

Preventing Suicide at Work

Suicide is a topic that many in our society find difficult to discuss. When an individual is perceived as being at-risk for harming himself/herself, some people are worried that they might “say the wrong thing” and then make the situation worse by talking about it. Some people are concerned that asking about a person’s well-being might appear to be “butting-in” to someone else’s business. The situation becomes even more complicated when the at-risk individual is identified in the work place.

The Myths About Suicide

One of the best ways to address the potential for suicide in the workplace is to help managers and employees understand suicide and educate them on appropriate intervention strategies. We must dispel the myth that talking about the issue puts the suicidal employee at even greater risk. The truth is that talking about suicide does not in any way increase the risk that an individual will act on their intentions. As a matter of fact, talking about suicide **significantly reduces** the probability of acting on such intentions because people who are suicidal are hurting. These individuals are in intense emotional pain and they believe that no one understands or cares. Talking about the issue lets these individuals know that others recognize their pain and that they do care.

Another common misconception is that suicide is rare. Suicide is much more common than people think. The statistics* are sobering and the fact that we are not aware of the magnitude of the problem is just another indication of how difficult it is for people to discuss the topic:

- Two times more people die from suicide every year (36,000) than from homicide.
- For 25-34 year-old's suicide is the second leading cause of death.
- For 15-24 year-old's it is the third leading cause of death.
- The rate of suicides in the 45-54 year-old age group is growing at a faster pace than any other age group.
- Women attempt suicide 2-3 times more often than men.
- Men are 4 times more likely to die from their attempt.
- Women tend to use poisoning or overdose in their attempts where men prefer guns.

**National Institute of Mental Health*

The Warning Signs

To identify an employee who may be at-risk, it is important to know the warning signs:

- Previous suicide attempts (number one risk factor)
- Threats to harm self or discussing/writing about self-harm
- Feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness
- Reckless or risky behavior
- Increased substance use (especially alcohol)
- Social withdrawal

- Increased rage/anger/seeking revenge
- Tendencies for mood swings
- An organized plan
- Little social support (as perceived by the suicidal individual)
- Access to a means of carrying out a plan

How to Intervene

Knowing of the prevalence of suicide and the risk factors associated with it does little to prevent suicide from occurring unless managers and supervisors are committed to intervening when appropriate. If we remember that individuals who are contemplating suicide are in intense emotional pain, then we can understand how even the most casual of caring conversations may make a large impact. Think about a time when you yourself were hurting. Think about how someone expressing interest and compassion may have helped you. When an employee is suicidal, expressing care and compassion may literally help save his or her life.

Individuals who are contemplating suicide are more likely to be identified by caring compassionate people in their families, social groups or workplace than by medical professionals. The approach to intervention in the workplace is simple:

- Listen in a nonjudgmental manner
- Express compassion and offer reassurance
- Encourage appropriate professional help

Almost every individual will express their emotional pain in some way long before they contemplate suicide. When speaking to someone you think may be at-risk, it is important to convey to the individual that you care and understand that they are hurting. This can best be done by asking two questions: “Are you having thoughts of hurting yourself?” If the answer is “yes” then “how are you planning to hurt yourself?” Although it may be difficult to think about asking these questions, they actually convey to the individual that you care and are not afraid to talk about their pain. This helps the person feel normal and can open the door to discussing a safety plan and getting the individual to commit to pursuing professional help. It is imperative to facilitate that the individual get professional help as quickly as possible. PAS stands ready to provide support services to both the concerned manager and the suicidal employee.

The three things that correlate with reducing the incidence of suicidal ideation are:

- Effective mental health care
- Increased feelings of connectedness
- Improved problem solving skills

Promoting the availability of confidential counseling and the many practical life management services offered by PAS is a pro-active suicide prevention strategy. PAS also offers workplace training for managers to help them better understand suicide and effective intervention.