

# Death of a Staff Member Guideline

This document provides a framework to support People Leaders in the event of the death of a staff member.

## What is it?

The death of a staff member is a serious loss to the RMIT community. These guidelines exist to provide a framework for following a process with dignity towards the staff member, their family and friends and the RMIT community in a consistent, timely and compassionate manner.

Each case will be different as circumstances vary; therefore, these guidelines are as inclusive as possible.

## Who is this for?

This guideline is to be utilised by all People Leaders RMIT University and all Australian entities.

## Guideline statement

To outline the preferred practice of RMIT in the management of responsibilities for dealing with the death of a staff member.

In recognition of the stressful impact this news may have, this guideline is led by the following principles.

The University is committed to staff wellbeing and will seek to provide appropriate assistance to the staff member's colleagues and work area as soon as possible after notification and for as long as required:

- We will seek to ensure that contact with the staff members' family is timely and sensitive;
- We will notify all relevant teams to ensure commencement of all due HR process;
- We will seek to manage the impact on colleagues, students, stakeholders and external clients (where applicable) and;
- We will ensure completion of all due HR process and outstanding entitlements are paid as appropriate.

If death occurs on campus, staff should immediately notify RMIT security and refer to the RMIT Emergency Procedures. The RMIT Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT) may be stood up. The CIMT actively manage high consequence and urgent or time sensitive events and issues. The following guidelines can then be used for response to a work area after an emergency has been addressed.

# 1. Notification

1.1 There are a few ways in which RMIT might be notified that a staff member has passed away. It might be by the staff member's family/next of kin; a colleague who is close to the staff member; or it might be from the authorities following a catastrophic event (such as a natural disaster). When RMIT is notified of the death of a staff member, it is important that the person being notified confirms who the family contact/next of kin is, their contact details and information about the death, such as the date when it occurred.

- a. Whoever receives the notification of the death should ensure that they:
  - i Ask their relationship to the deceased and their contact details. If the advice comes from someone other than a family member or next of kin, you should confirm that the family have been notified.
  - ii Ask for the name of the deceased and place of work (Portfolio or College area, if known).
  - iii Ask for the date of the death.
  - iii Inform the notifier that the staff member's Line Manager or delegated staff member will be in contact with them.
  - iiii Contact the deceased staff member's Line Manager as soon as possible.
- b. The Line Manager (unless in the event of absence; being new; or is personally affected and unable to act as primary contact) will be the primary contact and responsible for:
  - i Informing the relevant HR Business Partner and HR Assist ([hr.assist@rmit.edu.au](mailto:hr.assist@rmit.edu.au)) within the first few hours of the notification with the staff member's name, position, cause of death, name and address of surviving spouse/dependant (if possible) and details of funeral arrangements (if possible); and confirm the name of the line manager (or other) as the primary contact for coordination and communications.
  - ii Maintaining contact with the person who notified RMIT of the death to express sympathy, obtain further details on date and cause of death and details of the funeral and whether or not colleagues from RMIT are able to attend (if these details are known and have not already been passed on).
  - iii Obtaining an understanding of how much information they are prepared to be shared with the team through notifications, such as cause of death, related illness.
- c. The HR Business partner will be responsible for:
 

Informing the:

  - Vice Chancellor;
  - Director of Health, Safety and Wellbeing;
  - Executive Dean of the relevant School;
  - Counselling Service (EAP);
  - Supporting line manager with notifying colleagues, peers and any other parties and;
  - RMIT Connect (if the staff member is also a student at RMIT University).

- (See Appendix A: Death of a Staff Member – Manager's Checklist)

- d. Payroll (HR Assist) will be responsible for commencing the internal process RMIT are legally required to action.

## 2. Coordination of process

2.1 The line manager is responsible for ensuring smooth management of the process and will be the liaison point between the work area of the deceased staff member, HR Business Partner and Payroll (as required).

The Line manager will ensure:

- All other relevant parties are notified and provided with the information they need to complete their areas of responsibility;
- Communication between central administration and the work area is accurate and timely; and
- Recommendations regarding communication and counselling for co-workers are carried out.

## 3. Dealing with grief and loss

Everyone deals with grief and loss differently. Staff may experience all kinds of difficult and at times overwhelming emotions.

Grief is something that takes time to work through. Please refer to Appendix: C Guidance for Managers and Staff (Grief and Loss). This may be useful information to provide staff during their time of grief.

The RMIT Health, Safety and Wellbeing team and EAP provider (Benestar) can also provide resources and counselling to assist through the grief process and is available to all staff members and extended to their immediate families.

## 4. Communication to staff

4.1 The Line Manager or appropriate delegate will be responsible for the initial communication of the death to the immediate team members and colleagues as soon as possible. Ideally, this would be face to face or over the telephone, however, for a large team, this may need to be via email. See Appendix B: Email Communication Examples for notifying the team.

The Health, Safety and Wellbeing team along with EAP (Benestar) can assist with the notification and the psychological support of the team afterwards. This will be coordinated with the HR Business Partner. The process is as follows:

- Gather all staff together in a large area/room that is private and away from other teams or gather them virtually via Microsoft Teams;
- Compassionately and sensitively inform staff about the death, known facts surrounding the death and plans for the funeral or memorial and family wishes (if known);
- Advise that EAP support is available following the meeting and ongoing; and
- Contact staff who are away or on leave.

## 5. Communication to staff

5.1 The Line Manager is the primary contact with next of kin/family member. The Line Manager may seek approval from the next of kin for Payroll to contact them directly to seek the legal requirements which can take many months. This may reduce ongoing back and forth and assist the process in a more timely manner.

The only other contact with the family is via the Vice Chancellor who is responsible for contacting the staff members family to offer condolence, and to seek their wishes regarding further communication from RMIT (this process is driven by payroll via HR Assist).

## 6. External contacts

6.1 Often staff have external networks and contacts as part of their role at RMIT. In many situations, it will be necessary to formally advise these contacts of the death of the staff member.

The Line Manager will compile a list of contacts and will notify the contacts accordingly (see Appendix B: Email Communication Examples).

## 7. End of employment process

7.1 Taking into consideration the timing and other sensitivities, the HR Business Partner is responsible for working with the Line Manager to ensure the following duties are carried out:

- Approve end of employment documentation;
- Arrange with the next of kin the return of relevant RMIT property (staff ID, equipment);
- Check emails for appointments, email, and mail and manage these appropriately;
- Contact ITS Service and Support via the portal to remove access from systems; and
- List, pack and store personal possessions to be made available for next of kin to collect when available/appropriate. Discuss arrangements for collection with a family representative at an appropriate time. It may be necessary or more appropriate to organise a courier service.

## 8. Appendices

- A. Death of Staff Member – a Manager’s Checklist**
- B. Email communication examples**
- C. Guidance for Managers and Staff (Grief and loss)**

### A. Dealing with the Death of Staff Member Checklist

Stage 1: Immediate Response and Communication		
Responsible Person	Action	Complete
Line Manager *the order of actions may vary depending on how RMIT was notified and who was notified	Contact: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Next of kin</li> </ul> Gather information: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Circumstances of death</li> <li>- Full name of staff member</li> <li>- Date of death</li> <li>- Identify where staff member worked</li> </ul>	

	<p>Notify:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- HR Business Partner and HR Assist (payroll)</li> <li>- Direct team members/colleagues</li> </ul> <p>Identify key stakeholders</p>	
HR Business Partner	<p>Notify:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Director Health, Safety, Wellbeing</li> <li>- Vice Chancellor</li> <li>- Executive Dean of the relevant school</li> <li>- RMIT Connect (if the staff member is also a student at RMIT University)</li> </ul> <p>Contact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- EAP service provider (align attendance with Line Manager's team meeting)</li> </ul> <p>Support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Line manager with notifying colleagues, peers and any other parties.</li> </ul>	
HR Assist (Payroll)	Commence internal processes once notified	

Stage 2: Arrangements and Business Continuity		
Responsible Person	Action	Complete
Line Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Redirect telephone and mail communications</li> <li>- Arrange out of office message for voicemail and email</li> <li>- Arrange delegate access to inbox if required</li> <li>- Communicate funeral details when known</li> <li>- Pack and list personal possessions of deceased staff member</li> <li>- Notify external contacts</li> </ul>	
HR Business Partner	<p>Notify: Property services to ensure and photos of deceased staff member are removed from display</p> <p>Support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Distribute Grief and loss resource material to team members (or make hard copies available)</li> </ul>	

Stage 3: Final procedures and Follow-up		
Responsible Person	Action	Complete
Line Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Arrange collection or delivery of personal belongings</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Arrange collection of any RMIT property from family (if required)</li> <li>- Contact IT services to remove access from corporate systems</li> </ul>	
Payroll	Notify: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- next of kin or appropriate contact regarding payment of entitlements to estate</li> </ul>	

## B. Email Communication Examples

### Internal email example for notification of Death of Staff Member

Dear colleagues

It is with great sadness that I inform you of the death [overnight/yesterday/over the weekend] of [First name and Surname]. {First name} was a valued member of RMIT who made a substantial contribution to the [work area] over the last [insert period].

With permission of [his/her] family, we are able to share with you that [First name] was [insert illness/other brief detail] health issue for [some time/unexpected]. Our thoughts are with his family at this sad time. [First name]'s family have advised (insert funeral details) OR The details of [first name]'s funeral will be communicated shortly. (Insert information about time off for the funeral).

I know this news will be upsetting to many of you who knew [first name] well. If you feel you would like to speak with someone at this time, please reach out to a fellow colleague or contact our Employee Assistance Program which is available to staff and their families at no cost for guidance and support on 1300 360 364.

Take care,

[Manager's signature]

### External email example for notification

Dear

It is with great sadness that I inform you of the death of [Title, First Name and Surname]. [First name] made a substantial contribution to the School and to the field of [XYZ] over the last [insert period] and he will be greatly missed. Any communication to the University that you would normally direct to [first name] may now be forwarded to (insert delegated person's name and email).

## C. Guidance for Managers and Staff (Grief and Loss)

When loss occurs, we feel overwhelmed with grief at many levels. We wonder if what we are thinking or feeling (emotionally and physically) is normal). Despite our best attempts to keep personal and professional lives separate, these can collide when we experience the death of a colleague.

One place to start is to recognise that you are experiencing an inevitable, normal and natural response to loss; and you will experience this in your own unique and different way.

Learning about the stages of the grief process can be helpful, however there is no one 'right' way to experience grief:

1. Grief often affects us physically  
Problems with sleeping, fatigue, change in appetite are common complaints. As these problems can also be confused with real medical issues, it's important to take good care of your physical health.
2. Grief affects the way we think  
We may begin making decisions differently or our expectations and priorities may change dramatically. Sometimes grief reminds us of earlier losses, thinking about them at this time may help heal the past.
3. Grief affects the way we feel  
It's common to feel numb, guilty, deeply sad, angry and hopeful all in a short period of time. Experiencing an emotional 'roller coaster' may become the norm for a short time because we experience grief in different ways. There is no 'normal' schedule for grief.

By accepting a normal and natural view of grief, those who grieve, their co-workers, supervisors, and managers can be more supportive.

For additional support during this challenging time staff can also access RMIT's free counselling service [My Coach \(Individuals\)](#).

### Tips for Managers

One of the most difficult situations you may face in your career is managing the aftermath of the death of a staff member and how it may affect your work group or department. It may take its toll on relationships, attentiveness, motivation and overall performance. Your presence and compassion are the most important resources during this time.

Here are some steps to take to ensure you have the tools you need to support your staff during the grieving process:

1. **Remember that grief is important, necessary and inevitable.** Simply 'snapping out of it' will not help your staff return to a productive or supportive environment.
2. **Express your condolences.** Sincerity and simplicity will let the grieving person know you care.
3. **Stay in touch with grieving staff.** You represent the workplace to your grieving staff member.
4. **If you are grieving too, make time to take care of yourself as well.**
5. **A critical incident of this nature may be traumatic for co-workers of the staff member.** It can be helpful to schedule a debriefing session with Benestar (our EAP provider). Co-workers have the opportunity to volunteer expressions of grief and time to share thoughts in remembrance of the person. This can be arranged with the help of the Health, Safety and Wellbeing team or your HR business partner.
6. **Whenever tasks are redistributed, be sure to thank the other staff members for their additional work.**
7. **Support and encourage others in helping grieving staff members.**

8. **Expect less than the best from your staff given the circumstances.** You can accept less than the best for a while and still express confidence in them
9. **Set an example of support and professionalism.** Your actions and attitudes will be what others remember and follow.
10. **Effectively managing what may be an extremely emotional situation for you and your work group may** mean delegating certain duties associated with the death to those who are more detached from the situation.

For additional coaching support through this challenging time, you can also seek support through RMIT's EAP provider [MyCoach \(People Leaders\)](#).

## Document history

Version	Last updated	Authority	Author
1.0	15 <sup>th</sup> April 2021	Employee Lifecycle Policy	Manager, Staff Wellbeing