of the details of your bereavement - your baby's name; period of gestation or age; birth weight; cause of death if you know; what he or she looked like.

Let your employer and colleagues know if you want to talk about your baby or not. They may be waiting for 'permission' from you that it is OK to talk about your baby.

Be gentle on yourself at the start. It's OK to have bad days but it will help if your employer and colleagues have some idea what you are going through and where you are coming from.

Please note: The tips and advice we are giving here are general; they may not all be appropriate to how you feel or to your workplace and the relationship you have with your employers

### **Back to Work**

Returning to work may seem like a terrible and frightening hurdle. While you have been living in a world of pain and uncertainty, other people's lives have gone on regardless.

Friends and work colleagues can be a huge support at a time like this but they can also add to your pain if they find it hard to comprehend your grief or find the right words to comfort you.

*"Some people walk on eggshells round me; they don't want to cause any more upset. Others think they can 'help' me by making me feel better. In fact they are just stamping on the eggshells and making it all so much worse."* □ Father

Try not to expect too much from people; perhaps, before your baby died, you too would have found it hard to know how to comfort someone who'd experienced a tragedy such as this.

Some parents feel a sense of helplessness and guilt at not feeling able to return to work, others feel they want to go back straight away. However you feel, we hope you find the following suggestions helpful.

### **When to return to work**

There is no 'right' time to go back to work. Only you can really decide, but it will help if you talk it over with people who care for you and that you trust. If you have a good relationship with your GP, he or she is probably the best person to discuss this with.

For some bereaved parents, returning to the routine of work can help to bring a focus to days that may otherwise seem endless. Equally, returning too soon can delay and complicate the process of grieving. Whenever you do feel ready, talk it over with your boss or human resources department. You may decide to go back, find it too difficult, and realize you need to take a little more time.

### **Your rights**

Knowing what financial benefits are available to you may effect your decision about when to go back to work. If your baby was stillborn after the 24th week of pregnancy, you are entitled to your full maternity or paternity leave. This includes your maternity/paternity pay or allowances. You may also be entitled to incapacity benefit, maternity allowance, child benefit and tax credits. Such benefits may help you over the initial financial difficulties of your bereavement and enable you to take more time off work than you could otherwise afford. Also check with your boss or union - if you have one - about your entitlement to bereavement or compassionate leave.

Some businesses have in-house welfare or counselling services. Ask your employer about these. Of course there is also a wealth of support Sands and others can offer you if you need to talk to someone about any of these issues.

### **Different working hours**

It may be possible for your employer to let you phase your return to work, perhaps with some part days or working sometimes from home. Initially, nine to five or a full shift may seem intimidating. Perhaps it will be possible to work part-time for a while. You have a

legal right to have a request for part-time hours properly considered by your employer. You can get further advice on employment rights from [www.workingfamilies.org.uk](http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk) (020 7253 7243).

### **Letting colleagues know**

Your boss, colleagues and clients may have no idea what you're going through. Many won't realise that your baby was an individual with a personality that you identified with. Your beloved and special child is abstract to them; he or she was a 'bump' when you or your partner left work.

However, you may also be surprised to learn that some have experienced the loss of a baby either themselves, or among their immediate family and friends.

It may be both helpful to you and your work colleagues if you consider writing to your boss (a single letter/email can be passed around and is an easier way of communicating your experience than repeating events face-to-face).

You could explain some of the details of your bereavement: your baby's name, his/her birth weight, and the cause of death if you know. You might feel able to talk about what he or she looked like and how you felt about him/her. If you can help them to see how real your baby was, it will enable them to better understand your pain. Any of your colleagues and friends are welcome to contact Sands or look at our website for further information.

### **How you might feel at work**

Everyone reacts to bereavement in different ways but generally many bereaved parents feel they're not the same person they were before their baby died. Many find that their lives and priorities are completely changed. Things that once seemed important may not seem so important now. Do you still keep up with the football or go to the cinema? No? Then why would you still be interested in your job? This is a perfectly normal response to grief.

You may find it hard to concentrate on anything for long periods. You may be surprised by how much more exhausted you are. You may be hyper-sensitive to the things that people say or things that they don't say. Bereaved parents often feel 'different' from their colleagues, like they live in a different world.