Workplace Suicides Meeting Kit

SUICIDE AND THE WORKPLACE

Suicide is an unfortunate reality in today's society. The rate at which individuals are taking their own life has increased over the last decade. Suicides in the workplace have mirrored this increase.

Over two-thirds of the American population participates in the workforce; we often spend more waking time working each week than we do with our families. When a workplace is working well, it is often a place of belonging and purpose.

We need to widen our lens from seeing suicide only within a mental health framework to a broader public health one. In other words, when suicide and suicidal intensity are seen only as the consequence of a mental health condition, the only change agents are mental health professionals, and the call to action becomes a "personal issue" that people take care of with their providers—but not all problems will be solved by getting employees to counselors.

HOW TO DEAL WITH SUICIDAL FEELINGS

If you are dealing with suicidal thoughts or feelings it is important to know that there is help. These thoughts and feelings can be fixed.

- Know that your emotions are not fixed. How you feel now is not necessarily how you will feel tomorrow or next week.
- Promise not to do anything right now. Put time between thoughts and actions.
- Avoid drugs and alcohol.
- Make your home safe or go somewhere that you feel safe.
- Do not keep suicidal thoughts to yourself. There is always someone who you can share these thoughts or feelings with. (If you do not think you can share these thoughts with anyone around you, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline toll free 24 hours a day 1-800-273-8255.)

UNIVERSAL PREVENTION

Supporting workers through tough times fosters a sense of loyalty that helps lift morale and retention. The promotion of mental health is an investment in a company's greatest asset: its workers.

There are many prevention strategies that do not take much effort but yield tremendous results. **Here are seven steps employers can take to promote mental health and prevent suicide:**

Build a Better Workplace: Establish a flexible workplace in which “mental health days”, telecommuting, and flexible scheduling are part of the culture of a mentally healthy workplace and are written into policy. Define a clear no-tolerance policy for harassment, bullying, or intimidation, and ensure that the policy is communicated and enforced at all levels.

Develop Fully-Engaged Workers: Encourage employees to work in areas of strength and in ways the allow them to be strongly committed to meaningful work. Workers who feel connected to their teammates and feel they belong to something bigger than themselves often take turns making sacrifices for the greater good.

Reward Mental Wellness: Just as workplaces offer incentive programs for nutrition and fitness, workplaces can also create motivation and opportunities to obtain optimal mental health. For example, employees can earn points when they take workshops on how to reduce stress or improve sleep.

Change the Conversation through Social Marketing

Develop a multimedia campaign that lets people know they are not alone if they are thinking about suicide and that many resources exist to help. Employees can be encouraged to make use of resources such as the Lifeline’s 24-hour, toll-free, confidential suicide prevention hotline.

Offer Educational Programs on Mental Illness: Employee assistance professionals or other local mental health service professionals can provide “lunch-and-learn” sessions that increase awareness about the signs and symptoms of depression, bipolar disorder, alcohol dependence, and other mental illnesses that can lead to suicide. By offering stories of recovery and successful treatment, these presentations offer hope and modeling that treatment works.

Reintegration and Return to Work: When people have experienced a suicide crisis – a suicide attempt or the loss of a loved one – their lives are often turned upside down. When a workplace is sensitive to their return-to-work needs, the transition supports their recovery rather than adds to the distress. People may know what they need to get back on their feet, and, by empowering them to be part of the reintegration plan, workplaces demonstrate respect that builds trust. Staff may feel they are walking on eggshells and may not know how to help. Simply asking the returning employee what support they need may be effective.

Support Safe Bereavement: When a suicide affects a workplace, employers should not underestimate the impact of this event. Vulnerable employees who over-identify with the deceased person may become more at risk for suicidal behavior themselves. On the other hand, thwarting bereavement and memorialization efforts usually backfires. For example, employers who are unsure of how to handle the trauma and grief that comes with a suicide death may try to get things “back to normal” as quickly as possible. Workplaces should honor the life of the person lost without glamorizing or romanticizing the death. Workplaces should treat a death by suicide as they do other types of death that impact their staff. If it is the culture of the workplace to send cards and flowers for other types of death, then cards and flowers should be sent to the grieving family bereaved by suicide. If the tradition is to put an obituary of a deceased colleague in the company newsletter, then the same practice should be allowed for a colleague who died by suicide.

FINAL WORD

Whether you are dealing with these thoughts or someone else close to you is, take them seriously. Do not do anything sudden when dealing with these thoughts. Take the time and seek out help. It is important to understand that many people are dealing with these feelings and thoughts every day and someone in our workplace may be one of them.