

RESPONDING TO SUICIDE WARNING SIGNS

A Guide for Managers

Employees may spend more face-to-face time with coworkers and managers than their own family and friends. The workplace may represent a place of belonging. These reasons may contribute to an employee showing suicidal signs in the workplace. An employee may share thoughts with a coworker or make comments that are overheard. Coworkers or a manager might notice changes in behavior that are concerning.

It's understandable that a manager might be uncomfortable approaching the topic of suicide with an employee. It's a highly personal matter that's difficult for many to understand, let alone talk about. However, the best course of action is talking directly and openly when there is a threat of suicide. This handout is designed to give you a better understanding of how to respond if an employee shows signs that might point to a risk of suicide.

Warning signs of suicide risk:

- > Making direct statements about ending one's life.
- > Making indirect comments like, "What's the point of living?" "Life is meaningless." "No one would miss me if I were gone."
- > Talking or writing about death or dying (one's own or the topic in general), including social media posts.
- > Mentioning having means and/or a plan for self-harm such as access to pills, guns, or other weapons.
- > Giving away possessions.
- > Asking about life insurance policy details, especially as it relates to cause of death.
- > Showing interest in end-of-life affairs, such as making a will, discussing funeral preferences, etc.
- > Noticeable changes in behavior or mood. The person might appear uncharacteristically sad, quiet, depressed, or withdrawn. You might see neglect of work, appearance, or hygiene.
- > Voicing hopelessness or helplessness.

Increased risk:

Seeing one or more warning signs in a person who has suffered a significant loss may indicate increased risk. Examples could be a death, divorce, a relationship breakup, loss of child custody, home foreclosure, bankruptcy, or job loss. Other significant risk factors are severe financial stressors, legal problems, an event causing disgrace or shame, substance abuse, and impulsivity.

There are about 117 suicides per day in the U.S. or about one suicide every 12 minutes.

(Drapeau & McIntosh, 2015)

Most suicidal people do not want to die; they want the emotional pain to stop and can no longer see another way to get relief. Discussing suicide openly, in practical terms, is one of the most helpful things you can do.

What to do if an employee shows warning signs of suicide:

It's important as a manager to act quickly and gather information. You are not expected to do a suicide risk assessment, but asking questions can help determine appropriate next steps. Take all responses seriously.

Ask the employee about any suicidal thoughts

- > As soon as you become aware of warning signs, find the employee and don't leave them alone.
- > Take them to a quiet, private place to have a conversation to determine next steps.
- > Be direct and let them know what you've learned. You might start with, "It's come to my attention that you said, 'My life is not worth living.'"
- > Ask the employee if they have had thoughts of ending their life. You might be concerned that this will give them the idea if they didn't have it already, but research shows that, on the contrary, when asked this question, most people feel relief, not distress (NAMI, n.d.). You are giving them a sense of hope by making it OK to talk about it.
- > Give the employee a chance to explain. Listening is the most important thing you can do at this time.
- > Show your concern and support. Let the person know you care and you value them. Show understanding of their pain. Be compassionate, even if you feel angry or upset about what the person is considering.
- > Don't challenge their values or minimize their pain. For example, avoid saying things like, "You don't really want to do that," or "Think about what it would do to your family."
- > You can offer hope that, with the right help, solutions can be found for the problems that are leading the person to feel suicidal. But avoid the urge to question the employee about their problems. **Don't give advice or suggest solutions.** Stay in the present.
- > Protect the employee's privacy as far as is practical, but do not promise to keep the matter confidential. Rather, say you'll do everything you can to protect their privacy and will only share information as necessary for their safety
- > If the employee works offsite or is not at work, check company policy regarding calling the employee to have the above conversation.

If the employee is telling you that they intend to harm themselves:

- > Call 911. Safety is your priority. Never transport the employee to the hospital yourself. This could be dangerous for you or the employee.
- > You can say to the employee "Given what you've told me, I have concerns about your safety. I have a responsibility to make sure you get immediate help. Your safety is the most important thing right now."
- > When calling 911, give all the details that the employee has shared with you and any statements the employee reportedly made to others.
- > When the emergency responders arrive, they will talk to the employee to assess further and determine next steps.
- > 911 may also need to be called in situations where the employee works offsite or has not reported to work and is not reachable. If the information you have presents an urgent concern, it's better to call 911 to do a welfare/safety check than wait another day to see if the employee reports to work.
- > Once the immediate safety concern is addressed, consult with the appropriate resources within your company.
- > You may also need to call the employee's emergency contact person to alert them of the concerns. Check your company policy.

After the emergency responders have addressed the immediate safety concerns you may want to call the EAP as instructed below. The EAP Consultant can help you look at options for addressing the current situation.

If the employee doesn't indicate a plan to harm themselves but you remain concerned:

- > Make sure that the employee has the EAP number and understands that they can call that number at any time, 24/7, for help.
- > As a manager, you can call the EAP and state that the situation is serious and needs a quick response. Ask to speak with an EAP Consultant immediately.
- > The EAP Consultant will gather the details from you and help you put a plan together that might involve offering an urgent appointment to the employee, talking to the employee over the phone, setting up a management referral, or offering the employee EAP referrals.

Managing the employee going forward

- > After addressing immediate safety concerns at the workplace, the EAP can help you determine if a follow-up plan is needed.
- > Sometimes a formal management referral is appropriate to make sure the employee is following through with the help they need.

Take care of yourself

It can be very stressful when an employee displays warning signs of suicide. In addition to supporting your employee, don't hesitate to get support for yourself, either from your own manager or the EAP. You can call the EAP and talk to someone about *your* reactions to the situation. Your conversation will be confidential.



The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is here to help you before, during, and after a crisis.

References

Drapeau, C. W., & McIntosh, J. L. (for the American Association of Suicidology). (2015). *U.S.A. suicide 2014: Official final data*. Washington, DC: American Association of Suicidology. Retrieved from <http://www.suicidology.org/Portals/14/docs/Resources/FactSheets/2014/2014datagpsv1b.pdf>

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). (n.d.). What to do when you suspect someone is suicidal. Retrieved April 26, 2016 from <https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions/Related-Conditions/Suicide>

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