

What every HR exec needs to know about suicide in the workplace

Suicide can take a tremendous toll in the form of lost productivity and, more importantly, the compromised emotional well-being of your employees.

BY ANNA MITTAG

Nobody thinks suicide will happen to anyone they know--until it does. And when it happens, its impact reaches far beyond family members and loved ones, devastating co-workers, colleagues and supervisors across the company for which the individual worked.

Suicides in the U.S. totaled nearly 45,000 in 2016 (the latest year for which statistics are available), marking a 28 percent rate increase from 1999, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Institute of Mental Health. What's more, the majority of suicide deaths are among working age adults; and for every suicide, at least 20 other people are profoundly traumatized.

Despite the rise in suicides and the number of people affected, the topic is still so taboo that it remains difficult to talk about, especially at work. Yet employers must, because suicide can take a tremendous toll in the form of lost productivity and, more importantly, the compromised emotional well-being of your employees.

The good news is that stable businesses are well positioned to provide employees a sense of



The majority of suicide deaths are among working age adults, and for every suicide, at least 20 other people are profoundly traumatized. (Photo: Shutterstock)

community and purpose, structure in the day, as well as resources such as an EAP to help workers get back on their feet. This can be beneficial whether they survived the loss of a loved one through suicide, suspect someone they work with might be considering suicide, or even may be considering suicide themselves. Conversely, when a business is unable or unwilling to provide support and resources, the lack of assistance can contribute to suicide risk.

One in 20 people think about suicide at some level every day, according to clinical psychologist and suicide loss survivor Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas, who has helped lead the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention and the American Association for Suicidology. In recent months, I've had the privilege of working with Dr. Spencer-Thomas on a series of employee-facing videos that address suicide in the workplace ([see a sample here](#)); many of the insights shared in this article are drawn from our video series.

“Outside of work, suicidal thoughts could be fueled by relationship or financial issues,” Dr. Spencer-Thomas says. “At work, if the person strongly identifies with their work self, suicidal thoughts may stem from a humiliating experience such as a demotion or bullying, or from a sense of unmanageable expectations. Unfortunately, people living with unbearable psychological pain don't have physical markers that we can see, like a cast or a bandage. So, very often, they're able to mask their pain with a façade.”

Creating a framework of support

Training all levels of employees to recognize suicide warning signs and what to do about them should be baked into a company's culture, says Dr. Spencer-Thomas.

“Baking” suicide prevention training into workplace culture requires corporate leadership setting the tone that mental health is a priority, she explains. “Rather than just putting up signs

in break rooms and having lunch-and-learn workshops on well-being, nothing parallels authentic, compassionate communication from the top.”

While backing from top level management is key to creating and maintaining a culture protective against suicide and its effects, they're often going to be the last to learn about an employee with life-ending thoughts. Even by the time news of a struggling employee trickles to HR, it's usually because a critical performance issue needs to be addressed.

“Co-workers are the ones who'll first notice someone who isn't themselves,” says Dr. Spencer-Thomas. “Ideally, you want co-workers to be aware and trained to take action.”

Among the warning signs an effective training program should cover:

- Extreme mood swings, reckless behavior, or new patterns of behavior (i.e., irritability in an otherwise cheerful person, lethargy in an otherwise energetic person)
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Veiled threats, references to not being able to continue, or even a mention of the end of life in a seemingly casual way
- Preparatory behavior such as getting wills and/or finances in order.

Effective training also will teach employees how to have conversations with someone who is considering suicide without bumping up against disability laws. First and foremost, Dr. Spencer-Thomas advises that you directly,

yet compassionately, ask the person you're concerned about whether they are considering suicide. "Don't wait for the perfect moment because it won't come," she says. "It will always be scary and uncomfortable, and you may feel embarrassed if you're wrong. But, what if you err on the side of not asking, and they die?"

In addition to reaching out to employees who display risk of dying by suicide, employers also need to proactively provide for survivors of suicide loss. That means having strategies and tactics in place to support employees if a loved one or colleague has died through suicide.

"No one is mentally prepared to deal with the aftermath of a suicide," Dr. Spencer-Thomas says. "People tend to want to pretend that it didn't happen; meanwhile it's on everyone's mind, and not for a short period of time."

Simple humanitarian actions can help people cope, she explains. "Bring them chicken soup, show up at a memorial service. Give them time to work through their grief."

Beyond helping struggling employees (suicide loss survivors as well as those at risk of suicide), progressive employers consider the mental health needs of two other groups. The first is

independent contractors and freelancers. With the gig economy surging and the traditional workplace transforming, the mental health needs of the growing number of remote workers also will impact a company's productivity and culture.

Prospective employees comprise the second group. "We operate in a brain-based economy," Dr. Spencer-Thomas remarks, "and to be viable, managers in every industry must address issues surrounding mental illness and suicide if they want to recruit and retain young talent who value employers that respect and encourage their total well-being. Empathetically addressing these issues sends a message to potential employees that the employer cares about the well-being of its workers."

As an HR executive, you can't wish away suicide, but you can treat it like other unexpected death in the workplace: with concern, compassion and open communication. Any deviation from that speaks volumes to the people left behind.

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