



**** Disclaimer: Please note that this article discusses sensitive topics related to suicide. If you are struggling with suicidal thoughts or have experienced the loss of someone to suicide please be aware that this content may be emotionally distressing. Please do not hesitate to reach out to us at 800-526-3485 if you feel like you need support. ****

How Employers Can Lead In Suicide Postvention as Prevention



It's OK to talk about suicide. The more we do so, the more we break down barriers that stop people from feeling safe enough to seek help. Vital strides have been made to open the dialogue on suicide. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) Suicide Prevention Day theme for 2024-2026 is "Changing the Narrative on Suicide" with the call to action "Start the Conversation" about suicide, including

actions employers can take to facilitate open and honest discussions. In addition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released a 2024 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, which builds upon the 2012 strategy with a "whole-of-society" approach and offers an expanded workplace section. These leading organizations, among many others, are increasingly calling on the critical role of all employers in suicide prevention. The majority of people who die by suicide are of working age (18-65), which makes the workplace uniquely positioned to reduce suicide risk. Recent discussions among workplace mental health experts have focused on how one step every employer can take is developing a strategy for when suicide crises occur.

Create a Suicide Postvention Policy

Each suicide has far-reaching impacts, including an average of six people being intimately impacted as "suicide loss survivors," and newer research showing an average of 135 people who knew the person and were "exposed," such as colleagues. Importantly, someone does not need to have a close relationship with an employee that died to be affected, and it is not possible for workplaces to know exactly who will be affected and to what extent. Therefore, workplaces need a suicide postvention plan, defined as support offered after a suicide crisis (e.g., death, attempt, behavior/discussion), to have a profound effect on preventing more suicides. To do so, employers can create a written policy for postvention support that ensures people affected are reached in a timely, thorough, and clear manner.

Include a Postvention Communications Plan

It can be challenging to know what to say when a suicide crisis occurs. Sometimes, employers scramble in the moment and do not say anything at all. Not talking about suicide perpetuates the message that it is taboo, ultimately causing employees who may be suffering to remain silent and avoid reaching out for help. Other times, employers worry that by speaking about suicide, they increase the risk of suicide contagion. However, there are safe and sensitive messaging guidelines



to both encourage people to seek help and reduce contagion. An effective communications plan considers the following:

- Connect with the family in a timely, sensitive, and empathetic manner
- Abide by safe reporting on suicide and recovery-friendly language to avoid sensationalizing. Leave out information on the method used, location, notes, and photographs
- Release a statement that respects the family's wishes, offers condolences, shares resources for support, and any changes to schedules
- Equip senior leadership to talk about how they have personally been affected by the suicide to demonstrate it is not a sign of weakness to express feelings
- Distribute suicide grief and bereavement-specific resources to employees, including counseling, support groups, and hotlines, such as 988, the U.S. Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Include information on what to do if you think someone is struggling

Center Compassion in Your Postvention Policy

Although suicide is prevalent, it is important to remember that there is a person behind every statistic. Employers should infuse compassion in all aspects of their postvention policy to ensure people are treated kindly and have the space they need to support themselves and others. Consider the following to build a compassionate environment:

- Offer to give the employee's personal items to their family
- Be flexible with bereavement leave policies
- Allow all employees time to attend memorials
- Offer tips to Human Resources and managers on how to practice sensitivity and empathy
- Foster meaning-making opportunities for employees to process responses (e.g., memorials, donations, getting involved)
- Prioritize your employees' wellness first. Once grief needs have been addressed, which can take months but depends on the circumstances, employees will be more ready to receive suicide prevention-focused efforts, such as a training

Recognize Signs of Struggling Employees

Employers should be vigilant in recognizing signs that an employee might be struggling. Key indicators can include changes in behavior, mood swings, withdrawal from colleagues, decreased work performance, or increased absenteeism. Understanding these signs can help in providing timely support. Managers should be trained to notice these signs and encourage employees to seek help when needed. Regular check-ins and creating a supportive work environment can also help employees feel more comfortable reaching out for assistance.

Clarify Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP)'s Role in Critical Postvention Steps



Oftentimes, employers rely on their Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to provide crisis responses. This reliance on an external provider can make it unclear what the actual postvention policy and response are. To demystify and ensure quality, ask questions around:

- Immediate response: What is your protocol and timeline for responding?
- Communication: Do you assist with communicating and provide templates?
- On-site support: Do you offer on-site counseling services for employees?
- Counseling: Do you provide counseling and therapy services for affected employees and family?
- Support groups: Do you facilitate support groups for employees coping with grief and thoughts of suicide?
- Support for leaders: Do you provide training for managers and Human Resources on how to support their teams?
- Education: Do you provide any educational materials or resources on coping with grief and bereavement?
- Family support: What support services are available for the family?

Support Managers During Postvention

Managers have a complex role in supporting their staff and their own mental health in the aftermath of a suicide crisis. Taking extra steps to support managers helps alleviate some of the pressure:

- Host a specific debrief with managers after a suicide to provide additional information about how to support their staff, identify potential signs of distress, and share information about mental health resources
- Partner with external resources to take the burden off managers
- Highlight that difficulties after bereavement are not limited to emotions, but also include problems with concentration and motivation
- Give managers latitude to make changes in workflow, such as additional time off or changing deadlines
- Encourage managers to be a role model for healthy grieving and acknowledge their own feelings regarding the loss of a colleague

Address Workplace Factors That May Undermine Postvention Efforts

Even if you create a thorough postvention policy, certain workplace factors can undermine postvention efforts by increasing suicide risk and decreasing help-seeking behavior. For example, a company culture that does not make employees feel comfortable taking time off for an appointment in the workday can prevent people from seeing the on-site grief counselor you bring in. High stress and pressure jobs with long hours can hinder employee coping and grieving. To alleviate this, educate leadership on the increased suicide risk for employees working long hours and provide protected time off for all employees. A culture of invulnerability where it's not "okay to not be okay" increases the chances that a struggling employee will try to push through and endure at work as opposed to reaching out for support. If employees feel they cannot show emotions in the workplace to begin with, the chances of them thinking it is okay to show they are



affected negatively is low. This leads to silent suffering. Having leaders model vulnerability by making a leadership statement of support after a suicide crisis, promoting help-seeking as a sign of strength, normalizing complicated feelings, and storytelling of lived experience helps break down this facade.

Revisit Suicide Prevention Efforts

After employers develop a suicide postvention policy, it can be useful to take a step back and develop or enhance a suicide prevention strategy. Some employers focus on overall wellbeing and mental health, without having a specific plan to prevent suicide. In-depth guidance is available, such as the Comprehensive Blueprint for Workplace Suicide Prevention by the National Action Alliance, which outlines eight areas to incorporate, as well as the Quick Start Guide, which breaks down the nine practices in the National Guidelines for Workplace Suicide Prevention into first steps employers can take to build momentum. Remember to promote the positive narrative and focus on solutions, such as actions people can take to prevent suicide, as opposed to problems. Include prevention-focused data, such as the number of people that reached out for help, to inspire hope and encourage others to do the same.

Every Employer Can Start Today

The WHO has a goal to reduce the global suicide rate by one-third by 2030. Employers are pivotal in this process to create workplaces that effectively respond to suicide crises and prevent further risk through comprehensive and compassionate suicide postvention approaches. Suicide is preventable, and we all have a role we can play in it. In honor of September as Suicide Prevention Month, it is a great time to get started with a workplace campaign to reinforce that prevention works, effective help is available, and it's OK to talk about suicide. Within your campaign, educate employees on what to do if they see signs of suicide.

Educate employees on recognizing signs of distress and how to access support, including your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), peer-led support groups, and hotlines such as the 24/7 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988.

Solutions EAP provides free, short-term, and confidential counseling for employees and their families.

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