

How To Help A Co-Worker Who May Be Suicidal

A Thrive Worldwide Resource

If you have never had thoughts of ending your life, it can be difficult to relate with someone who is.

This short information sheet will outline common warning signs and ways to help someone who is suicidal. It is always important to take your co-worker (or anyone else) seriously if they say something about ending their life or not wanting to live.

It's normal to feel uncomfortable in asking someone about suicide. However, you cannot make someone suicidal by asking them straightforward and caring questions.

Unfortunately, suicide and thinking about suicide is more common than you might think. According to the World Health Organisation, over one million people commit suicide every year and it's the 10th leading cause of death globally. Aid and development work often requires staff to live and work away from home in extremely difficult environments without their normal social network or access to services. This may increase a person's risk of a mood disorder and suicide.

WARNING SIGNS

Most, but not all, suicidal people will give warning signs of their intentions. Co-workers may be the first to notice changes in behavior or the first to hear about someone's suicidal thoughts. The following are a few examples of changes in behaviour which are warning signs to watch for.

Talking about suicide. This is a cry for help, take it seriously.

- Increased isolation and withdrawal from others
- Talking about feelings of hopelessness, despair, self-doubt, self-hatred which they say feel unbearable.
- Risky or self-destructive behaviours (substance abuse, reckless driving, unsafe sex).
- Loss of interest in daily activities, neglect of personal appearance, significant changes in sleeping or eating patterns.
- Getting affairs in order or saying goodbyes where there is no scheduled change in circumstances,

e.g. moving jobs or location.

Mental health concerns, depression in particular, often plays a role in suicide. Depression may cause distortions in thinking that impact someone's ability to imagine a solution to their suffering.

“

Most, but not all, suicidal people will give warning signs of their intentions.

If you are concerned about your colleague, ask them about any continuing concerns about possible mental illness, alcoholism or drug abuse. Research shows that at least 90 percent of all people who die by suicide suffer from a mental or mood disorders. Also be aware that changing or starting a new antidepressant medication may actually worsen depression symptoms in the short term.

Check if they have had a change in medication recently (last 4 months). It is OK to ask in a supportive and kind way - further research shows that those feeling suicidal often wish that people would ask how they are.

TALKING TO YOUR CO-WORKER

Speaking with someone about suicide can be uncomfortable. It is best to be direct and approach the conversation in a caring and non-judgmental way. Those thinking about suicide are often feeling ashamed so, whilst you can't promise absolute confidentiality, you can offer privacy, dignity and the opportunity to get help.

Ways to start a conversation about suicide: 1

- "I've been feeling concerned about you lately."
- "Recently, I've noticed some differences in you and wondered how you are doing."
- "I wanted to check in with you because you haven't

seemed yourself lately."

Questions you can ask:

- "Are you having thoughts about suicide?"
- "When did you begin feeling like this?"
- "Did something happen that made you start feeling this way?"
- "How can I best support you right now?"
- "Have you thought about getting help?"

What you can say that helps:

- "You're not alone in this. I'm here for you."
- "You may not believe it now, but the way you're feeling will change."
- "I may not be able to understand exactly how you feel, but I care about you and want to help."
- "When you want to give up, tell yourself you will hold off for just one more day, hour, minute—whatever you can manage."

HELP YOUR CO-WORKER TO FIND SUPPORT

Help your co-worker speak to a staff health advisor or any other medical staff on your team. If they prefer to not tell anyone else in the organisation, support them in finding other resources. This could include:

- Calling home or a good friend
- Accompanying them to a visit to the doctor or psychologist
- Finding a support group
- Helping them make adjustments at work or lifestyle

If you feel that your co-worker is at high risk for suicide, find them professional support as soon as possible. High risk means that they are thinking about suicide and have a thought through plan, (e.g. the means, the timing), and the intention to commit suicide. In this case, make sure that someone is with them continuously, and help them to seek treatment with a doctor or at an emergency care unit immediately.

As part of your organisation's health and safety procedures, there should be highly visible medical service providers and emergency numbers posted at the office. These should be checked periodically.

Understand how your organisation's health insurance works.

In the long term, encourage your colleague to seek treatment for a mood disorder or any other underlying cause of suicidal thinking. This could be through psychotherapies, a support group or medications.

Recovering from suicidal thoughts may take time and different treatments and support may be needed.

If you have supported a colleague through a period of suicidal ideation, or suicide, make sure that you are taking care of yourself as well. Increase your self-care practices, keep in close connection with friends, and consider debriefing with a professional.

OTHER RESOURCES

These phone lines provide 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress.

- **Samaritans**
Dial 116 123 (from UK) or 08457909090 (UK Based, call from anywhere)
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**
1-800-273-8255 (US Based, call from anywhere)

Online support:

- **Global Aid Worker Website**
Depression, Anxiety and Suicide: bit.ly/2MqrlYv
- **Rethink Mental Illness Website**
Suicidal thoughts: How to support someone:
bit.ly/2Ybp4sp
- **Helpguide.org Website**
Suicide prevention:
bit.ly/3ca63yU

Thank you for accessing this resource.
For more resources and dedicated support:
visit www.thrive-worldwide.org
email info@thrive-worldwide.org

Resource Author
Ben Porter

Last Updated
October 2018

Footnotes

(1) Adapted from helpguide.org



ThriveWorldwide