

hunu

UNLOCKING THE CONFIDENCE TO DISCUSS DEATH IN THE WORKPLACE

Building resilience for the future with
mental wellbeing.



Building resilience for the future

The mental wellbeing of our workers is now more important than ever before. The pandemic has seen us all experience change and loss, on a scale rarely seen before. In many cases, hybrid working has become the norm. We are all facing new insecurities with the cost of living crisis and pressures on the infrastructures around us, whether that's the NHS or strikes causing disruption. We can all feel in a state of flux, which can play havoc with our wellbeing. Not only do we need to think of our places of work as physical spaces in terms of health and safety, but also as places that can offer positivity, productivity and a place to thrive.

By including practical yet emotionally supportive strategies into the workplace, we can begin to build resilience for the future and a sense of understanding from recent events which may have impacted our mental and physical health. It is only by acknowledging and exploring our experiences that we can derive a healthy and long-lasting legacy.

Death is a universal experience and yet rarely discussed in many cultures and certainly not in the workplace. It is as if we are all immortal, and death won't happen to us. Recent times demonstrate otherwise but it is still not considered good form to even mention the 'D' word in the workplace.

Julia Samuel, Psychologist, in her excellent book, Grief Works, calls this a "conspiracy of silence," which deprives and isolates employees of the support they need.

According to the CIPD the most common cause of long-term sickness is due to poor mental health.

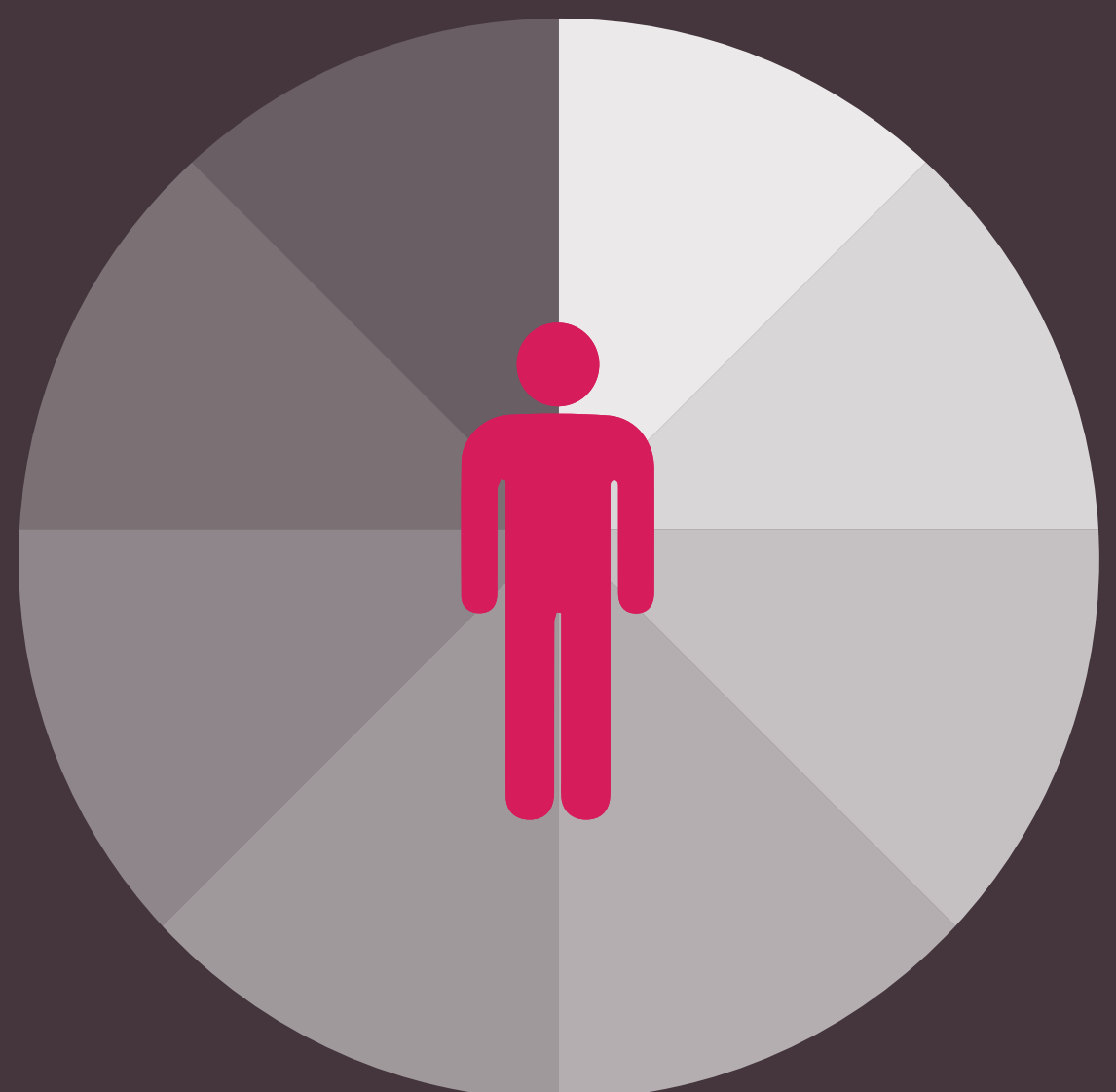
And a report by the HSE found that a whopping 17.9 million working days are lost due to work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2019/20.

The pandemic exacerbated our stress levels, death has become an unwelcome part of many of our lives, for some it can be the first time that they have questioned their mortality and those that they love. Many are bereaved or have experienced change. It hasn't been an easy time and world events and pressures continue to take their toll on our coping strategies.

Talking and preparing for the inevitable can begin to lessen this prevalent anxiety. By taking away some of the unknowns and increasing our awareness and understanding, we can begin to answer some of those nagging questions and support those in the workplace who are struggling with the concept of death. When we begin to become prepared we can then support those discussions.

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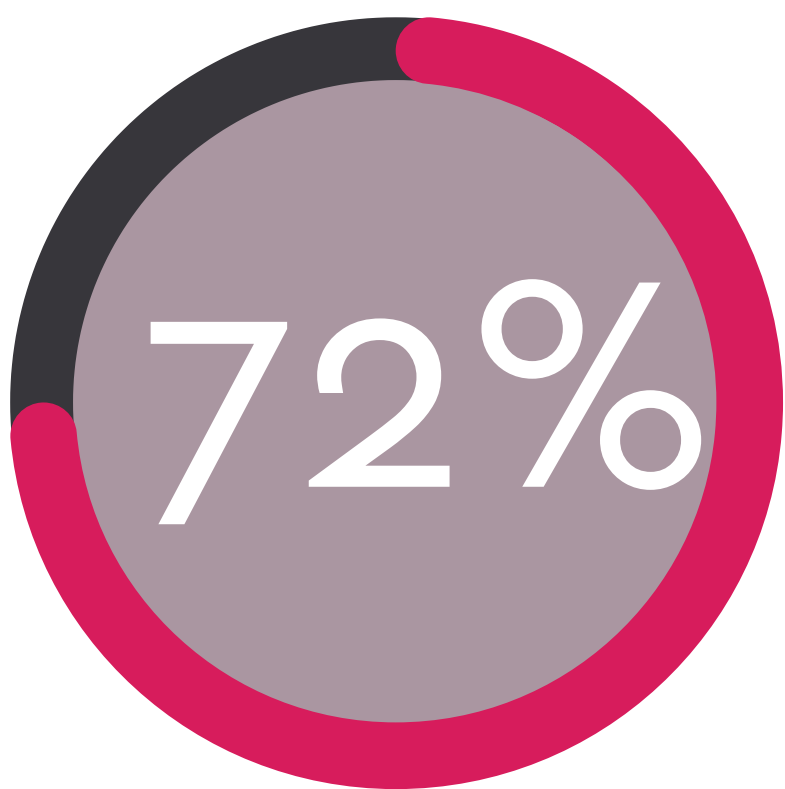


Preparedness

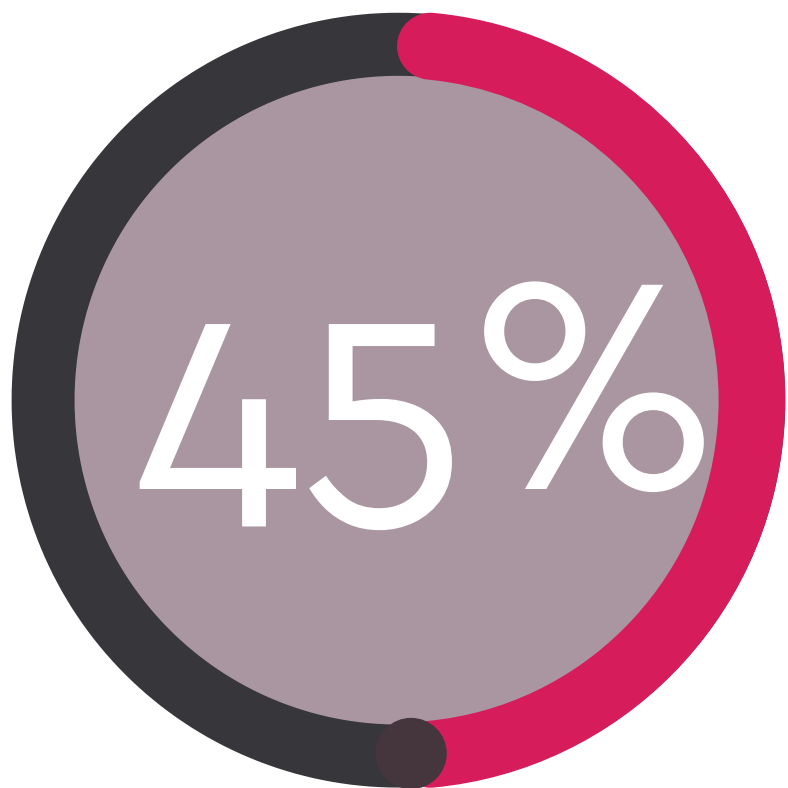
Preparation is vital. Moving into this new world with long-term strategies in place to support health and wellbeing is needed. It isn't good enough anymore to 'power on through.' The workplace needs to move with the times we find ourselves in.

Workplace presenteeism is a threat to productivity, it's not good to have sick, stressed or unmotivated employees turning up at work. It's for this reason that we need to create or encourage a culture of positive mental health and wellbeing.

And the figures are stark. According to a report by High Speed Training:



72% of employees recognise this as a part of their workplace.



45% of organisations say that, on average, a quarter of their staff comes to work when sick.

On average, presenteeism costs businesses £605 per person each year.



Positive conversations

So, how can talking about death promote a positive mindset and support productivity?



When we avoid talking about the experiences that have affected us deeply, we are likely to feel tense and in isolation. The impact of a person dying on those who are left behind can lead to anxiety, depression, a difficulty with concentration, guilt and even physical symptoms in the body. Being able to listen to someone's story of grief and to give an employee space to share those memories, thoughts and feelings is a good sign that an organisation is both open and supportive. To be part of an organisational culture that doesn't shy away from reflecting on death and dying and grief - particularly during a pandemic - can help people not only to continue to do the work, but also to be in the company of a robust, caring and courageous team able to tolerate human distress as well as the celebrations of working life.

Dr Esther Ramsay-Jones

Lecturer in Death, Dying & Bereavement, Palliative psychotherapist and author of 'Holding Time: Human Need and Relationships in Dementia Care' and 'The Silly Thing: Shaping the Story of Life and Death.'



For many, the workplace is more than just somewhere they work.

In a Harvard Business Review report "Companies promise employees meaningful work and a sense of community, not just a salary."

This argues that an employer's obligation to their staff is more than simply 'work.'

"Death seems to be the undoing of everything we value at work: control, growth, productivity, connections. Death can't be fixed or mastered. It has no care for strategy, talent, or future plans. And so, at work, we have no words for it."

What if we did? What if we began to find the words, to initiate discussion and awareness?

Employees would feel less isolated, less alone. They would have a space to share and bond with their coworkers, feel less disenfranchised and better supported by their colleagues and employer alike.

Creating and developing a lasting culture of openness and positive mental health awareness, now that would be a good thing.



Everyone has an experience of death, and they all deserve a space to share those stories.

Clare Turner, founder of huunuu



Enablement and encouragement

Enablement and openly discussing dying and legacy can have profound effects on the wellbeing of staff and the workplace culture.

There should be a strategy in place to be able to deal with scenarios as they arise. These should become the 'norm' and be expected. There should be no hiding in dark corners and emotions seen as 'difficult.'

An example from the workplace

Several years ago, Sarah's Dad died suddenly of a heart attack, she was one of my management team at the time. A very private person, she didn't really mix work and her social life, and then only when it was absolutely necessary.

But a few months previously I had shared with her my vision for huunuu. We discussed some of the ideas, concepts and reasons about why we just don't talk about death often enough. I shared with her my experience and research about why we are all underprepared to listen, support, make plans and make it easier on those we love and ourselves. We delay the important things such as making a will, assigning lasting power of attorney's, sharing our hopes and our wishes etc.

Sarah took bereavement leave, and our policy at the time was 5 days. She needed time with her family and within a few days, surprisingly, she wanted information and support from me around the things we had discussed. It helped her to support her mum, her children and the rest of the family. She had talked things through with me because of my vision and belief. This helped the family make choices and decisions around many things, but the three things that stood out;

1. How proud they were of the diamond ring they had made for her mum from her dad's ashes. Whilst it isn't everyone's choice, it was and is a huge comfort for all the family.
2. They talked, and within 6 months they had all made a will due to the fact her father had died without one; it was taking months for it to go through probate. The disruption and access to normality was difficult for the family.

When she returned to work, I was concerned for her and the team. How would they behave, what would they do? How would she react, what would she do? Carry on and pretend nothing happened? Ask questions? Would they wait for Sarah to say something or cry? Share their own experiences? What impact would all this have?

The impact of death is part of life but so deeply hidden and shamed away as a result of how we handled it in Victorian times. Given how private Sarah was I was sure there was going to be some very difficult and distracting moments for everyone.

3. To my surprise in our first team meeting, she shared with the team our conversation and her view on my vision and how that had helped her. The team listened intently, she shared that sometimes something may make her cry, but that was ok. We understood it was because of the hole in her life and that she was learning to live with a different way of being. She needed their acceptance about what she needed now that she was back at work. She didn't want people to not ask her how she was feeling but needed them to know it was ok to just nod and listen.

There was a much healthier and supportive environment for all of us just because we had talked.

Introducing the subject in a positive way that is beneficial to employees will reap the rewards in those difficult moments.

Encouragement is vital and bringing teams together can result in employees' advocating for the discussions to take place.



Group discussion

The huunuu Group Discussion Mat allows employees the opportunity to advocate for themselves when it comes to discussion and planning for death. Participants write down their wishes on important considerations, such as, Lasting Power of Attorney, Organ Donation and Digital Assets; all areas that are under their control.

The process offers a chance to plan for the future about a subject we often don't give enough thought to. Participants use the mat to discuss their choices. Designed to enable thought provoking conversations amongst co-workers. The type of conversations that aren't often shared in the workplace, but are incredibly important to an employee's wellbeing and your organisational health.

The layout of the mat will allow for unfiltered thought, and debate which will bring co-workers together in a shared activity. The purpose is to encourage open discussion between colleagues over shared concerns about their own mortality, and the financial, legal and personal issues that accompany death. These could include but are not limited to; conversations about property, family, finances and rights. Having a starting point reduces stress and worry for those who have not yet made fixed plans or have any contingencies in place, such as life insurance. The aim is to encourage them to take action.

The A0 sized mat is designed for up to six employees, who sit together and work through step by step. This helps to promote a healthier work dynamic between employer and employee, by giving them space to focus on a fundamental part of life.

The mat will also help to develop strong communications skills, by listening and responding to those who may share sensitive information. This will strengthen your employees' ability to support and initiate lively discussion and debate on sensitive issues. The impact gives a boost to the teamwork ethic and creates a healthier, more productive work environment. The mat acts as a springboard for ideas, as well as a conduit to discussion through question answering and sharing.



Support and productivity

A supported employee is a productive employee. An emphasis on improving mental wellbeing and reducing stress from areas of life outside of the workplace has a positive impact on how the employee feels within their company. The support shown is effective in creating a positive and healthy employer/employee relationship, knowing their mental wellbeing lies within their employer's interests. With a holistic approach, they view employees as a whole being, rather than just their job. This is how productivity thrives

It is estimated that inadequate mental health costs companies \$50 billion CAD per year. By 2041, the total cost is estimated to be \$2.5 trillion. (Deloitte) ·

87% of employers state that they provide services or programs to promote employee wellness, but only 50% have ones relevant to stress reduction. (HR.com)

63% of companies believe that providing programs for employee wellness leads to more engagement from employees. (HR.com)

Employee wellness extends to family members: Each week, 16% of U.S. employees spend an average of 20+ hours providing assistance of some kind to a friend or relative. (AARP)

A 2016 study by the American Psychological Association (APA) found that workplace wellness programs with senior leadership support yielded positive employee outcomes. 89% would recommend their company as a great place to work and 91% found themselves motivated to do their best on the job as a result.

Treating workers at all levels with respect was rated as "very important" to 67% of employees, higher even than compensation, which was rated by 63% of employees as very important. (SHRM) An IBM study (Oct. 2020) revealed that only 46% of employees said their company supports their physical and emotional health. 80% of executives believe their company is supportive. The study emphasises that employees' changing expectations demand an active role by employers to take care of their physical and mental health.

A global survey across 11 nations by The Workforce Institute at UKG (Ultimate Kronos Group) (Sep. 2020) found that burnout and fatigue affect both employees working remotely (43%) and those in a physical workplace (43%). 29% of employees wish their employers demonstrated more empathy in the workplace.

Ultimately, these practical discussions contribute to the workplace being perceived as open, honest and prepared. Talking about death establishes a foundation of trust between employee, co-worker and employer. We need to create thriving workplaces rather than continued uncertainty.

63%

Of companies believe that providing programs for employee wellness leads to more engagement from employees.

46%

Think that their company supports their mental and physical health and wellbeing

Why not?

Why wouldn't you talk about death in the workplace? Common phrases we hear:

"It's morbid."

"Talking about death will make it happen!"

"I want to boost my employees happiness not bring it down."

Newsflash: Death is inevitable. Research by HRM, the Australian HR Institute, found that:

Sixty-seven per cent of employees continue working while undergoing treatment for an illness and 94 per cent of carers balance work with their personal responsibilities. And, the really stark fact that the number of people that will die per year is going to double in the next 25 years.

In their report they gave us the example of: Jessie Williams, CEO of the GroundSwell Project. She discovered that when she lost her baby during labour, how her workplace treated her had a profound effect. They were positive and proactive and helped her to transition back to work in a way that was comfortable.

"That terrible situation turned into an incredibly transformative experience for not only myself, but also for the team. They did it right. They created space for people to talk and have a reaction."

By facilitating a conversation around an individual's experience of loss was helpful rather than 'morbid.' By being open and transparent, confidence was built.

As well as the benefits to the employees for their mental wellbeing, creating the time and space to have some of these difficult conversations can support you and your organisation to become one of the best companies to work for.

Workplaces are often rated by employees in how they are treated during significant moments in their life. A fluid and people-based approach can be a sign of a healthy workplace. Sensitivity and empathy play there part, of course, but talking about practical considerations as a par for the course, should be encouraged.



Work while undergoing treatment for an illness



Of carers work whilst coping with their personal responsibilities

New normal

From all that we have experienced in our recent past we have the opportunity to become prepared and change our workplace culture around death, legacy and the consequences.

Financial wellness gained significant attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a financial wellness survey by the Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI) (Oct. 2020) on employer and employee approaches to financial planning, retirement, and healthcare, 57% of employers will embrace a holistic program when offering financial wellness. On a similar note, 62% of employers feel extreme responsibility for their employees' financial wellness, according to Bank of America's 2020 Workplace Benefits Report (Sep. 2020). It is now time to adopt a holistic program for death, dying and legacy support. Loss has become a part of every one of your employees' lives. Death and dying will always be a subject of great importance that will eventually affect everyone, but now, whilst the entire population has shared a universal experience, it is of great importance to everyone, at the same time.

That's difficult to ignore and so we have a responsibility to bring this shared experience out into the open. By taking a bold approach in bringing these subjects into the norm, you can create long-lasting strategies and future proof your workplaces. Not only is this timely it can reap rewards in terms of productivity and employee satisfaction.

Start by finding a way to introduce the subject into your wellbeing and resilience programs. We can unlock confidence in talking about death if we choose to. We can build resilience.

It is a good time to begin.

huunuu creates and sells products and tools about life, death and legacy to businesses and individuals. We exist to break the barriers around death for a fuller life.



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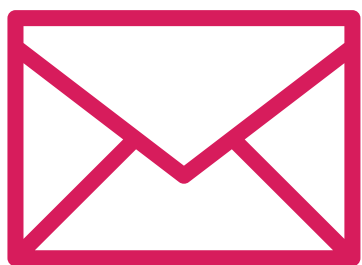


Follow our journey

Here at huunuu we help facilitate difficult conversations about life, death and legacy. We provide tools to assist individuals and businesses alike to take that important step in discussing and planning for the things that matter to us in life and death.



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