Deer Oaks EAP Services

EAP SUPERVISOR ENHANCEMENT NEWSLETTER

WHAT'S INSIDE:

DEER OAKS EAP PRESENTS:
Supervisor Excellence Webinar Series

Transitioning from Staff Member to Supervisor

Date: November 14, 2022

Time: 1:00-2:00 PM CT   **REGISTER**

Why Organizations Should Invest in a Suicide-Prevention Program

National Suicide Prevention Week (NSPW) is an annual week-long campaign in the United States to inform and engage health professionals and the general public about suicide prevention and warning signs of suicide. By drawing attention to the problem of suicide in the United States, the campaign also strives to reduce the stigma surrounding the topic, as well as encourage the pursuit of mental health assistance and support people who have attempted suicide. National Suicide Prevention Week begins Sunday, September 4th and runs through Saturday, September 10th.

Having a proactive suicide program can help an organization take care of employee mental health and boost productivity. This article explores how organizations can prevent suicide and offer support to employees who may be vulnerable.

When people hear of a suicide, they are quick to attribute it to a single factor: The person took their life because of a failed relationship, because of huge financial problems, or because of not being promoted at work. The truth is that suicide is a complex phenomenon that is based on several factors. A person may contemplate suicide because of several challenging situations that he or she may be facing: stress at work, lack of job satisfaction, problems with relationships or family, self-image issues, financial loss, anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues. The combined stress of these challenges could make the person consider suicide.

Suicides are usually a hidden problem, as employees rarely want to speak about it. There are several fears that keep people from reaching out for help:

- "What if my boss finds out?"
- "Will I lose my promotion and bonus?"
- "How will my colleagues and employer treat me once they find out?"
- "Will I lose my job?"

Due to these fears, employees may not share their thoughts of suicide. Lack of knowledge about the services offered may also decrease a person's trust and make it less likely that he or she will reach out for help; in several organizations, employees with mental health issues are asked to take leave (sometimes unpaid) and referred to a hospital where they may or may not receive the support they need.

"But we don't have a problem!"

Most organizations dismiss the idea of a structured suicide-prevention program due to the belief that there has been just that one suicide. There are several myths and beliefs: "It's just one person who took their life," or "the suicide may not even have been work related," or "I know my employees can handle this."

Even one suicide, when it occurs, can have long-term effects, harming not only the person who took their life, but other employees and the organization too. Colleagues and fellow employees may think that the suicide was due to work-related causes; they may assume that the same factors will affect them in the future. This may create a general mistrust in the management or the system.

One suicide is usually just the tip of the iceberg. There are possibly several other employees who are contemplating suicide, due to factors that may or may not be related to the workplace. These vulnerable employees may see suicide as an easy way out of their difficult situation.

Employees may develop a negative image of the organization and leave. This leads to a loss of manpower, productivity, earnings, and goodwill.

The Tip of the Iceberg

The number of suicides that have occurred in a certain setting—even if there has been just one suicide over several years—is always the tip of the iceberg. Experts use the idea of a spectrum to explain how suicide occurs. "Suicide is always a spectrum, and what we see as an attempted or completed suicide is at the end. For every person who dies by suicide, there are at least 10 to 20 who have attempted

suicide, hundreds who are thinking of suicide, and many more who are at risk," says Gururaj Gopalakrishna, professor and head of the Department of Epidemiology at the National Institute of Mental Health & Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) in Bangalore, India.

An employee has just been promoted to a job that he's not trained for, and is not able to deliver. He experiences enormous stress, finds outlets in drinking and smoking, and spends most of his money on cigarettes and alcohol. This leads to his developing a gambling habit—which puts him deeper into debt. He is unable to support his family. The family is unhappy; he fights with his wife regularly. He drinks more and becomes depressed. He feels lonely, loses interest in all activities, and wonders whether life is worth living. This thought process becomes more repetitive and intense. At this point, he moves beyond thinking about suicide to actually planning it.

(This fictional narrative has been constructed to aid the understanding of this phenomenon by placing it in a real-life situation.)

Suicides are caused by several social, cultural, biological, work-related, and system-related factors, all of which affect each other and can have a cumulative effect. These factors can accumulate over a period of time and cause great distress, making a person consider ending his or her life.

Why is it important to have a suicide-prevention program?

Mental health and suicide-prevention programs are essential in any workplace in order to accomplish the following:

- Improve employee health and wellness
- Identify those at risk of developing a mental health disorder (and offer support to them)
- Identify those who are in critical situations (i.e. employees who have attempted suicide or are contemplating it), and offer them timely support and follow-up services
- Improve the quality of life for those who are affected by mental health issues or suicidal thoughts, and support them in returning to productivity

From the employer's point of view, having a proactive suicide-prevention program ensures that the employees are mentally healthy. If employees have suicidal thoughts, they can receive support, which helps them cope better with work and improves their level of productivity. An outreach program gives the employees a sense of being taken care of and improves their comfort level. Overall, the organization benefits by having a more mentally healthy and productive workforce.

For employees, the existence of a mental health and suicide-prevention program tells them that the organization is interested in their health and welfare; this can increase their confidence in the management. Employees also benefit from the opportunity to discuss their challenges with a dedicated team of experts; they can receive help for themselves or seek it on behalf of their colleagues or family. This access is a crucial element in the prevention of suicide. A person who has access to help and is able to tackle his or her problems with professional support is likely to come out of the suicidal ideation phase.

A suicide-prevention program is also a form of long-term care and support, and can help employees contribute optimally to the organization. In short, having an effective mental health and suicide-prevention program benefits the employer as well as the employee.

Setting Up a System

"When we say 'just one suicide,' we are focusing only on the tip of the iceberg. Any such incident has to be taken seriously. Some organizations function in a reactive way, by trying to control damage when an employee dies by suicide. Ideally, an organization has to take a proactive role in ensuring that no crisis reaches the stage of desperation," says Gopalakrishna.

There are two ways in which an organization can take a proactive approach to preventing employee suicide:

- By having an overall mental health program that addresses common mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and substance use
- By having a suicide-prevention program independently or as part of the workplace program on mental health

There is a need to recognize suicide prevention and mental health as a part of the larger employee wellness program. At the same time, it is also essential to recognize suicide as an issue, assess its impact on an organization, and create a structured plan to deal with it.

Any suicide-prevention plan requires that the organization make sure that the services are available to all employees who may need them, and that there is support from the management for employees who wish to seek help. Due to the sensitivity and complexity of the issues, the program needs to be well structured and thought out. The employers and the employees need to recognize each other's needs and be supportive of the offer to help.

Managing an Employee Who May Be Suicidal

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death, a tragedy with painful ripple effects on survivors: family, friends, and coworkers. It is also a frightening issue to think or talk about, one that many people would prefer to avoid. As a manager, you may be faced with an employee who is at risk of suicide. How will you recognize the risk, and what should you do?

Warning Signs of Suicidal Risk

Many of the warning signs of suicidal risk are similar to those for stress and anxiety, though sometimes they are more extreme. People considering suicide often have been worn down by stress or by setbacks in their lives. Loss or anticipated loss—from a loved one's death, a separation or divorce, declining health, or deteriorating finances—can lead a person to suicidal thoughts. The suicidal person is often lonely, without a strong social support network. Depression can make life seem hopeless.

Signs of suicidal risk may include changes in behavior, such as:

- Deteriorating job performance
- Dramatic mood changes
- Lack of attention to personal appearance
- Withdrawal from colleagues
- Giving away prized possessions
- Interest in end-of-life matters, such as wills, insurance beneficiaries, or funeral plans

The employee might also express suicidal thoughts by:

- Talking about not being present in the future
- Making statements that indicate hopelessness ("Life is meaningless." "I'm trapped." "You would be better off without me." "No one would miss me if...")

- Posting messages on social media about death or hopelessness

If you hear this kind of talk, whether expressed directly to you or through another employee, question it, kindly but firmly. You won't make the situation worse by clarifying it, and an open conversation with you may be the person's first step toward getting well. It's important that you get past your own fear of talking about suicide in order to have a helpful conversation. The employee support program provides valuable consultation to help managers prepare for difficult and sensitive conversations such as this.

If an Employee Admits to Thinking About Suicide

You'll want to get your employee to professional help, and the way you do this is very important. Demonstrating respect and concern for the employee can make them more willing to seek help and can contribute to the healing process:

- Let the employee know that you care about them as a person.

- Listen to the employee's concerns, and try to understand the depth of their feelings. Give them your undivided attention. Remember that listening also includes body language, such as eye contact. When responding, reflect back what you are hearing to help them understand that you are taking their concerns seriously. Don't be afraid to ask direct questions like, "Are you thinking about taking your own life?" Let them talk openly. Show compassion, and speak in a nonjudgmental tone.

- Don't leave the person alone, whether on the phone or in person.

- Don't debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or whether the person's feelings are right or wrong. Don't minimize their problems or give advice. They need to hear that what they are experiencing is not their fault and that you are there to help.

- If any of the employee's problems are related to work, offer to address those problems, then follow through on your promises.

- Do not pry into the employee's personal problems, but listen in a caring way if the employee chooses to share them.

- Don't try to solve the employee's problems. Your role is to listen and show that you understand that those problems are real and painful, and to help guide the employee to someone who can provide meaningful help.

- Protect the employee's privacy within the workplace, while seeking professional help. Your Human Resources (HR) department needs to know about the problem and can help both the employee and you. But think carefully about what other employees or higher management need to know.

Mobilize a response.

Seek help from your HR department, and contact the employee assistance program to speak with a specialist. Alert your manager. With the employee's consent, call the employee assistance program on their behalf, or your community's crisis intervention or suicide prevention helpline. In an urgent situation, call 911.

Follow up.

Once your employee has connected with a support program or has started to receive professional help, continue to show that you care:

- Find out if the employee needs to adjust work hours to participate in therapy.

- If the therapist is willing to offer you guidance directly—at the employee's request and with their consent—find out whether you should continue to challenge the employee as you normally do or temporarily reassign them to less challenging duties.

- Check in with your support system.

Working with a suicidal person can be very stressful. Don't underestimate its emotional toll on you. It is common for supporters in a situation of suicide risk to:

- Have feelings of guilt ("Did I do enough?")
- Become emotionally numb
- Be angry or irritable
- Sleep too much or not at all
- Be emotional
- Use alcohol or drugs to dull uncomfortable feelings

Pay attention to these reactions, and don't hesitate to get support for yourself, whether from the employee assistance program, your manager, or your own social support network. It is a totally natural reaction, and support can help you process your feelings in a way that helps you heal.

Source: Workplace Options (WPO). (2019, November). Suicide awareness (pp. 23–25). In A manager's guide to the employee support program. Raleigh, NC: Author.

Ask Your EAP!

The following are answers to common questions supervisors have regarding employee issues and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.

Q. At times, I don't think employees truly understand the purpose of an EAP. Sure, they know it is a professional source of counseling and referral, but when supervisors refer, some employees become defensive. What's missing, and how can supervisors make formal referrals go a little smoother?

A. When a supervisor suggests the EAP or makes a referral, it can be helpful to explain early on that the basis for your recommendation is job performance, not your belief that a personal problem exists, and that all EAPs work this way. This issue, perhaps more than any other, is what prompts defensiveness. Also, do not mention the EAP for the first time late in the process of an attempt to correct performance. If weeks and months of difficulty, arguing, or tension have existed, your employee may believe that your motivation for referring now is to "cover your bases" as you prepare for termination of the worker.

Q. I strive to know my employees well so I can assess their needs and develop their talents. When employees don't perform well or keep commitments, or come to work late, I feel taken advantage of and angry. This causes me stress. How can I react differently?

A. Perhaps you have heard the expression, "Employees are our organization's most valuable resource." It offers a clue to help you understand how best to work with employees when they disappoint you. Wanting your employees to be happy and productive is a good thing, and the EAP plays a key role in helping you do this, but you will use the EAP less when you are emotional and feel personally hurt in response to employees not living up to your expectations. When you use the "employees are a resource" paradigm, you respond differently. You become more strategic, and this means a possible referral to the EAP sooner. Viewing your employees as ungrateful invites you to take their shortcomings personally, experience more stress, delay referral to the EAP, and be angry with them. You feel taken advantage of, and the risk is that you will experience a desire to retaliate, terminate, or "teach them a lesson."

Q. Our supervisors recently struggled with how to notify employees about a worker's suicide and, in one case, a murder at a remote location. This delayed managing the incidents and recognizing these employees' lives. This caused upset among coworkers. How should managers respond to such incidents?

A. The death of an employee, especially by accident or homicide, will thrust the manager into a crisis role that employees instantly rely upon for direction, support, and empathy. Fortunately, from the standpoint of how to manage it, death in the workplace is not new. Step-by-step protocols and checklists exist for managers to follow, although smaller employers may not keep such material on hand. Examples can be found at the American Psychological Association, the Society for Human Resources and nonprofits that focus on helping people manage grief (see below). The EAP can also assist with helping managers find such resources, while supporting employees and later offering more awareness and education about helping employees and recognizing protracted grief and its effects on productivity. Note that the two most significant mistakes managers make regarding death in the workplace is treating such incidences too lightly or turning away from them too soon in an attempt to get back to work.

Source: www.griefcounselor.org/2017/11/07/grief-in-the-workplace-an-outline-for-helping.