

Suicide Prevention in the Workplace

Not everyone views suicide as a workplace issue, however it's not that simple to leave personal worries at home. Furthermore, it is often the case that work is a contributing factor to deteriorating mental health.

Aside from a legal duty of care to provide a safe working environment for employees, employers have a strong moral and ethical responsibility to support their employees' health and wellbeing. This includes fostering an environment where mental health is treated as considered on par with physical health, and a culture where people feel able to talk about suicidal feelings and seek help without fear of judgement.

WORKPLACE ACTION

From a workplace point of view, suicide prevention strategies should address workplace factors that contribute to suicide risk. Such factors include bullying and harassment, monotonous tasks, stress-inducing psychological work pressures, lack of control over work, heavy workloads, and inadequate rewards.

The World Health Organisation recommends a workplace should be enacting the following policies:

1. Provide information sessions for your staff on mental health and suicide prevention. Ensure all staff know what resources are available for support, both within the organisation and in the community.
2. Foster a work environment in which colleagues feel comfortable talking about problems that have an impact on their ability to do their job effectively, and culture in which they support each other during difficult times.
3. Become familiar with relevant legislation.
4. Identify and reduce work-related stressors which can negatively impact mental health.
5. Design and implement a plan for how to sensitively manage and communicate the suicide or suicide attempt of an employee in a way that minimises further distress. Measures should include the availability of mental health professionals and support services for staff.

SIGNS AN EMPLOYEE MAY BE SUICIDAL

Although you may not have close relationship with your work colleagues, you are still in a position to notice changes in a colleague's behaviour, or to be aware of events in their life that could be having a negative impact on them.

There are general signs you can look out for in a colleague, including:

- Talking about suicide or just not wanting to be here
- Talking about being a burden on others
- A known history or disclosure of attempted suicide(s)
- Talking about being trapped or experiencing emotional pain
- Agitation, anxiety and/or irritability
- Trouble sleeping
- Changes in appearance and general grooming

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SUICIDE PREVENTION IN THE WORKPLACE

- Taking more time off work or a drop in work performance and/or productivity
- A recent stressful event
- A recent loss
- Social withdrawal
- Seeming distracted or distant

INDIVIDUAL ACTION

If you're concerned that someone at work might be suicidal, don't be afraid to talk to them and let them know that you are concerned about them. It is normal to be anxious about how to approach this conversation, but remember that no one knows the perfect thing to say in this situation. It can be helpful to remain calm and non-judgmental if a colleague does disclose that they have a mental health condition or thoughts of suicide. Asking about suicide takes courage, but sharing suicidal thoughts also takes courage - acknowledge this and thank your colleague for being open with you.

If a colleague admits to having suicidal thoughts, they may or may not feel that they will act on these thoughts. See below for recommended actions to be taken in each scenario:

1. They admit to having thoughts of suicide but do not feel they are currently at risk of acting upon those thoughts.

1. Indicate that you are very concerned for their wellbeing and that, as a duty of care, you need to support them to access professional support.
2. Encourage them to contact the Converge EAP service or request consent from the employee if they would like you or someone else to call on their behalf. If you feel comfortable, you may do this for them. Alternately, this may be done by the employee's manager (if that's not you), or a member of HR. Once on the phone, ask for an urgent EAP telephone consult to be provided.
3. Support and stay with the employee while the call to EAP is made. It is important to remember that the employee may still need support, even if they have given consent for you to make the call on their behalf.

4. If they do not wish to call the EAP provider, offer to call their GP and arrange an urgent appointment. Suggest that a family member or friend be called to accompany them to the appointment.

If the employee refuses the above support, request their consent to reach out to their emergency contact and explain your concerns to them. In this scenario you do not need the employee to provide this consent, though it is still advisable to seek it.

2. They disclose that they are at risk in that moment.

1. This scenario requires fast, decisive action and should involve the employee's manager and HR department.
2. You should indicate that you are very concerned for their wellbeing, and as a duty of care, someone will accompany them to the local hospital immediately.
3. If they decline, the police or ambulance will need to be called. When there is risk of self-harm or suicide, consent is not required as the primary focus is on ensuring the individual's physical safety.
4. If the employee leaves your presence, call police and request a welfare check to take place at the employee's home. Ensure that you have the employee's contact details to provide to Emergency Services.

If the above situation occurs, don't be afraid of being too "intrusive". It is also not your prerogative to decide whether the employee is over-reacting or not. If someone discloses risk of harm to themselves and/or others, it is critical that the above actions are taken.

If you or a colleague are feeling depressed and have suicidal thoughts, we can help.

Call **1300 687 327** to talk to our friendly team.

Alternatively, below are some contacts you can call:

- **Emergency Services** 000
- **Suicide Call Back Service** 1300 659 467

FIND OUT MORE

