

Suicide Awareness

When a worker commits suicide or makes an attempt on his or her life, it can have a devastating effect on the workplace. Team members may struggle to come to terms with the loss or wonder if they could have done something to intervene.

While it is impossible to be certain that your team will never be impacted by suicide, knowing the warning signs may help you recognize when someone is at risk. Consider these factors:

- ▶ **A recent loss.** While a difficult personal loss of any kind can be stressful, a staff member may be especially vulnerable after the suicide of a friend or loved one. A financial setback or job loss may also be a risk factor, especially if the person's sense of self-worth is strongly tied to his or her career or financial status.
- ▶ **A change in behavior, habits, appearance, or work performance.** For instance, if an outgoing person suddenly becomes withdrawn, it may be cause for concern. (Keep in mind that a behavior change could also be a sign of a medical or other personal issue.)
- ▶ **Depression.** In the workplace, you may notice depression through chronic fatigue, talk of hopelessness, attendance problems, missing deadlines, or a lack of concentration. While not all suicidal persons are depressed, many are.
- ▶ **Absence of social support.** Those without a close network of family, friends, and co-workers may have difficulty maintaining resilience when dealing with personal or professional challenges. Individuals who lack strong emotional support may also be at risk.



- ▶ **Multiple simultaneous problems.** A person who is dealing with multiple personal issues at one time (finances, grief, health, legal, etc.) may face greater risk.
- ▶ **Impulsiveness.** Someone who is impulsive may be at more risk of acting on suicidal thoughts. In addition, alcohol or drug use may loosen inhibitions and make a person more prone to engaging in self-harm.
- ▶ **Personal history.** While there is no sure way to predict suicidal behavior, some aspects of a person's history may put them at greater risk, including:
 - Previous suicide attempts
 - A history of moderate to severe depression
 - Alcohol or other drug abuse (of all drugs, alcohol has the greatest risk factor)



- A family history that includes suicide, domestic violence, or substance abuse
- Physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, including bullying, harassment, and social rejection

- ▶ **Putting affairs in order.** Actions like suddenly giving away prized possessions, making funeral plans, or talking about what to do if he or she is “not around” may be an indication of suicidal thoughts or behavior.
- ▶ **Suicidal comments or references.** Statements such as “I can’t go on,” “It’s no use,” or “I’d be better off dead” should be taken seriously.

Don’t assume that the team member is joking around or merely blowing off steam.

A person engaging in a single activity (such as giving away possessions) or having one or two risk factors does not necessarily mean that he or she is contemplating suicide. However, if you observe several of these behaviors in a short period of time, take action. Keep these tips in mind:

- ▶ **Listen to your instincts.** If you are worried about someone’s behavior, or if another team member expresses concern, it’s best to address the situation.
- ▶ **Contact LifeMatters.** The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can assess the situation and guide you through the steps to take if action is warranted. Your HR and Medical departments can also provide assistance and resources.
- ▶ **Avoid becoming overly involved in the worker’s personal situation.** Once you have addressed any immediate risks and made a referral to LifeMatters, take a step back. While it’s important to be compassionate, your focus should be on helping the individual stay on track at work so he or she can maintain stable employment. The structure of a workplace routine can be comforting to someone who is struggling.
- ▶ **Protect privacy.** Information about the situation should only be shared on a need-to-know basis.

Helping someone address suicide concerns is stressful, but you don’t have to face it alone. LifeMatters is available to provide consultation and assistance. In addition, LifeMatters can help you cope with your personal reaction to the situation. Call 24/7/365.

Call the **LifeMatters®** by Empathia Management Consultation Service toll-free anytime. **1-800-367-7474**

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