

Option **B**

# Be an Agent for Change

An HR Leader's Guide to  
Expanding Bereavement and  
Compassionate Leave



# Take Action Today

As an HR leader who is committed to your employees' well-being, you likely already have bereavement and compassionate leave policies in place. But research shows that most policies are outdated and inadvertently harm employee morale, productivity, and retention.<sup>1</sup> **Top employers are responding by expanding policies to ensure that people have the time and support they need to navigate the hardest moments of their lives.**

The cost of expansion is low given how infrequently requests for leave after loss happen in practice. Employee commitment also increases significantly when companies have a policy in place that supports their well-being after a major loss.<sup>2</sup>

**Option B wants to help you drive change within your organization.** In this guide, you will find:

- **The business case with the latest data** for expanding leave after loss
- **Five recommendations from experts** to improve workplace policies after loss
- **Research-backed responses to questions** you may receive from other decision-makers within your organization

Company leaders need to ask themselves, "What do you want to be known for?"<sup>3</sup> Supporting the well-being of employees during life's greatest challenges isn't just a business issue, but a moral issue as well.

In honor of Grief Awareness Day, let's enact change, together.

"When my dad died unexpectedly, my family broke and my mother fell apart. The leave allowed me to manage the overwhelming and life-altering grief without worrying about putting together a slide deck or something equally as mundane ... I'm now an executive at my company because my company prioritized me as a person."

*—Nicole, 2023 Option B Community Survey*



## The Business Case for Expanded Leave

More than 60% of U.S. workplaces only offer three days of paid bereavement leave or less, with many restrictions around when and for whom this leave can be taken.<sup>4</sup>

**Research shows that these outdated policies have a negative impact on almost every major metric HR leaders care about.** They hurt employee productivity, morale, and retention.<sup>5</sup> Supportive managers and colleagues are helpful in the face of loss. But without robust policies, they aren't enough.

No team member performs at their best after experiencing loss. After losing an immediate family member, **three in four employees report harm to their work performance.**<sup>4</sup> Forcing people to return to work too soon drives decreased productivity and increased absenteeism that **cost employers more than \$75 billion each year.**<sup>6</sup>

The inability to grieve fully is also impacting people's desire and ability to continue to work for an organization.

- **Nearly 80% of 18- to 34-year olds would consider leaving their jobs** if they did not get proper support after a major loss.<sup>7</sup>
- Grief can harm employees' engagement at work, which can lead to **turnover rates up to 43% higher** than those of highly engaged teams.<sup>8</sup>

Everybody wins when people are empowered to take the time they need to recover from loss and hardship.

Expanding bereavement policies benefits companies and employees alike by improving retention, productivity, and well-being. **More than that, it is simply the right thing to do.**

# Workplace Recommendations

**Here are five key recommendations to drive meaningful change.**

While not all updates may be possible in your specific workplace, best practices recommend that you expand your policies in one or more of the following ways.

## *Recommendation #1*

**Workplaces need to expand their current bereavement policies beyond three to five paid days.**

According to experts, this is not enough time to cope with grief.<sup>9</sup> Best-in-class companies have up to 20 days paid leave.<sup>10</sup>



## *Recommendation #2*

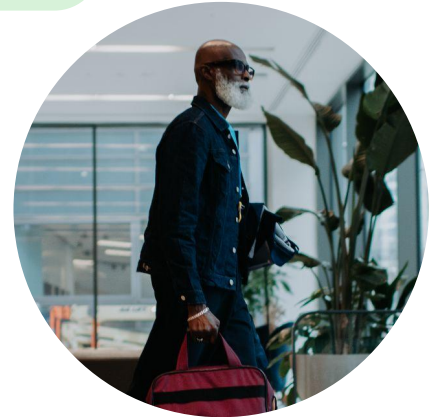
**Workplaces should consider allowing employees to take leave non-consecutively, not necessarily all at once.**

Grief is not one and done right after a loss occurs. It's a non-linear process that "comes in waves."<sup>11</sup>



## Recommendation #3

**Workplaces should consider expanding bereavement policies to include losses for extended and chosen family members, in addition to immediate family.**



## Recommendation #4

**Workplaces should consider expanding their bereavement policies to include some form of pregnancy loss.**

As of February 2023, one in four U.S. companies is offering bereavement leave for pregnancy loss.<sup>12</sup>



## Recommendation #5

**In addition to bereavement leave, workplaces may want to consider adopting paid compassionate leave.**

Compassionate leave is a catchall category for life-altering and emergency losses and hardships, like when a close family member is seriously ill but a loss has yet to occur, or when a loved one is caregiving and you need to provide support.<sup>13</sup>







## The Case for Change

Here are research-backed responses to several common questions you may get when advocating for expanded leave in your workplace.

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### *How do these types of leave benefit companies?*

- Providing robust paid bereavement and compassionate leave policies boosts employee morale, increases retention, promotes a productive workplace, and enhances loyalty to employers.<sup>14</sup>
- In multi-state or multi-country companies, the more generous the policy, the easier it is for employers to stay in compliance as different locations adopt varying laws on leave.<sup>15</sup>

### *Why give more than three to five days of bereavement leave?*

- Research shows that there is no one-size-fits-all timeline for grieving and that it can take months for employees to adapt to their new "normal" after loss.<sup>16</sup> While it is likely unrealistic to take that amount of time off work, only having a few days to grieve before returning to work is insufficient.<sup>17</sup>
- In the last 10 years, workplaces have started to realize that employees need time off not only to travel to and attend a funeral, but also to start emotionally processing a loss.<sup>18</sup>

### *Why include loss beyond immediate family members?*

- The best bereavement leave policies provide flexibility and cover the loss of a range of loved ones, creating space for people to grieve those most important to them.<sup>19</sup>



## The Case for Change

*Why is it important to be able to take leave non-consecutively (i.e., not be required to take your leave all at once)?*

- Grief and healing from any major loss or hardship is a non-linear experience, frequently described in research as coming in waves.
- Experts stress that leave should be able to be taken non-consecutively to reflect the unpredictability of the mourning and healing process, to honor days like the anniversary of a death or miscarriage, and to complete legal and medical requirements that follow a major loss or hardship.<sup>20</sup>

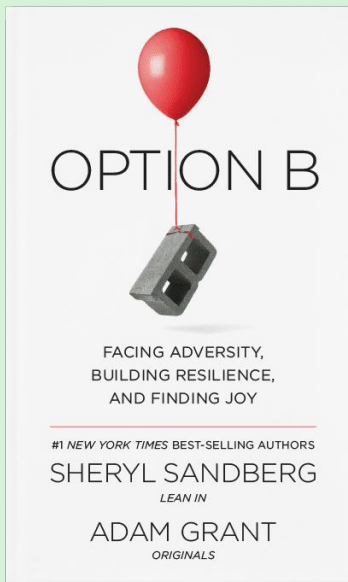
*Why include pregnancy loss in your bereavement or compassionate leave policy?*

- Almost one in three women develops post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after pregnancy loss; this is one of the most difficult forms of grief.<sup>21</sup>
- Research shows that having time away from work to grieve a pregnancy loss can make a substantial difference for employees by reducing loneliness and isolation and providing time to heal.<sup>22</sup>

*If we add or expand our leave policies, will employees misuse them?*

- Employee misuse of loss-related policies is extremely rare. It's unlikely that someone would lie about the death of a loved one or a loss-related crisis. This small likelihood of misbehavior should not stand in the way of companies creating strong workplace policies for loss.<sup>23</sup>

For more information, please check out [www.optionb.org/bereavement-at-work](http://www.optionb.org/bereavement-at-work). If you successfully extend your policy in any way or have further questions, let us know at [info@optionb.org](mailto:info@optionb.org).



## *Who We Are*

The work we do at Option B is inspired by former Meta COO Sheryl Sandberg and organizational psychologist Adam Grant. Sheryl and Adam collaborated on the best-selling book *Option B* after Sheryl lost her husband Dave suddenly in 2015.

Their goal was to provide a relatable guide for how to navigate loss and hardship, grounded in a body of research and Sheryl's personal experience. In 2017, Sheryl founded OptionB.Org to provide resources and support for others facing life-changing challenges. In 2022, Option B reached over 18 million people with education and support worldwide.



# Endnotes

1. ["America's lack of bereavement leave is causing a grief crisis," Business Insider, August 2022;](#) [The Cost of Dying](#), Empathy, January 2023
2. ["It's time to rethink corporate bereavement policies," Harvard Business Review, October 2020.](#)
3. ["America's lack of bereavement leave is causing a grief crisis," Business Insider, August 2022.](#)
4. ["It's time to rethink corporate bereavement policies," Harvard Business Review, October 2020.](#)
5. [2023 Leave Management Survey](#), NFP, 2023.
6. ["The Hidden Perils of Unresolved Grief," McKinsey & Company, September 2020.](#)
7. ["Compassionate Employers Workplace Support," Hospice UK, 2023.](#)
8. ["The business case for better bereavement support," BenefitsPRO, October 2022.](#)
9. [2023 US Employee Benefits Trend Report](#), NFP, 2023.
10. Some companies that have expanded their bereavement leave to 20 days include Liberty Mutual, Goldman Sachs, and Adobe (["Liberty Mutual Insurance Recognized as a Best Workplace for Parents by Great Place to Work," Liberty Mutual, 2020;](#) ["Goldman Sachs Rolls Out New Worker Benefits to Combat Employee Burnout," Wall Street Journal, November 2021;](#) ["Bereavement," Adobe.](#))
11. Mary-Frances O'Connor, ["Grief: A Brief History of Research on How Body, Mind, and Brain Adapt," Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine, October 2019.](#)
12. ["One in Four US Companies Offers Bereavement Leave for Pregnancy Loss," Bloomberg, February 2023.](#)
13. ["Compassionate Employers Workplace Support," Hospice UK, 2023;](#) ["Compassionate Leave—What It Is and How to Manage It," Leave Monitor, 2023.](#)
14. ["It's time to rethink corporate bereavement policies," Harvard Business Review, October 2020.](#)
15. ["Companies are changing bereavement policies in response to employee needs," SHRM, April 2022.](#)
16. Saba Mughal, Yusra Azhar, et al., ["Grief Reaction," StatPearls, 2022;](#) Jelena Milic, Taulant Muka, et al., ["Determinants and Predictors of Grief Severity and Persistence: The Rotterdam Study," Journal of Aging and Health, 2017.](#)
17. Donna M. Wilson, Sehrish Punjani, Qingkang Song, and Gail Low, ["A study to understand the impact of bereavement grief in the workplace," Journal of Death and Dying, 2019.](#)
18. ["It's time to rethink corporate bereavement policies," Harvard Business Review, October 2020.](#)
19. ["Bereavement Leave Is Evolving," Built In, January 2022.](#)
20. ["Why it might be time for a more compassionate bereavement policy," HR Dive, September 2021.](#)
21. Jessica Farren, Maria Jalmbant, Nora Falconieri, et al., ["Post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression following miscarriage and ectopic pregnancy: A multicenter, prospective, cohort study," American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, 2019.](#)
22. ["Workers have few job protections during the trauma of a miscarriage," NPR, January 2022.](#)
23. ["It's time to rethink corporate bereavement policies," Harvard Business Review, October 2020.](#)