

# Inside Story: Dealing with grief

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By Dawn Picken



Penny Riley, right, says her boss, Iain Bent and colleague, Keith Still helped her transition back to work at the BakeShack after her son died.

**Census numbers show nearly 2,400 deaths happened in our region from March, 2014 to March this year. Losses " within the community and further afield " leave not only broken hearts, but life's logistics, as those who grieve return to the world and for many, return to jobs. Bay of Plenty Times Weekend reporter Dawn Picken spoke to people who've suffered loss as well as experts in the field of bereavement to learn about ways workplaces can help " and hinder " the grieving process.**

Penny Riley lost her son, Shay Aston, 18 months ago. He was living with Penny's ex-partner in Napier at the time and she was in Mount Maunganui.

"It was one of those phone calls you never want to get," she says. "He was 17. It was a sudden death. He was a fine, healthy boy. There was nothing wrong. He went to sleep, went into cardiac arrest and didn't wake up."

Penny jumped in the car and headed for Hawke's Bay.

"On the way down I rang my boss and talked to him directly and I couldn't say a lot. I'd worked there for a long time. He knew all about Shay and I said, 'He's gone " he's passed and I'm going to Napier.'"

Penny says her boss knew not to ask too many questions. "He was good to let me say what I had to say and hung up the phone. I couldn't explain to him because I didn't know myself at the time."

Penny took three weeks off her job as manager at the BakeShack after Shay's death, all of it covered by bereavement leave, sick leave and annual leave. She remembers her first day back: "A couple came over and said they were there for me. I visited before I went back to work so I could get the initial icebreaker thing out of the way " better to stop in and let everyone say 'sorry' to you then, so you can concentrate at work."

Penny says it wasn't easy, but her colleagues did their best. "I used to cry a lot at work and they just left me, or gave me a cuddle and asked if I was okay. At that stage, I wanted something normal, the way it was before. That is why work was quite important. It gave me somewhere to go that didn't have his stuff everywhere."

There were days when Penny says she held her emotions in check between 4am and noon, then broke into tears as soon as she reached her car. Throughout those first few months, her team's kindness propped her up.

Things such as baked goods sent to her family in Napier, flowers on her doorstep the first day she arrived back in Tauranga and a card from work.

"Every one of the staff had written on the card. Seeing every single name, even the ones that had just started, wee notes or snippets " it was nice to know that many people cared."

Penny says her boss, Iain Bent, often asked if she needed anything and flew down for the funeral.

Iain owns the BakeShack and said it was the first time he had been in that situation with a staff member.

"We were lucky to be in a position that I could give her as much time off as she wanted, but also was trying to get her back to work so she'd have something else to think about. Penny's done a lot for the company as well. It shows how good the team is that we pull together for each other in times of need.

"Penny says having team member Keith Still act as point person was helpful, too.

"When I cried, he was there. He always made sure I was happy and would hug me every day and ask if I was okay: was it a good day or bad day? Having one person instead of everybody is good, because it gets to be too much."

Work remained important. "I said to my boss, 'Don't wrap me in cotton wool because you're making me feel I can't do my job. He understood. He wanted to loosen my load and give me less responsibility and it made me feel worse. Trying to get out of bed every day was a mission, let alone being told I can't do the job. He let me make my mistakes if I needed to. I've been really lucky I had such good employment, people that understood. We're close where I work, like one big, happy family. When you feel pain, they feel pain, too."

BEX O'Donnell says she returned to work two weeks after her ex-partner of 12 years, Rik James, died of a heart attack at age 38.

The couple had been separated for three years, and with two children (ages 7 and 9 at the time), Bex says the death almost two years ago hit hard.

"You go through the separation and grieving process - grieve the loss of love and loss of family, all those dreams. It hit me as quite a shock, how really emotional I got because I thought I'd processed all that stuff."

Bex works as a nurse at Grace Hospital and says her managers and colleagues were outstanding.

"They came around with flowers and a little gift bag with chocolate and money in it. There was a group of them, we had coffee and cried and laughed and they left dinners."

Bex says one colleague in particular would keep in touch and pop in with treats.

"It was helpful to know those people were there and not feel alone. I'd be inclined to curl into a corner and hide away and deal with it myself, whereas it's much easier to discuss it with people and hear what someone else has done.



Brookfield's Megan Gamble says her husband's death spurred her to quit one of her jobs, earn a degree in social work and move her family to the Bay of Plenty.

"I needed to return fairly quickly because I felt I needed to get back to normality, rather than moping around home feeling sorry. I returned into the regular routine and returned kids back into school, as well. My employer was really good, they gave me the option to have enough time off as I needed. But because it was my ex-partner, I kind of felt I wasn't allowed to take much longer, anyway."

The Welcome Bay resident, who works a second job in telemedicine, says death has given her a new perspective.

"It makes you stop and really take stock of what's important, and for me, it's my children, because they only have me now. I do want to show them strength of character, but amongst that you have to stop and when the children fall apart, everything stops for them, so work had to work around me if the children were having a bad day."

ON A recent Wednesday afternoon, six women, including Bex, plus school-aged children, gather in an upstairs room at St Mary's Anglican Church in Mount Maunganui.

They're here to share chips, chocolate, egg pie, sausage rolls " and grief. The group, called Grieving and Parenting (GAP), was started in 2008 by two widows, Helen Stewart and Dee Byrne, after they both lost spouses.

The women tell me how their respective employers handled the aftermath of their husbands' sudden deaths.

Mrs Stewart says her boss allowed her to "trickle back into work" when she felt ready.

Mrs Byrne says her Auckland employer paid for her move to Tauranga, even though she had quit her job as a chemical company administrator after eight years.

"My former workmates and bosses were there supporting me right from the start. They never stopped caring and they were always there if I needed them."

Brookfield's Megan Gamble says work compounded her grief. She was putting in 60-65 hours a week at two jobs in the Palmerston North area when her husband, Shawn Holland, died in 2006.

He was 36. Megan says she was already the main earner and was left to care for two kids, then aged 6 and 9.

Megan returned to work one week after her husband died.

"In hindsight, it wasn't long enough, but I was a workaholic and felt I needed to be busy."

She says managers and co-workers at her children's school, where she served as teacher aide, were supportive. But she says staff were stretched thin at another job at which she worked.

"It was what they didn't do " check in on me. I wasn't the type of person to ask or volunteer my emotions. "

Megan says she left that job after her husband died and spent three years earning her Bachelor's degree in social work. She moved to Tauranga four years ago and helps lead a support group at Grief Support Services.

Another Bay resident says his employer told him, 'You name it if you need it', after his 41-year-old daughter died last September. Andrew Webb says his wife found his daughter's body and phoned him at work, where he was in a meeting with his boss at Altex Coatings in Tauranga. Andrew says he took about 10 days off before returning. He recalls the first day back as strange.

"It was, like, embarrassing in a way. Everyone was very sympathetic. It wasn't that I didn't want to communicate with them, but just wanted to shut that particular side out. I felt more comfortable when there was no attention, and that was fully respected."

Andrew says after 35 years, he is still working part-time at Altex.

"It certainly solidified my opinion of the company. They are a very good employer, full stop."

COUNSELLOR and educator James Arkwright, who teaches counselling at Bethlehem Tertiary Institute and runs workshops and therapeutic retreats on grief and loss, says communication and flexibility are key for employers, because each person experiences loss differently.

He says some bereaved people may want extra time off, others may want to continue working, and others may need to spend more time caring for family members after a loved one dies.

Dr Arkwright says, "It might seem like the employer is giving up ground, but research indicates if the employer is connected to that person, the employee will make up for it later when their feet are on the ground; they'll be more appreciative of their employer having been supportive and more than likely be more committed to their work as a result".

Dr Arkwright says some workplaces in the US have lunchtime grief support groups or "Study Circles", but he is not sure New Zealand is ready for that.

"Part of our identity as Kiwis is being a bit staunch, but the more we can talk and share and be understood, the better off we are."

Dr Arkwright says the idea, shown in decades-old studies that society expects people who've suffered loss to return to normal life within two weeks, "... is pretty outlandish. It was the old idea that people went through the grief process and came to terms, acted and moved on.

"Grief doesn't work like that. We can have good days and bad days."

Tauranga Grief Support Services (TGSS) senior counsellor Janet Baird says it helps about 500 people each year, 400 of whom are new clients.

She says many of those people talk about the "big step" of returning to work.

Baird says time pressure is common.

"There can be an expectation around time - such and such amount of time has passed so they should be able to be back to normal, up to speed at work - that's not always the case."

She says, "Financial pressure means a lot of people, including the self-employed, return to work before they feel ready".

To coincide with Loss and Grief Awareness Week (July 27-August 2), Tauranga's Grief Support Services has developed a new brochure for employers to help support employees re-entering the workforce.

The brochures about bereavement in the workplace are a good way to encourage companies to think about how to help staffers experiencing major life crises, Baird says. They will be available from next week through Elliotts and Grief Support Services in Greerton.

Penny Riley says she hopes all employers understand the importance of respecting the fact everyone does grief differently.

## **Bereavement leave rules**

Employers have a legal requirement to provide a certain amount of bereavement leave for workers under the Holidays Act 2003, says Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment communications advisor Ella Zaykova.

She says employees don't need to be full-time. Information about the amount of statutory leave and who qualifies can be found at:

[www.dol.govt.nz/workplace/knowledgeablese/item/1291](http://www.dol.govt.nz/workplace/knowledgeablese/item/1291)

The MBIE spokeswoman says employees cannot "gift" annual leave and companies cannot be required to gift leave from one employee to another. She says, "Annual leave is a statutory entitlement, which means employees need be given at least the minimum amount of leave and cannot be asked to give it up. Some agreements may provide for one or more additional weeks of holidays on top of their minimum entitlements. Employees are also able to ask their employer to pay out in cash up to one week of their minimum entitlement to annual holidays per year."

Visit [www.employment.govt.nz/er/holidaysandleave/annualleave/cashing-up.asp](http://www.employment.govt.nz/er/holidaysandleave/annualleave/cashing-up.asp).