

# When an Employee May Be at Risk of Suicide

One of the most difficult challenges you may face as a manager is knowing what to do if an employee is at risk of suicide. Don't ignore the warning signs that someone's life may be in danger. If someone in your group or workplace appears to be at risk of suicide, it is vital to get help immediately, both for the employee and for yourself.

Some people feel hesitant to ask whether someone is having thoughts of suicide because they are afraid it will put the idea into the person's mind. However, asking someone whether they have had suicidal thoughts will not give that person the idea to take an action that they haven't already thought about. In fact, the person may be grateful for the opportunity to talk about something that they have been afraid to bring up.

Never assume that the employee doesn't really mean it or will "get over it." And don't assume that the fact they are talking about it means they won't do it.

## Warning signs

Suicidal thoughts can occur in people of any age or background. Employees with outstanding work performance as well as those who are having work performance issues can have suicidal thoughts. The warning signs of suicide may include:

**Oral or written threats of suicide.** An employee who is thinking of suicide may say things like, "I'd be better off dead" or "I just don't see the point of going on." The person may also express feelings of hopelessness or of being overwhelmed by difficulties. Always take it very seriously when someone talks about or writes notes about suicide, especially if the person has a history of suicide attempts. Never assume that the employee doesn't really mean it or will "get over it." And don't assume that the fact they are talking about it means they won't do it.

**A preoccupation with death.** Suicidal people often talk about death more than others do. They may show an interest in an organization's death benefits or life insurance policies or ask questions such as, "What would happen to my pension if I died?" Or they may talk about making a will, planning their funeral, or putting their affairs in order. They may also give away their prized possessions or seem not to care about things that used to be important to them.

**Appearing to be depressed.** Serious depression increases the risk of suicide. A suicidal employee may talk as if they are saying goodbye or going away forever. A sudden and unexpected change in an employee suffering from anxiety or depression to an unusually cheerful attitude is a common danger sign.

**Major changes in performance at work.** Formerly reliable employees may have become less productive, feel overwhelmed, or have trouble working as part of a team. If they have been helpful and friendly in the past, they may appear intensely negative or withdrawn. A lack of interest in life and work may also be seen. Some people may have trouble sleeping and, for this reason, may develop problems with punctuality. Depressed employees may also begin to dress inappropriately

for work, either because they don't care about their appearance or are having difficulty eating properly, so that their clothes no longer fit.

**Major changes in their work attitude or behavior.** Some employees may be prone to extreme reactions. They may fluctuate from being very irritable and having lost their sense of humor to seeming very elated and finding everything funny. Co-workers may report that the employee was acting very strangely at times.

**An increase in reckless or other high-risk behavior.** Risky behavior may include abusing alcohol or drugs, gambling, engaging in inappropriate sexual activity in or out of work hours, or acting in rude or threatening ways toward others.

**Increased financial concerns.** In today's environment there can be more anxiety about finances, and it may be hard to separate out normal concerns from suicidal thoughts.

One or more of the above warning signs is often present in a person considering suicide.

## What you should do

Act immediately if you think that someone may be at risk for suicide. You can first consult with human resources (HR) and review any corporate policies that may already be in place, and then contact your assistance program to get additional suggestions before approaching the person.

. . . remind the employee they can call **911** or the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#), formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, by dialing **988** (or 1-800-273-8255) for confidential support any time.

**Talk privately with the employee.** Find a place where you won't be overheard or interrupted. Give the employee your full attention during the conversation. Tell the employee that you are concerned about them, both as a person and as a valuable member of your team.

**Take the employee's concerns seriously.** Listening carefully and sympathetically to what the employee says is very important. Don't tell the employee that their problems could be worse, that things will be better soon, or that everything will turn out fine. And don't assume that someone is "cured" because of recent treatment in a psychiatric facility. Remember that suicide involves very deep-rooted issues that you may know nothing about, and, more important, you don't need to know what issues are causing the employee to be so upset to be supportive.

**If the employee acknowledges thinking of suicide, take immediate action.** Ask the employee directly if they are planning on suicide or self-harm. It is important to determine the employee's intention to determine how to intervene. If the employee says they are planning on taking their life, they should not be left alone. Some type of intervention should occur right away.

Here are two ways to intervene:

**First ask the employee whom they would like you to call.** Or, they may prefer calling someone while in your office. You can also call the emergency contact listed in the employee's personnel file

and tell the person that you are worried about the employee's safety. Ask the emergency contact to pick the employee up and take them to the nearest emergency room where they can be evaluated.

**Call 911 and ask for someone to come and take the employee to hospital to be checked for suicidal risk factors.** The emergency response personnel will want to know what prompted your call, and you should tell them what the employee said that first caused you concern. To help maintain the employee's privacy, try to find a secluded area for the employee while they are waiting for emergency services to arrive and stay with the employee until emergency personnel arrives.

If the employee says that they are not planning on hurting themselves, offer the following support:

**Let the employee know that thoughts of suicide are usually related to problems that can be treated.** Explain that most people who get treatment successfully recover.

**Tell the employee to contact their therapist right away if they are in treatment.** Give them a private room so they can call their therapist confidentially.

**If the employee is not currently receiving treatment, give them the number of the assistance program.** Tell the employee that they can speak confidentially with someone at the assistance program who has experience in helping with the kind of concerns they are having. Or ask the employee if you can call the assistance program for them and then put the employee on the phone to talk with a consultant. Ask the employee if you can share the reason for the call and if the employee agrees, call for them and get someone on the line. Leave the room so the employee has privacy. Remember to also ask the employee if you may speak with the assistance program when they have finished the call. This way you can be advised as to whether any further intervention on your part is needed.

You might also remind the employee that they can call **911** or the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#), formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, by dialing **988** (or 1-800-273-8255) for confidential support any time.

**Get immediate assistance if the situation is urgent.** In rare cases, an employee may become agitated or highly anxious, and you may feel that you need additional assistance. You can confidentially ask HR or security for their help. If you have an on-site medical department, it can also be a very helpful resource. If you are working remotely, contact the emergency services and give them the employee's address.

**Protect the employee's privacy at work.** Keep in mind that questions of privacy may involve legal or other issues that go beyond your work relationship with the employee. If you have questions, request a confidential meeting with HR to ask about your company's policies and resources and how to proceed.

**Ask the employee if any of their difficulties are work-related.** If so, offer support in finding solutions. Keep in mind that the employee may have legitimate concerns about work, such as

feeling overwhelmed by their workload. In your efforts to offer support, do avoid giving reassurances that may not be realistic.

**Avoid asking about personal concerns.** If your employee brings up private concerns, listen carefully, but don't offer advice. Suggest that they get professional help. You might say, "I am concerned about you, and I want to connect you with a trained professional who can help you with your situation." Then give the employee the number of the assistance program and remind them that it is a confidential resource.

**Never promise confidentiality to someone who may be close to suicide.** If there is a serious risk of suicide, you may need to involve others to help the employee. Instead, tell them what you *can* do. For example, you might say you won't discuss their concerns with co-workers but that you will need to talk about this on a confidential, need-to-know basis with your manager and/or HR.

**Follow up.** After your conversation, continue to offer support to the employee. Remind them that you value their contributions. Follow up to make sure they have contacted the assistance program or other mental health professional and that they are getting the help they need.

**Remind the employee of other information and resources that may be helpful.** For example, be sure the employee is aware of resources available through your organization's assistance program.

## **Remember that manager support is available, too.**

If you become aware that a member of your team is considering suicide, get help quickly, both for the employee and for yourself. Don't decide on your own about the best way to help. Someone who is very troubled may need more help than you can give.

**Talk with your manager.** Remember that you and your organization share responsibility for the wellbeing of employees at work. Be sure to let your manager know if you believe that others are aware that the employee may be at risk for suicide. Talk about how to handle the situation if other employees bring up the subject with you.

**Contact the assistance program.** Find out what else, if anything, you need to do to help the employee and other members of your group. Employees who are concerned about their co-worker can also get confidential help for themselves through the assistance program.

It can be extremely troubling to realize that a member of your team may be thinking of suicide. But know that suicide has complex causes and that you alone cannot "save" or solve the problems of someone who is feeling great pain. Your job as a manager is to show that you care and want to help with any work-related difficulties that are contributing to the problem. You can do this by making sure your employee knows about sources of support that are available. It is essential to act promptly so that your employee gets the immediate help they need.

This information is provided to supplement the care provided by your physician or mental health professional and is not to be used as a substitute for professional medical advice. Always seek the advice of your physician or other

qualified health or mental health professional if you have questions or concerns about a medical condition or plan of treatment.

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