

'I'm a mental health expert and this is why we need to do better for grieving people at work'

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'Mum on a mission' boosts compassion at work after devastating loss

A mum who was told to 'just crack on' by bosses the day her former partner died is spearheading moves to improve bereavement support at work.

Emma Tomes, 42, of Bournemouth, Dorset, has dubbed herself 'a mum on a mission' to drive the message home that empathy and compassion should be uppermost in employers' minds when employees are hit by the loss of loved ones.

Emma's former partner and dad to her son, then aged 12, died by suicide, aged 31, in 2010. She was called to Poole Hospital where he was taken before he died.

When Emma contacted her then manager, they said she should take that day as holiday, to 'just crack on' by coming back to work the next day.

Emma said: "It's all a blur but I do remember being badly affected by my manager's words. In the midst of such enormous trauma, I was left reeling at how anyone could be so insensitive. They could have shown so much more care.

"I went back to work the next day as requested, as I couldn't afford to lose my job and looking back, I didn't feel resentment or anger at the time, it was all too much to take in, but since then I have channelled anger that has grown into a commitment to ensure other managers can do things right and say helpful things.

"Later, at work I was also told I had too much emotional baggage and that I should just go get some resilience – this was when my mum was diagnosed with terminal cancer and my mother-in-law diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

"Sadly, I know my experience isn't that rare, even all these years later.

"Research by the Centre for Mental Health shows that one in six UK employees suffer depression and/or anxiety each year – both of which are a prevalent result of grief. Studies from The Health and Safety Executive have also revealed that some GBP 35 billion is lost by UK companies due to employees' emotional health problems.

"That's why I am on a mission to support companies and organisations who care for their employees to not just find the right words at such a crucial period at the height of grief, but also to establish meaningful ways to genuinely be there for people.

"We all know that employees who feel supported and valued are more satisfied and productive at work and there is no more urgent time to be there for them than when they are grieving."

Emma's experience drove her on to take voluntary redundancy from her job as a learning and development consultant and retrain as a coach to help people suffering from emotional health difficulties, often also caused by grief. Four years on, she is now leading a team of other freelance trainers, coaches, and counsellors as The Mental Health People. (<https://mentalhealthpeople.com/>)

She said: "Lots of people we work with have told us they have struggled at work after bereavement, HR teams have explained that loss can often be the catalyst for grievances and tribunals and managers themselves don't feel confident or comfortable in knowing what to do when the worst happens.

"I have now collaborated with my team at The Mental Health people to provide a meaningful course for

managers' training that can really make a difference.

"We need managers to embrace compassion and support in a way that means their colleagues don't have to suffer even more when they are already coping in what can already be extreme circumstances, we need the founders and directors to invest in their workforce and we need greater understanding of how debilitating grief can be.

"For those thinking more about their bottom line than their employees' wellbeing, they should be assured that a study by Deloitte found that for every GBP1 invested in mental health support in the workplace, there is an average return of GBP 5 in improved productivity and reduced absenteeism."

You can find out more about Emma's work at

<https://mentalhealthpeople.com/training-course/mental-health-training-for-managers>

'Need a wellbeing boost you can spark all by yourself?'

Emma offers the following tips – ahead of Mental Health Awareness Week, which starts on Monday, May 16.

1. Step away from the keyboard and switch off that smartphone: Find a healthy balance with technology. Set boundaries around screen time, especially social media, and use apps that promote relaxation and mental clarity, like meditation or gratitude journals.
2. Unleash your crafty imagination Explore art therapy as a means of self-expression. Engage in painting, sketching, or collage-making to process emotions and rediscover creative passions.
3. Tantalise your tastebuds: Experiment with cooking or baking new dishes that excite your palate. Use cooking as a form of self-care and enjoy the therapeutic benefits of preparing nutritious meals.
4. Step into new friendships: Foster connections with like-minded people through virtual meetups or local community groups. Share experiences, support each other, and build meaningful relationships.
5. Find time to reflect through journaling: Dedicate time to journaling as a tool for self-reflection. Write about your thoughts, feelings, and aspirations to gain clarity and cultivate self-awareness.
6. Delve into podcasts: Listen to podcasts that cover topics like health, self-care, and personal growth. Engaging with empowering content can uplift your spirits and inspire positive change.
7. Go outdoors: Plan outdoor activities such as hiking, biking, or gardening. Spending time in nature has profound benefits for mental health, promoting relaxation and reducing stress.
8. Laugh your socks off: Embrace laughter therapy through comedy shows, funny movies, or laughter yoga. Laughter is a natural mood lifter and can strengthen emotional resilience. Will Ferrell, Sarah Millican, and the much-missed Robin Williams can be your new best friends.

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For more information, please contact Emma: Emma@mentalhealthpeople.com or call her on 07969 579108

NOTE: Emma has with-held the name of her son and the way her former partner took his life.