How to Navigate Workplace Conversations around Suicide

Suicide remains a widespread health concern, persisting among the top three leading causes of death up to age 34 and top five up to age 44, only declining as other physiological health concerns grow in prevalence as we age. With workplace suicides also on the incline and adults spending most of their lives at work, there's an opportunity for the workplaces to play a preventative role—in fact, an inevitable one.

Suicide can feel like a scary and challenging topic for many, especially in the workplace. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be. Here is our basic guide for navigating suicide in the workplace setting.

1. Know your role.

In most cases, your role is to simply be a supportive colleague and connect the individual to resources or those better-equipped to help them (such as a suicide hotline).

Sometimes, leadership, managers, HR, legal, and similar "representatives of a company" are legally required to report possible risks of suicide for the safety of the individual, though this can vary by region.

In all instances, it's never your role to diagnose or treat the individual (unless that is literally your job as a health provider).

2. Familiarize yourself with the issue.

Cultivating a foundational awareness can better equip you to navigate the issue in a productive way if it ever presents itself.

Be aware of risk factors. There are a variety of factors at any workplace that can contribute to poor mental health and risk of suicide. This includes:

- Low safety and security (e.g., low job security or pay)
- Access to lethal means (e.g., medications, firearms, fall hazards)
- Unhealthy work practices (e.g., long hours, toxic behaviors, bullying, isolation)

Be aware of at-risk populations. There are industries and groups of people that display higher rates of suicide.

- Industries (e.g., construction, law enforcement)
- Young adults under 24 and older adults over age 45
- Crisis survivors (e.g., from loss, disaster, veterans)
- Marginalized communities like Indigenous American and LGBTQ+ populations

That said, it's important to understand that this data does not speak to the nature or character of these groups—rather, the social cultural norms associated with these populations and how they are treated can create conditions that may ultimately lead to higher risk.

Be aware of common myths. Finally, being conscientious about the realities of suicide can help inform the way in which you talk about and navigate the topic in a healthy and supportive way. Remember:

Talking about suicide does not increase the risk of it happening. It instead offers the opportunity to increase awareness, have a productive dialogue, reduce stigma, and normalize help-seeking.

Suicide is never someone's "fault," nor are individuals selfish, attention-seeking, or "crazy." Instead, individuals are often navigating pain, hopelessness, loss, and more. It's in these moments that we need to extend compassion and support.

3. Navigate and respond.

If you ever find yourself in a conversation where a possible risk of self-harm or suicide arises, here is a step-by-step guide to follow when navigating the conversation.

1. **Notice the signs.** If someone is at risk of suicide, you can watch out for warning signs, including:
   - Talking about being a burden
   - Being isolated
   - Increased anxiety
   - Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
   - Increased substance use
   - Looking for a way to access lethal means
   - Increased anger or rage
   - Extreme mood swings
   - Expressing hopelessness
   - Sleeping too little or too much
   - Talking or posting about wanting to die
   - Making plans for suicide

   Of course, this can be an endlessly gray area. But any mention that circles suicide or suicidal thoughts, wanting to hurt them self, or not wanting to be around anymore or feeling hopeless about life warrants moving to the next step.

2. **Ask.** The best way to evaluate risk is to literally ask "Are you having thoughts of suicide?" or "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" It can feel uncomfortable asking so directly, and that's completely okay. Given the possible risks involved, we encourage people to embrace the discomfort to prioritize safety. You can consider softening the language like prefacing with, "This may be completely wrong, but…" or "I may be totally assuming, but…" You can even say, "I read an article recently, so it's been on my mind." If the other person responds with "no," then you can continue the conversation as normal. However, if they say "yes" (or anything that may indicate a yes), it's worth continuing to the next step.

3. **Listen and signal compassion.** If someone does share that they are having thoughts of suicide or wanting to kill them self, create space for that person to share more. For many, they have likely grappled with feelings of shame, hopelessness, isolation, and other feelings. This is a time where you can convey a space of safety, that you hear their experiences, and that you are there for them. Consider statements like, "Tell me more about that," "That sounds really hard," "There's no shame in that," or "I'm here for you."

4. **Be mindful.** There are a few things to be mindful of that may depend on the context. For example, saying you understand can differ depending on the context of the conversation. That said, if you have personally experienced suicidal thoughts or have attempted suicide in the past, sharing briefly about your experience could be one way to create safety by being vulnerable yourself. Promising confidentiality is another tricky topic. Many leaders and managers have a legal obligation to breach confidentiality and contact crisis support in these instances. The lines here may vary by employer, so it's best to reach out to your HR or similar team to understand the nuances here.

5. **Refer.** At this point, it's best to connect the person to those best-equipped to support the individual. This can be the suicide hotline (988) or 2-1-1. In a workplace context, this may be an HR team member who can help connect the individual with the company's employee assistance program (EAP) to get set up with a counselor. The main goal is to get the person in touch with a professional who can navigate the nuances and provide further, ongoing support.

After connecting the individual to crisis support, your immediate role has been fulfilled, and you may no longer be involved as the individual hopefully gets the support they need. Still, remember to take care of yourself. Conversations like these can feel intense and challenging. Taking a break, signing off early, or finding support from friends and family can be helpful (keeping confidentially in mind, of course).

4. Looking forward.

While suicide may represent the most critical point of a crisis, it's important to recognize that there is a huge spectrum of opportunities to identify and explore meaningful supports before it ever reaches this point. There are tangible things anyone can do in their everyday life that can create safe and supportive environments:

- **Create safety through ally-ship** by being vulnerable, sharing your own story of mental health, and naming mental health and suicide as critical issues are helpful starting

points. What's more, talk about suicide in healthy ways (like debunking the myths we mentioned).

- **Check-in routinely.** Particularly if you are a manager or leader, make sure you take dedicated time to check-in with your team members and how they are doing. You don't have to ask about suicide directly every time, but creating a dedicated and expected space for people to simply share honestly and authentically around how they're doing ensures that if anyone does experience a crisis, they have a time and space to share (and hopefully, the feeling of safety to so as you demonstrate your allyship).
- **Contribute to healthy organizational cultures.** Understanding that work can play a risk factor in suicide means that cultures of safety, inclusion and support, along with healthy and sustainable cultures of work itself are both things we can proactively address in meaningful ways. This is particularly important for leaders and managers. For more information around how to do this, check out the U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being.

Suicide is preventable, and anyone can play a meaningful role—including colleagues, managers, and workplaces. Whether it's creating the psychological safety to genuinely share, to navigating conversations with care, to championing mental health initiatives in your workplace, there's a lot we can collectively do.