The Role of
Co-Workers
in Preventing Suicide in the Workplace

Tiana had worked with Jennifer for three years. Although they were not good friends, they got along well at work. In the past few months, Tiana noticed that Jennifer seemed different from her usual self. Typically, she was calm and focused on her work. But now she seemed either agitated or really tired and would snap at co-workers about little things. In addition, Tiana overheard her crying and arguing on the phone with her boyfriend.

Because Tiana was concerned about Jennifer, she asked the Human Resources (HR) Department for advice. They recommended that she reach out to Jennifer and suggest to her that she meet with HR. If Jennifer didn't agree to this, they suggested that Tiana give Jennifer a resource sheet listing the mental health professionals in the workplace's Employee Assistance Program (EAP). When Tiana talked with Jennifer, she was initially reluctant to open up. But Tiana persisted and let her know that she was concerned about her health and was there to support her. She said that she had encouraged others with similar problems to seek counseling, and they later told her how helpful it had been. Jennifer agreed to take the mental health resources sheet as a way to start. When Tiana followed up with Jennifer the next week, she learned that Jennifer had made an appointment with a mental health professional.

Key Steps to Reduce Suicide Risk among Your Co-Workers:

- Understand why suicide prevention fits with your role as a co-worker

- Identify co-workers who may be at risk for suicide

- Respond to co-workers who may be at risk for suicide

- Be prepared to respond to a suicide death

Understand Why Suicide Prevention Fits with Your Role as a Co-Worker

In the vignette above, Tiana played an important role by encouraging Jennifer to get help. She cared about her co-worker and wanted the best for her. As a co-worker, you are well positioned to notice if someone at work is struggling and to take the first steps in assisting him or her to get help. You spend a lot of time at work and have day-to-day contact with those around you. You get to know your co-workers over time, can observe changes in their behavior, and may see them at critical times in their life. In addition, workplaces often have a structure, such as an EAP or HR Department, to which you can refer co-workers to help them find a mental health professional.

You can also help foster a sense of community, belonging, and respect in your workplace. Feeling connected to a community promotes emotional well-being and can decrease risk for suicide (Rodgers, 2011).

SPRC

Sources of Help for Employees

Employee Assistance Program (EAP): Many medium- to large-sized workplaces have EAPs. These programs provide confidential counseling and referrals for individual employees and their household members who have personal difficulties, such as mental health, substance abuse, health, work, or family/relationship problems that impact their ability to function. EAP professionals have significant training in assessment, referral, and short-term counseling.

Human Resources (HR) Department: Most workplaces have an HR Department, responsible for the hiring, training, and retention of employees. HR staff are concerned with the overall welfare of employees in the workplace and can take initial steps to help employees obtain confidential assistance with problems that may impact their work.

Identify Co-Workers Who May Be At Risk for Suicide

Be alert to problems that increase suicide risk

You may notice problems facing your co-workers that may put them at risk for suicide. There are a large number of risk factors for suicide. Some of the most significant ones are:

- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Mood and anxiety disorders, e.g., depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Access to a means to kill oneself (i.e., lethal means)

Suicide risk is usually greater among people with more than one risk factor. For individuals who are already at risk, a "triggering" event causing shame or despair may make them more likely to attempt suicide. These events may include relationship problems or breakups, problems at work, financial hardships, legal difficulties, and worsening health. Keep in mind that most people with risk factors will not attempt suicide.

(Adapted from Rodgers, 2011 and SPRC, 2008)

Watch for signs of immediate risk for suicide

There are some behaviors that may mean a person is at immediate risk for suicide. These three should prompt immediate action:

- **Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself**
- **Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun**
- **Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live**

Other behaviors may also indicate a serious risk, especially if the behavior is new; has increased; and/or seems related to a painful event, loss, or change. They are:

Know the Facts

Suicide touches everyone—but especially working age adults.

- **Suicide takes the lives of about 38,000 Americans each year (CDC, 2010).**

- **The majority of the suicide deaths in the United States are among working age adults (ages 24–64), especially men (CDC, 2010).**

- **Each year over 8 million adults think seriously about taking their life, and over 1 million make an attempt (NSDUH, 2011).**

However, there is help and hope when individuals and workplaces join forces to prevent suicide.

- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

(Adapted from National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, [n.d.])

Respond to People Who May Be At Risk for Suicide

Be prepared by knowing who to contact in your workplace if a co-worker is in distress or suicidal. The EAP and HR Department are the appropriate first points of contact. If you do not have an EAP or HR Department, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline can provide guidance and referrals to mental health professionals.

Take action if you encounter someone who is at immediate risk.

If a co-worker is:

- **Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself**
- **Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun**
- **Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live**

Take the following steps right away:

1. If the danger for self-harm seems imminent, call 911.
2. Stay with the person (or make sure the person is in a private, secure place with another caring person) until you can get further help.
3. Contact the EAP or HR Department and they will help you decide what to do. Provide any background information that may be helpful.
4. If you do not have an EAP or HR Department, contact the Lifeline and follow their guidance.
5. Continue to stay in contact with the person and pay attention to how he or she is doing.

Reach out to someone who may be at risk

The steps just covered are an appropriate response to a co-worker showing immediate warning signs of suicide. To help other co-workers who may be at risk for suicide, you can take the steps below, depending on what feels most comfortable to you:

- Talk with your EAP or HR Department or call the Lifeline about your concerns.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

The Lifeline is a 24-hour toll-free phone line for people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. The phone number is 1-800-273-TALK (8255). For a Lifeline wallet-sized card listing the warning signs of suicide and the toll-free number, go to http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/App_Files/Media/PDF/NSPL_WalletCard.pdf

- Reach out to the person:
  - o Ask how he or she is doing.
  - o Listen without judging.
  - o Mention changes you have noticed in your co-worker's behavior and say that you are concerned about his or her emotional well-being.
  - o Suggest that he or she talk with someone in the EAP, the HR Department, or another mental health professional. Offer to help arrange an appointment and go with the person.
- Continue to stay in contact with the person and pay attention to how he or she is doing.

Be Prepared to Respond to a Suicide Death

It is also important for you and your co-workers to support each other in coping with a suicide of someone from work even if it does not occur on the job. Such an event can have a profound emotional effect on others in the workplace. Some people may struggle with guilt and unanswered questions about what they think they should have done to help, and some may experience depression or suicidal thoughts themselves. People experiencing a suicide loss usually need the same things that people who experience loss from other causes of death need: support, time to grieve, and space to share stories of the person they love.

Ask your EAP or HR Department if it offers any counseling or referrals to mental health professionals to help employees cope with a suicide. For more information on helping yourself and others deal with a suicide loss, see *Suicide Survivor Resource Materials and Support Group Directories* in the Resources section of this sheet.

> *Address Cultural Differences*
>
> Differences in cultural background can affect how people respond to problems, the behaviors they show, and their attitudes toward suicide, as well as how they feel about sharing personal information and seeking help. It is important to be aware of possible differences and tailor your responses accordingly. For example, individuals from some cultures may not be open to seeing a mental health provider, but they may be willing to talk with a faith community leader or traditional healer.

Resources

QPR Institute for Businesses and Corporations
QPR Institute (2010)
http://www.qprinstitute.com (Under "QPR for Organizations," click on "Business.")
QPR is centered on the "question, persuade, refer" strategy of suicide prevention training for gatekeepers, including workplace employees. The Institute offers training and information materials tailored for a variety of organizations and workplace settings.

Suicide Survivor Resource Materials and Support Group Directories
American Association of Suicidology (AAS): http://www.suicidology.org/suicide-survivors/suicide-loss-survivors

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP): http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=742A015C-D811-979A-AB84379C813F8D93

Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE): http://www.save.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=EB883CA2-7E90-9BD4-C5E35440BC7761EE

Suicide Warning Signs (wallet card)
By the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (2011)
http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/App_Files/Media/PDF/NSPL_WalletCard.pdf
This wallet-sized card lists the warning signs for suicide and the toll-free number of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

The Role of Managers in Preventing Suicide in the Workplace

By the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (revised 2013)

http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/managers.pdf

The materials available from this webpage contain information for employees as well as employers on suicide prevention and intervention and dealing with mental health issues in the workplace.

ValueOptions Strategic Principles for Suicide Prevention

http://www.valueoptions.com/suicide_prev/html%20pages/Support.htm

This website was designed to help employers create a suicide prevention plan for the workplace. It includes materials for managers and employees on suicide prevention and intervention and related mental health issues.

Working Minds: Suicide Prevention in the Workplace

By Sally Spencer-Thomas and Rick Ginsberg, Carson J. Spencer Foundation (2009)

http://workingminds.org

This program is designed to help workplace administrators and employees better understand and prevent suicide. It provides informational materials, including a DVD, and in-person trainings, and features a toolkit for employers to implement training to help employees learn what to do when facing suicide crises that impact the workplace.

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