



WHEN AN EMPLOYEE SEEMS SUICIDAL: GUIDANCE FOR MANAGERS

Some have referred to COVID-19 as the "perfect storm" when it comes to suicide risk. While the disease itself causes sickness and death, its ripple effects include economic hardships, social isolation, and increased anxiety. In some countries, COVID-19 stigma is causing additional stress and anxiety.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, symptoms of anxiety disorder and depressive disorder increased considerably in the United States in April through June of 2020, compared with the same period in 2019. A survey conducted between June 24th and 30th, 2020 found that 10.7 percent of survey participants reported that they had seriously considered suicide in the 30 days before completing the survey. In addition, the percentages were significantly higher among respondents aged 18 to 24 years (25.5%), minority racial and ethnic groups (Hispanic respondents [18.6%], non-Hispanic black respondents [15.1%]), self-reported, unpaid caregivers for adults (30.7%), and essential workers (21.7%).

A survey of mental health therapists in India found that nearly 30 percent of participants observed an increase in people who had participated in self-harm or expressed suicidal thoughts.

As a manager, you may be faced with an employee who is at risk of suicide. How will you recognize the risk and what should you do?

What are the signs of suicidal risk?

Many of the warning signs of suicidal risk are similar to those for stress and anxiety, though sometimes they are more extreme. People considering suicide often have been worn down by stress or by setbacks in their lives. Loneliness, which has been a common struggle due to quarantine, and social distancing measures can be other causes. Loss or anticipated loss of a loved one's death, a separation or divorce, declining health, or deteriorating finances can also lead a person to suicidal thoughts. Depression can make life seem hopeless.

Signs of suicidal risk may include changes in behavior, such as

- deteriorating job performance
- dramatic mood changes
- lack of attention to personal appearance
- withdrawal from colleagues
- giving away prized possessions
- interest in end-of-life matters, such as wills, insurance beneficiaries, or funeral plans

The employee might also express suicidal thoughts by

- talking about not being present in the future
- making statements that indicate hopelessness ("Life is meaningless." "I'm trapped." "You would be better off without me." "No one would miss me if...")
- posting messages on social media about death or hopelessness

How Should Managers Respond?

If you hear this kind of talk, whether expressed directly to you or through another employee, address it kindly but firmly. You won't make the situation worse by



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clarifying it, and an open conversation with you may be the person's first step toward getting well.

You'll want to get your employee to professional help, and the way you do this is very important. Demonstrating respect and concern for the employee can make them more willing to seek help and can contribute to the healing process.

1. Let the employee know that you care about them as a person.
2. Listen to the employee's concerns, and try to understand the depth of their feelings.
 - Give them your undivided attention, and remember that listening also includes body language, such as eye contact.
 - When responding, reflect back what you are hearing to help them understand that you are taking their concerns seriously.
 - Don't be afraid to ask direct questions like, "Are you thinking about taking your own life?"
 - Let them talk openly, show compassion, and speak in a non-judgmental tone.
3. Don't leave the person alone, whether on the phone or in person.
4. Don't debate whether suicide is right or wrong or whether the person's feelings are right or wrong.
5. Don't minimize their problems or give advice; they need to hear that what they are experiencing is not their fault and that you are there to help.
6. If any of the employee's problems are related to work, offer to address those problems, then follow through on your promises.

7. Do not pry into the employee's personal problems, but listen in a caring way if the employee chooses to share them.
8. Don't try to solve the employee's problems. Your role is to listen and show that you understand that those problems are real and painful, and to help guide the employee to someone who can provide meaningful help.
9. Connect the employee to professional support.
10. With the employee's consent, call the EAP, your community's crisis intervention, or suicide prevention helpline on their behalf.
11. In an urgent situation, call your local emergency services, notify your HR department, and alert your manager.

There is a dangerous myth that when someone is suicidal: there really isn't anything anyone can do to change their mind. Experts say that couldn't be further from the truth. So, if you feel one of your employees might be exhibiting one of the signs of suicidal risk, take action.

*This article is adapted from *A Managers Guide to the Employee Support Program* developed by Workplace Options.