The Role of
Managers
in Preventing Suicide in the Workplace

Ralph had supervised George for almost seven years, and they got along well. Recently, Ralph was noticing changes in George's behavior. He avoided his co-workers. He stopped eating in the lunchroom and ate by himself. He became abrupt with customers and looked sad all the time. A number of times, George looked like he had been through a night of heavy drinking.

Because Ralph had participated in a training offered by his workplace on identifying someone in emotional distress, he knew he needed to approach George. So he arranged a private meeting to talk with him. Ralph told George that he had noticed some changes in his mood and behavior and was concerned about his well-being. He asked him if there was something he could do to help. George's first response was concern that his job was in jeopardy. But after Ralph reassured him that George's wellness was his top concern, George relaxed and thanked Ralph for reaching out to him. Ralph suggested that George contact the Human Resources (HR) Department and talk with them about getting mental health counseling. George followed through with that advice, and Ralph continued to keep in touch with George's progress.

In this sheet, we use *manager* as a general term for anyone in the workplace who is responsible for planning and directing the work of a group of employees, whether as a direct supervisor, administrator, owner, etc. It includes anyone who works with employees on a daily basis and may be in a position to identify and respond to those who are suicidal or at high risk for suicide. On pages 5–6, we briefly describe the approach that a workplace should take regarding suicide prevention, but most of this sheet is about what you can do as an individual manager.

Key Steps to Reduce Suicide Risk among Your Employees:

- Understand why suicide prevention fits with your role as a manager

- Identify employees who may be at risk for suicide

- Respond to employees who may be at risk for suicide

- Be prepared to respond to a suicide death

- Consider becoming involved in workplace suicide prevention

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Understand Why Suicide Prevention Fits with Your Role as a Manager

In the vignette above, Ralph played an important role by encouraging George to get help. He cared about his employee and wanted the best for him. As a workplace manager, it is both humane and good business to create a culture of health and safety in your workforce, including investing in the mental health of your workers. They are your most valuable asset. By protecting the mental health as well as the physical health of your workers, you will have a more productive workforce.

As a manager, you are also well positioned to notice if your employees are struggling and to take the first steps in assisting them to get help. You spend a lot of time at work and have day-to-day contact with your employees. You get to know them over time, can observe changes in their behavior, and may see them at critical points in their life. In addition, workplaces often have a structure, such as an HR Department or Employee Assistance Program (EAP), to which you can refer employees to help them find a mental health professional.

You can also play an active role in suicide prevention by creating a work environment that fosters communication, a sense of belonging, and respect. Feeling connected to a community promotes emotional well-being and can decrease risk for suicide (Rodgers, 2011).

Stigma about mental illness can keep people from sharing their situation and seeking help, especially in their workplaces. Reassure your employees that mental health problems are *real* and *treatable*. Talk about mental illnesses in the same way you talk about physical illnesses.

Sources of Help for Employees

Employee Assistance Program (EAP): Many medium- to large-sized workplaces have EAPs. These programs provide confidential counseling and referrals for individual employees and their household members who have personal difficulties, such as mental health, substance abuse, health, work, or family/relationship problems that impact their ability to function. EAP professionals have significant training in assessment, referral, and short-term counseling.

Human Resources (HR) Department: Most workplaces have an HR Department, responsible for the hiring, training, and retention of employees. HR staff are concerned with the overall welfare of employees in the workplace and can take initial steps to help employees obtain confidential assistance with problems that may impact their work.

Know the facts

Suicide touches everyone—but especially working age adults.

- Suicide takes the lives of about 38,000 Americans each year (CDC, 2010).
- The majority of the suicide deaths in the United States are among working age adults (ages 24–64), especially men (CDC, 2010).
- Each year over 8 million adults think seriously about taking their life, and over 1 million make an attempt (NSDUH, 2011).
- Depression, one of the most significant risk factors for suicide, is a leading cause of workplace absence and low performance (Lerner & Henke, 2008; Kessler et al., 2006).

However, there is help and hope when individuals and workplaces join forces to prevent suicide.

Identify Employees Who May Be At Risk for Suicide

Be alert to problems that increase suicide risk

You may notice problems facing your employees that may put them at risk for suicide. There are a large number of risk factors for suicide. Some of the most significant ones are:

- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Mood and anxiety disorders, e.g., depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Access to a means to kill oneself (i.e., lethal means)

Suicide risk is usually greater among people with more than one risk factor. For individuals who are already at risk, a "triggering" event causing shame or despair may make them more likely to attempt suicide. These events may include relationship problems or breakups, problems at work, financial hardships, legal difficulties, and worsening health. Keep in mind that most people with risk factors will not attempt suicide.

(Adapted from Rodgers, 2011 and SPRC, 2008)

Watch for signs of immediate risk for suicide

There are some behaviors that may mean a person is at immediate risk for suicide. These three should prompt immediate action:

- **Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself**
- **Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun**
- **Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live**

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

The Lifeline is a 24-hour toll-free phone line for people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. The phone number is 1-800-273-TALK (8255). For a Lifeline wallet-sized card listing the warning signs of suicide and the toll-free number, go to http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/App_Files/Media/PDF/NSPL_WalletCard.pdf

Other behaviors may also indicate a serious risk, especially if the behavior is new; has increased; and/or seems related to a painful event, loss, or change. They are:

- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

(Adapted from National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, [n.d.])

Respond to People Who May Be At Risk for Suicide

Be prepared by knowing who to contact in your workplace if an employee is in distress or suicidal. The EAP and HR Department are the appropriate first points of contact. If you do not have an EAP or HR Department, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline can provide guidance and referrals to mental health professionals.

Take action if you encounter someone who is at immediate risk.

If an employee is:

- **Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself**
- **Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun**
- **Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live**

Take the following steps right away:

1. If the danger for self-harm seems imminent, call 911.
2. Stay with the person (or make sure the person is in a private, secure place with another caring person) until you can get further help.
3. Contact the EAP or HR Department and they will help you decide what to do. Provide any background information that may be helpful.
4. If you do not have an EAP or HR Department, contact the Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) and follow their guidance.
5. Maintain contact with the employee and the EAP or HR Department to provide appropriate support and follow-up.

Address Cultural Differences

Differences in cultural background can affect how people respond to problems, the behaviors they show, and their attitudes toward suicide, as well as how they feel about sharing personal information and seeking help. It is important to be aware of possible differences and tailor your responses accordingly. For example, individuals from some cultures may not be open to seeing a mental health provider, but they may be willing to talk with a faith community leader or traditional healer.

Reach out to someone who may be at risk

The steps just covered are an appropriate response to an employee showing immediate warning signs of suicide. To help other employees who may be at risk for suicide, you can take the steps below, depending on what feels most comfortable to you:

- Talk with your EAP or HR Department, or call the Lifeline about your concerns.
- Reach out to the person:
  - Ask how he or she is doing.
  - Listen without judging.
  - Mention changes you have noticed in the person's behavior and say that you are concerned about his or her emotional well-being.
  - Suggest that he or she talk with someone in the EAP, the HR Department, or another mental health professional. Offer to help arrange an appointment and go with the person.
- Provide ongoing support to the person.
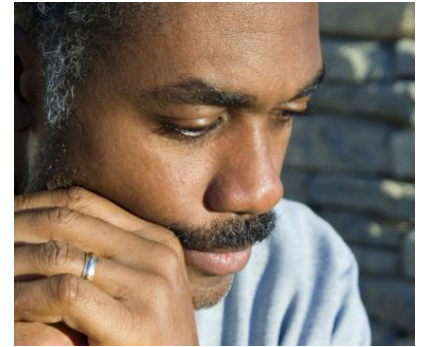
Be Prepared to Respond to a Suicide Death

The suicide death or attempt of an employee—even if it does not occur on the job—can have a profound emotional effect on others in the workplace. Some people may struggle with guilt and unanswered questions about what they should have done to help, and some may experience depression or suicidal thoughts themselves.

As a manager, you can ensure that employees get the help they need and assist the workplace in returning to a state of normalcy. Give employees time and space to deal with their feelings so that they can manage the trauma and transition back to working effectively. In addition, foster an environment that encourages employees to support each other in coping with a suicide in the workplace. People experiencing a suicide loss usually need the same things that people who experience loss from other causes of death need: support, time to grieve, and space to share their stories of the person they love. Also, be sure to seek support for yourself.

Ask your EAP or HR Department if it offers any counseling or referrals to mental health professionals to help employees cope with a suicide. For more information about responding to a suicide in a workplace and helping yourself and others deal with a suicide loss, see the Resources section of this sheet.

Become Involved in a Workplace Suicide Prevention Program

Helping individual employees who may be at risk for suicide is an important part of suicide prevention. As a manager, you can also become involved in an existing workplace suicide prevention program or help start one. You may want to work with the EAP and/or HR Department on this. The key components of a comprehensive program include:

One way you can provide guidance to employees on how to address suicide in the workplace is by giving them the information sheet *The Role of Co-Workers in Preventing Suicide* in the Resources section.

- Policies and procedures to help employees at risk and in crisis
- A plan for responding to a suicide attempt or death in your workplace
- Mental health emergency contact information placed throughout the workplace
- Education and training on mental health, suicide prevention, and stigma reduction for employees
- Specialized suicide prevention training for the workplace's EAP providers and/or HR staff. Established relationships with mental health professionals in the local community.
- A referral guide to resources in your community that offer support and/or treatment for problems related to suicide.
- A work environment that values its employees and promotes respect, open communication, a sense of belonging, and emotional well-being, and that encourages people to seek help when they need it and to support each other.

For more information about developing a workplace suicide prevention program, see *Working Minds: Suicide Prevention in the Workplace* or *ValueOptions Strategic Principles for Suicide Prevention* in the Resources section.

Resources

A Manager's Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace: 10 Action Steps for Dealing with the Aftermath of Suicide
By American Association of Suicidology and the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention in partnership with Crisis Care network and the Carson J. Spencer Foundation (2013)
http://carsonjspencer.org/ManagersGuidebook.pdf
This guide provides clear steps for postvention, with information for workplace leadership on how to respond immediately to a suicide, plan in the short-term for recovery, and consider long-term strategies for helping employees cope. It contains succinct procedures with checklists and flow charts and can be useful to managers at all levels—from a CEO of a large business to a front-line supervisor of a small organization.

Breaking the Silence in the Workplace: A Guide for Employers on Responding to Suicide in the Workplace
By Ciaran Austin of Console and Breffni McGuinness of Irish Hospice Foundation (2012)
http://hospicefoundation.ie/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Breaking-the-Silence-in-the-Workplace-A-Guide-for-Employers-on-Responding-to-Suicide-in-the-Workplace.pdf
This guide book provides information for employers on dealing with suicide deaths among their employees and other people close to them, and addresses suicides that occur in the workplace and also offsite. It also provides guidance for developing and implementing a workplace bereavement policy for suicide.

National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, Workplace Task Force
http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org/task-force/workplace
This task force of the Action Alliance is working on suicide prevention in the workplace. Its webpage includes the goal, objectives, and members of the task force as well as two public service announcements and a directory of suicide prevention resources for employers.

QPR for Businesses and Corporations
QPR Institute (2010)
http://www.qprinstitute.com (Under "QPR for Organizations," click on "Business.")
QPR is centered on the "question, persuade, refer" strategy of suicide prevention training for gatekeepers, including workplace managers. The Institute offers training and information materials tailored for a variety of organizations and workplace settings.

Suicide Survivor Resource Materials and Support Group Directories
American Association of Suicidology (AAS): http://www.suicidology.org/suicide-survivors/suicide-loss-survivors

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP): http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=742A015C-D811-979A-AB84379C813F8D93

Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE): http://www.save.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=EB883CA2-7E90-9BD4-C5E35440BC7761EE

Suicide Warning Signs (wallet card)
By the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (2011)
http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/App_Files/Media/PDF/NSPL_WalletCard.pdf
This wallet-sized card lists the warning signs for suicide and the toll-free number of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

The Role of Co-Workers in Preventing Suicide in the Workplace
By the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (revised 2013)
http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/CoWorkers.pdf
This information sheet helps people in any type of workplace learn how to recognize and respond to the warning signs for suicide in their co-workers.

ValueOptions Strategic Principles for Suicide Prevention
http://www.valueoptions.com/suicide_prev/html%20pages/Support.htm
This website was designed to help employers create a suicide prevention plan for the workplace. It includes materials for managers and employees on suicide prevention and intervention and dealing with mental health issues in the workplace.

Working Minds: Suicide Prevention in the Workplace
By Sally Spencer-Thomas and Rick Ginsberg, Carson J. Spencer Foundation (2009)
http://workingminds.org
This program is designed to help workplace administrators and employees better understand and prevent suicide. It provides informational materials, including a DVD and in-person trainings, and features a toolkit for employers to implement training to help employees learn what to do when facing suicide crises that impact the workplace. Train-the-trainer workshops are available upon request.

Workplace Strategies for Mental Health
http://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/
This website contains information on suicide prevention and intervention as well as focusing on mental health issues in the workplace. The information is tailored to different workplace roles, including managers.

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