

Guidance for staff for Passover

Passover, or Pesach, is one of the major Jewish festivals. It starts on the 15th during the Hebrew month Nisan and takes place from the evening of Wednesday 5th April until the evening of Thursday 13th April.

Passover commemorates the Biblical story of Exodus and the celebration is prescribed in the book of Exodus in the Torah. The holiday is observed for eight days and incorporates themes of springtime, family, remembrance of Jewish history and freedom.

For all staff, including line managers, it is extremely important to be aware of the personal and religious sensitivities of Jewish staff during this period. By understanding their experience and accommodating their particular needs, you can help ensure people to perform to the best of their abilities through empathy – boosting morale, productivity and staff retention.

Whether your team consists of majority staff who are Jewish, or none at all, it is best practice to read through and familiarise yourself to ensure you are being actively inclusive. However, this guidance is general, and you may need to adapt your approach depending on who you are supporting.

What is Passover and how is it celebrated?

Passover is a Jewish festival that commemorates the Israelites escape from slavery in Egypt. Most observant Jewish people in the UK celebrate the festival for eight days, and for many the first and last days are considered Holy Days. It is important to note that the exact dates change every year because there the Jewish calendar is based on the cycles of the moon.

On the first night, and for some families the first two nights, Jewish people host a special dinner called a Seder. The Seder is a ritual feast that involves the retelling of the story of Exodus, from a book called the Haggadah, which includes special blessings, commentaries and songs. Children have a very important role in the Seder where they frame the whole evening around four questions, which are usually sung by the youngest child around the table.

There are lots of symbolic foods and ritual activities carried out during the Seder: such as eating bitter herbs to symbolize the bitterness of slavery, matzos which represent the unleavened bread that the Hebrews fled Egypt with, or dipping parsley into salted water representing new beginnings, while the salted water represents the tears that the Israelites cried in captivity. These rituals evoke the themes of the evening: slavery and freedom, and this can include reflecting on current communities facing similar injustice around the world today. The Seder is one of the most commonly celebrated Jewish rituals performed all over the world and has been celebrated by Jews since around the 5th century BCE. In fact, the Last Supper is widely thought to have been a Seder meal.

The day after the seder, or seders, are considered Holy Days for many Jewish communities where no work is allowed and people engage in prayer. The last day is also considered a Holy Day for some.

For the entirety of Passover, Jewish people are not allowed to eat anything known as Chametz, a Hebrew word meaning leaven (a substance that makes something rise), as a continuation of the symbolic representation of the festival. This includes anything made of wheat, barley, oats, rye, and spelt. Some Jewish traditions (Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe) also stop eating rice, beans, peanuts, corn and lentils whilst others (Sephardi Jews from Spain and North Africa) will continue to eat these products. There is lots of creative cooking and baking that takes place during this time as people cook with the absence of lots of staple ingredients.

Steps you can take to support Jewish colleagues

- Raise awareness

It is good practice to be aware and acknowledge Passover, especially if you are working with a Jewish colleague. If you are not directly working with anyone Jewish, it is still good practice to raise your awareness to ensure you are being proactive in your inclusivity.

Here are some ways to wish someone well during Passover:

- Happy Passover

In Hebrew: chag Pesach sameach, chag sameach or Happy Pesach. To note, the 'ch' in chag is pronounced like 'Bach', rather than 'chair'.

- Be flexible

Be prepared for Jewish staff to want to take annual leave at the start of the festival and do your best to accommodate any leave requests during Passover. Seder night is a very important day in the Jewish year where families get together to celebrate, and it has similar importance as Christmas Day.

Also, people may want to swap shifts/work hours so it is best to prepare for solutions that suit all parties.

- Intentional planning

Avoid booking meetings and scheduling events on Passover, later in the day on 5th and during 6th and 7th, wherever possible. If catered events are taking place between 5th – 13th we need to ensure there is food available for those who are keeping kosher for Passover (for example no grains/wheat)

It is best to avoid internal staff meetings that would stop someone getting away on time (or that does not allow them to get off a little earlier) on 5th and 6th April.

5th and 6th. Some Jewish colleagues will be taking the first and second day of Passover off work although this will vary for different people. It is always best to check in with them before scheduling any important internal meetings that they would be expected to attend on those days.

- Be mindful

Jewish people observing Passover have a lot of dietary restrictions. Try to be mindful of this and if you're planning any working lunches or social activities try to avoid communal eating and be respectful if people choose to eat separately or away from others during the festival.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this guidance, and I look forward to working together with you on EDI at Homeless Link.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact pavan.nagra@homelesslink.org.uk