

Responding to Suicide Warning Signs

When an employee is struggling with suicidal thoughts, there are often warning signs that manifest 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 is important to take action if there are any concerns for an employee's safety. 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 The person might appear uncharacteristically sad, quiet, depressed, or withdrawn.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 include:

- A death
- Divorce or relationship breakup
- Loss of child custody
- Home foreclosure
- Bankruptcy
- Job loss

Other significant risk factors include:

- Ongoing physical or mental health challenges
- Severe financial stressors
- Legal problems
- An event causing disgrace or shame
- Substance misuse
- Impulsivity
- Access to lethal means

There are about 130 suicides per day in the U.S.

That is roughly 1 suicide every 11 minutes.

(American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2021; CDC, 2021)

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

- Take all reports of suicidal thoughts seriously. If a colleague reports concerning statements made in the workplace or social media posts (even if made outside work hours), take immediate action.
- As soon as you become aware of warning signs, find the employee and don't leave them alone, as long as you are not in danger. Attempt to reach remote employees by phone and keep them on the line. If you are unable to reach a remote employee, you may need to call 911 for a welfare/safety check.
- For in-person interactions, take them to a quiet, private place away from crowded areas or colleagues to have a conversation and determine next steps.
- Be direct about what you've observed or heard from others. You might start with, "I have heard 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 talking about suicide reduces stigma and allows individuals to seek help (Fuller, 2020). You are giving them a sense of hope and relief 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 for and value them. Be compassionate, even if you feel angry or upset about what the person is considering.
- Don't minimize their pain with comments like, "It's not so bad." Acknowledge their pain and despair.
- Offer hope that with the right help, solutions can be found for the problems that are leading the person to feel suicidal. Do not offer advice or brainstorm solutions. Remember, it's not your job to "fix" the situation, but rather to assist with getting them help.
- Protect the employee's privacy as far as is practical, but do not promise complete confidentiality. 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.

Starting a conversation

- *I feel like you haven't been yourself lately. I am concerned about you.*
- *I want to respect your privacy, but I can tell something is wrong.*
- *I know you've been having a tough time recently. Can you share what has been going on?*
- *It's come to my attention that you said, "____" on social media. Can you share why you said that?*

Phrases you could use

- *How long have you felt like this?*
- *Have you been feeling hopeless?*
- *How are you coping with what's been going on in your life?*
- *I'm here to support you.*
- *Can you think of anything I could do to help you?*
- *I am concerned for your safety. It's my responsibility to get you the help you need.*
- *I don't know exactly how you feel, but you matter to me and I want to help.*
- *Your safety is the most important thing right now.*

Key questions to ask

- *Do you ever find yourself thinking that you would hurt yourself?*
- *Are you having thoughts of suicide?*

Phrases that may not be helpful

- *You don't really want to do that.*
- *It can't be that bad.*
- *You have so much to live for.*
- *You can't do that to your family.*

If the employee confirms 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.
- Explain to the employee that given what they've shared, you have concerns about their safety, and that it is your responsibility to ensure they get immediate help.
- When calling 911, give all the details that the employee has shared with you and any statements the employee reportedly made to others, including social media posts.
- When the emergency responders arrive, they will talk to the employee to assess further and determine next steps.
- If the employee works remotely and is unable to be reached or working offsite, you may need to call 911 to do a welfare/safety check. If you wait until the next day to see if they report to work, it may be too late to prevent a tragedy.
- 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.

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

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- Fuller, K. (2020) 5 Common Myths About Suicide Debunked. Retrieved from <https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/September-2020/5-Common-Myths-About-Suicide-Debunked>

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