

# FD Consultants

Psychosocial Support and Trauma Specialist Services

## Managing the Crisis of a Staff Member Dying from Coronavirus (Covid-19)



At the time of writing just under three million people have been infected by Coronavirus (Covid-19) and just over 200,000 people have died from this virus globally. Coronavirus (Covid-19) has spread to nearly every country in the world. The unfortunate truth is that within the space of a couple of months we will all likely know of someone who has either died from the virus or experienced a close bereavement on account of it. In the circumstances of a staff member within your organisation

dying of coronavirus (Covid-19) it may be therefore be helpful to think ahead about the factors that might make this a particularly challenging type of loss, and to consider how best you can support your team.

## Potential Complexities of Coronavirus (Covid-19) Bereavement

- **Sudden & Unexpected.** Deaths due to coronavirus (Covid-19) are likely to be sudden and shocking in nature, meaning that friends, family and colleagues of the deceased will have had little opportunity to prepare for their loss. Whilst we are told that the majority of people who die from the virus have pre-existing health conditions, this is not always the case. Even for those who do have pre-existing health conditions, these will not necessarily have been perceived as terminal or life-threatening before they came into contact with the virus. Whilst any death, anticipated or not, is likely to be painful for those close to the deceased, it can often feel harder to accept the reality of someone dying in a sudden and unexpected way – particularly when there is no chance to see or speak to them beforehand. In the case of a colleague dying from coronavirus (Covid-19) remaining staff may therefore feel in a state of disbelief.
- **Traumatic & Triggering.** Deaths due to coronavirus (Covid-19) may have a traumatic element. We will all likely have seen media reports regarding overcrowded hospitals operating with limited resources – meaning that extremely difficult decisions have to be made about the administration of care to those who are sick and dying. Rules put in place to limit the risk of infection may mean those who die from the virus will have been unable to have their loved ones with them at their sides. These types of details may be extremely difficult, even quite traumatic, for those who knew the deceased to take in. Common reactions to a traumatic loss may include experiencing disturbing mental imagery regarding the person who died or having nightmares. Anyone with pre-existing experience of psychological trauma may be particularly vulnerable to this type of reaction. More generally, though, anyone with pre-existing experience of bereavement may find themselves feeling ‘triggered’ by the current situation and the prevalence of news and talk about sickness and death within society at the moment. This may lead to distressing memories regarding previous losses being easily and involuntarily evoked.
- **Barriers To Engagement In Conventional Mourning Rituals.** The coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic presents particular challenges in the context of bereavement. This is because the isolation measures that have been put in place to limit the spread of the virus will prevent many traditional mourning rituals (eg. funerals, wakes, nine-nights) taking place in their conventional form. Often these rites, alongside the more general practice of mourners visiting one another and gathering in person to offer comfort and support after the death of someone close, help with the processing of a loss, prompting greater acceptance of its reality. At the current time, though, these customs will not be able to proceed as normal<sup>1</sup> and may be significantly delayed (an additional source of distress for families from certain cultures where burial or cremation is expected to take place within certain time frames). In the case of a colleague dying from coronavirus (Covid-19) remaining staff may therefore feel upset, frustrated or helpless that they are unable to attend a

<sup>1</sup> See [The National Association Of Funeral Directors](https://www.funeral-directors.org.uk/) website for information about changes to funeral arrangements in light of the pandemic.

funeral or similar commemorative event, or that they cannot make a much longed-for gesture such as visiting the deceased's family to offer support.

- **Worries About Infection.** The coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak has heightened many people's concerns about contamination and infection. This may be particularly acute for those with pre-existing anxiety or mental health conditions such as OCD. In the case of a colleague dying from coronavirus (Covid-19) remaining staff may therefore feel concerned that they have been placed at risk of contracting the virus, particularly if they were in recent contact with the person who died. If any staff member themselves has been ill they may also question, 'did I give it to them?' and encounter uncomfortable feelings of guilt.
- **Existing Challenges & 'Saturation' With Coronavirus (Covid-19) Related News.** The coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic will have changed all of our lives in a number of ways. We may be adjusting to working from home, feeling distanced from our colleagues and familiar surroundings, and perhaps balancing a challenging mixture of responsibilities at the same time – such as home-schooling children or caring for more vulnerable members of our households. Many of us will be dealing with additional concerns relating to the crisis – perhaps worrying about our job security and future income, struggling with the new rules of social isolation, or experiencing increased pressure and anxiety if we work in 'front line' or 'keyworker' roles. On top of this, we will likely be experiencing 'saturation' with coronavirus (Covid-19) related news through regular and social media channels, and also through our conversations with family and friends. Much of this news will be distressing and anxiety-provoking. This makes for a very unusual and challenging 'context' for people to process a bereavement within. In the case of a colleague dying from coronavirus (Covid-19) remaining staff may therefore feel too consumed by their own worries and concerns to really 'take in' the loss which, in turn, can lead to feelings of guilt ('do I care enough?', 'am I heartless?'). The general uncertainty many of us are experiencing, and the suspension of 'normal rules' within society, may make it seem unsafe to 'let go' and fully engage with feelings of grief – at least for the time being.

## How To Help

Whilst it's evident that this is a particularly challenging time to experience the death of a colleague, and that many of the 'normal' means of offering support may be compromised, there are still valuable things senior managers can do to assist their remaining staff and promote morale within their organisations.

- **Breaking The News.** Given current circumstances, it will likely be impossible to gather remaining staff together in person to inform them of the death of a colleague. The delivery of sensitive and potentially upsetting news is almost always best done in a personalised way so think carefully about how this might best be managed within the 'new norms' of social distancing and remote working. Calling close colleagues (for example, teammates) of the deceased to inform them individually of the death may be a preferable first step, prior to sending out an organisation-wide e-mail or putting a notice on your company website. If you do make these broader communications, though, it may be helpful to let staff know they can contact you or another senior manager if they want to arrange an individual conversation about what has happened. In sharing information about the death, you may also want to liaise with the family of the deceased in order to respectfully find out how much they are happy to be shared.
- **Creating Opportunities To Mourn & Remember The Deceased.** As indicated, at present, only a few close family members or next-of-kin are permitted to physically attend funerals and similar events aimed at commemorating a person who has died. Staff members within your organisation who may ordinarily have attended such occasions will therefore not be able to do so. Many funeral directors and celebrants are helping families to live stream and transmit funeral and other similar services online. Therefore, it may be worth asking the family of the deceased if they are planning to do this, and if they are happy for you to share details with your staff. It can often be a great comfort for mourners at these sparsely attended events to know that well-wishers are watching and 'virtually' present. However, do remember that engaging in online events isn't to everyone's liking and some people may prefer to find their own ways to remember the deceased. This can be a very healthy thing for individuals or small groups of colleagues to do together – for example, making a set time to remember the person who died, and to perhaps do something symbolic such as looking at old photos, lighting a candle, or taking some kind of action in their memory. It may also be possible to drop cards or gifts off to the family of the deceased if social distancing rules are

observed and no-one from different households comes within two meters of one another. When thinking of ways of commemorating the deceased do remember that we won't be living under the current restrictions forever. There will therefore be a time when you and your staff will be able to make more traditional gestures to honour the memory of the person who has died.

- **Consider Who Might Be More Vulnerable.** As mentioned, individuals with pre-existing experience of trauma, other mental health issues, or personal histories that feature significant bereavement and loss may be particularly impacted by the death of a colleague to coronavirus (Covid-19). Whilst you cannot be expected to know everything about your staff members' personal histories, particularly if have not disclosed issues to you, if you are aware of someone who may be especially affected for the reasons given above we would recommend checking in with them in a private context, and asking if they feel they might need additional support.
- **Be Careful With Language & Challenge Misinformation/Stereotypes.** In a position of leadership within your organisation, the language you use and the way you present information will count for a lot. Therefore think carefully about the words you use to communicate and describe what has happened – for example, stating factually that someone has sadly died as a result of coronavirus (Covid-19) will appear more professional and objective than stating that they have been a 'victim' of the virus or 'lost their battle' with it. The media can be prone to foregrounding the deaths of particular groups of people who have lost their lives to coronavirus (Covid-19) – for example, mothers of young children, younger people, and people who did not have pre-existing health conditions. Whilst, of course, such deaths may seem particularly shocking or senseless, any loss of the life to the virus is going to be a tragedy to those who were close to the deceased, and it will be important to hold this in mind when reporting the news or discussing the death subsequently. It is also worth remaining alert to the fact that much misinformation about coronavirus (Covid-19) is in circulation and that with feelings running high, people may want to blame certain ethnic groups or sectors of society for bringing the virus into existence or allowing its spread. Whilst anger and the desire to blame can be natural and understandable parts of the grieving process it will be important to challenge anything you encounter within your workforce that may seem like casual racism or prejudice.
- **Promoting Psychological Health Within The Workplace & Referring On For Additional Support.** At a time like this it will be especially important to promote and model psychologically healthy practices within your workplace, and to be open to referring staff who might need it on for more specialised support, such as access to an EAP (Employee Assistance Programme) or another kind of counselling service. In the current context conventional team meetings and one-to-ones may not be possible in person. However, arranging them regularly using video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom will help you and your staff to continue to feel connected – which will be especially important in the event of having to deal with a loss together. Remember the positive impact that modelling psychologically healthy practices at work will also have on your staff. This may include, to an extent, sharing some of your own feelings in response to the death of any member of staff within your organisation (of course, only to an extent you feel comfortable with), maintaining and promoting reasonable work-life balance, and limiting your communications with others to working hours.

## Information About Coronavirus (Covid-19)

With a lot of information circulating about coronavirus (Covid-19) we would recommend that you and your staff refer only to official websites and sources – particularly when making more formal communications within the workplace. These sources may include :-

- [Gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/) (https://www.gov.uk/) – government website featuring up to date advice and guidance on a range of issues such as employment, benefits, travel, health, childcare and funerals.
- [NHS](https://www.nhs.uk/) (https://www.nhs.uk/) – the main NHS website features health related advice and guidance regarding symptoms, treatment and the prevention of the spread of Coronavirus (Covid-19).
- [BBC](https://www.bbc.co.uk/) (https://www.bbc.co.uk/) – reporting on the latest government briefings and advice regarding the pandemic as well as global, national and local stories relating to the virus.

## Counselling & Further Professional Support

- [CRUSE](https://www.cruse.org.uk/) (https://www.cruse.org.uk/) – the UK's main bereavement charity provides bereavement counselling and support (now being delivered by telephone or online) across the nation, as well as running a bereavement helpline. Their website has been updated to provide specific

information and advice regarding various aspects of bereavement that may be particularly impacted by coronavirus (Covid-19).

- Many towns and London boroughs have their own independent bereavement services with details that can be found through internet searches.
- [MIND](https://www.mind.org.uk/) (https://www.mind.org.uk/) – the UK’s main mental health charity has updated its website with information aimed at supporting those with mental health difficulties that may be linked to or exacerbated by the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic.
- [FDConsultants](https://www.fdconsultants.net/) (https://www.fdconsultants.net/) – FDConsultants have a number of associates trained in working with bereavement and supporting staff teams in times of crisis. Please contact us for further advice.

## About FD Consultants

For organisations looking for employee psychological support, FD Consultants are the trauma specialists and well-being service, who will best deliver a reliable, quick, and bespoke support system in the workplace. FD Consultant’s team of accredited specialists will offer ongoing support to help manage stress, prevent burnout and provide specialist trauma care where required, enabling your staff with the tools to cope, and recover more quickly.

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