

# Longer bereavement leave needed for employees, study finds

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It takes months, even years to recover from the grief of losing a loved one, and Canadian legislation and workplaces need to start recognizing that, says a University of Alberta researcher.

While many workplaces offer three days of paid or unpaid bereavement leave, it's based on an outdated 1967 [federal law](#) in the Canada Labor Code that needs to be upgraded, said nursing professor Donna Wilson, lead author of a new study on how work, careers and workplaces can be affected by [grief](#).

"The law is not based on any evidence of how impactful grief is; deeply grieving people often aren't ready to come back to work that soon," she said.

"If a child dies, if a parent or friend you are close to dies, if a spouse dies, there is monumental grief; this is not like going to a funeral of someone you knew distantly and feeling sad for a few days. This is major grief that could last from two years to the rest of your life, and it happens to a lot of working age people. You can't expect someone to just brush that grief off and go back to work and be perfectly OK."

Workplace safety and productivity can both be affected by people who come back to work too soon, she added.

"If a pilot, a bus driver or a surgeon are still actively grieving, they're sleep-deprived, distracted, not eating well; they can make mistakes at work or on their way to work. It's like being impaired—they have 'grief brain.' They can't work like they did before the death—and this could go on for weeks or months."

The other possible fallout is that workers never come back to work or are laid off. In a new study published in *Social Work in Health Care*, researchers interviewed people deeply mourning close loved ones, and found that at least half had been fired or forced out of their jobs, Wilson said.

"One woman whose baby had died asked her employer if she could work

in a different situation. She'd been working with children but it reminded her of her baby. The employer said no, and offered her a letter of reference, so she had to quit and retrain to work in a different field."

The study revealed a need to let people grieve in their own time, Wilson said.

She said some people need an extended leave from work, some may need a few days of sick time and others may come back and overwork as they try to escape their grief.

"Some will want to talk about it at work and some won't," she said. "Grief doesn't fit the current three-days-off, cookie-cutter approach by most employment contracts."

Grieving workers typically need some accommodation to help them get back on the job, she added.

"There really is nothing right now—you get your three-day leave and then are supposed to come back and work as if it never happened. You've got some informed managers or human resource departments that are willing to be flexible with conditions like shorter work days or work weeks, but that is not a standard."

Accommodation in the workplace is typically for people with [physical disabilities](#), "but we don't think about accommodation of people who are grieving a serious loss in their life."

People grappling with sorrow also found barriers to returning to work, the study found.

"The biggest one they faced was the attitude that grief is something you can blow off—the idea that everybody's grief is the same," said Wilson.

One study participant who returned to work after her fiance was killed was told that because he wasn't a relative, she was lucky to get the three days off.

"These are things they'll remember for the rest of their life."

Workers were also hesitant to apply for disability leave because it meant having to get a doctor to declare they were mentally ill, Wilson noted.

"It's stigmatizing. And grief is a normal reaction to a life event, not a mental illness."

Help for grieving workers could come from several areas, Wilson said.

## **Workplace policies**

Employers need to review their policies for the supports they offer. Do they offer counseling or help with forms? Do they offer a staggered return to working full-time? And do they make sure employees know what's available to them?

## **Bereavement leave**

The Government of Canada needs to bring bereavement leave into line with modernized parental leave (up to 63 weeks) and compassionate care leave (up to 28 weeks). Under the Canadian Labor Code, just five days of paid bereavement leave is allowed for federal employees, if no other collective agreement provisions apply.

Wilson would like to see at least five days of leave and seven days for people who do shift work for all workers across Canada, not just federal employees. She also wants the legislation expanded to include loved ones

who fall outside the current definition of immediate family member.

"If you raised your nieces or nephews, or considered a close friend to be like a beloved family member, they should count. We also need a mechanism so you can plead your case for someone not in an existing category."

With 300,000 deaths happening in Canada annually, and that number expected to double over the next decade as the population ages, the resulting grief will increasingly affect the workforce, Wilson warned.

"We could have a lot more people fired in the prime of their working careers without consideration or accommodation for their grief."

## **Genuine support from co-workers**

Co-workers should refrain from offering well-meaning but unhelpful advice to a grieving person.

"Do not tell the person what they should be feeling or doing, that they should go out and find somebody new to love. It makes the person feel worse and they may distance themselves from you," said Wilson.

Nor should people offer "false support," she added.

"Don't offer to look after their kids or help anytime unless you really mean it. If you wind up saying no when they ask, they're left in the lurch and they realize they are really on their own."

It's also important to be respectful of their grieving process, Wilson noted.

"If they need to go to the bathroom for a good cry, tell them don't worry

about it, you'll watch the front counter."

And COVID-19 could intensify the grief they feel about losing a loved one, Wilson added.

"People tend to grieve harder with a [sudden death](#), like with COVID-19, and the pandemic has also disrupted the customary things we do before and after death that comfort and heal us, like visiting them in hospital, giving someone a hug or attending a funeral. Even working from home doesn't necessarily make it easier to do the job when you are grieving, as you are even more isolated with your grief. People can't drop into your house for a visit or give you a hug. We still have to recognize that grief is a big deal and it's going to affect people and their ability to work."

**More information:** Donna M. Wilson et al. The potential impact of bereavement grief on workers, work, careers, and the workplace, *Social Work in Health Care* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/00981389.2020.1769247](https://doi.org/10.1080/00981389.2020.1769247)

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