

THE SUPERVISOR/HR NEWSLETTER



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The World Health Organization defines burnout as a syndrome of "chronic workplace stress that hasn't been successfully managed." During these current stressful times, many employees are at an even higher risk of burnout. This important session will discuss several strategies for more effectively managing stress and keeping our lives in balance to reduce the risk of burnout.

Date/Time: October 11, 2021, 1:00-2:00 PM CT

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2021 Supervisor Excellence Webinar Series

Helping Your Team Find Work-Life Balance During Stressful Times

During these difficult times, many employees are experiencing higher levels of stress. This important session will provide supervisors, managers, and HR professionals with practical strategies to help them encourage their employees to live more balanced lifestyles so they can remain healthy and productive.

Date/Time: August 2, 2021 1:00-2:00 PM CT

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A Manager's Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace

Part 2

Immediate, Acute Phase

Coordinate: Contain the crisis.

One of the highest priorities for managers in a suicide postvention response, like any critical incident, is to contain the crisis. The initial response of any organization often sets the tone for what is to follow. Upon discovery of the body of a suspected suicide on worksite property, law enforcement should be contacted immediately. As happens in all cases of nonnatural deaths, the scene is first treated by police as a crime scene, thus all unauthorized people should be kept away from the body and site. Do not disturb the scene until you have received permission from the appropriate law enforcement authorities. Comply with all requests from law enforcement as they conduct their investigation. In many cases, law enforcement personnel work with victim advocates to notify next of kin in the event of a suicide. Depending on the circumstances, a representative from the workplace might consider accompanying the victim advocate when contacting the family. When notifying the next of kin, dignity and professionalism are essential, but this does not mean you need to restrain yourself from expressing appropriate emotions. Use the person's name and work with the victim advocate to answer questions for the family while avoiding unnecessary traumatizing details if possible.

If the death by suicide of an employee occurs outside of the workplace setting, management may be notified by a relative, friend, or public safety officer. The relative or friend may not have all the facts about the death, may not know for sure the cause of death, or may ask that it not be revealed that it was a death by suicide. Leaders are advised to carefully coordinate employee communication in consultation with their HR management and policies and procedures, and not make any official statements until the death has been confirmed by law enforcement, medical examiner, or immediate family member.

Action Points

- Identify a main point person to coordinate all postvention efforts and related communication.
- Contract for professional cleanup (after the investigation is completed) if required by a suicide in the workplace.
- Contact victim assistance.

Notify: Protect the privacy of the deceased.

Management may want to distribute the death notification memo to staff. When the deceased employee's loved ones ask that the death not be disclosed as a suicide, leadership may not be able to assure complete secrecy for a couple of reasons. If information has already spread through informal communications, leadership runs the risk of appearing disingenuous, out of touch, and untrustworthy if there is no acknowledgment of the manner of death. (Suicide is actually a manner of death, but the cause [e.g., by blunt force trauma] is often confused with manner [e.g., by suicide by fall].) Also, in many states the manner of death, even when it is worded as "cause of death is being withheld by family," is public information, as it may appear on the death certificate as such. Therefore, leaders can promise they will do what they can to maintain confidentiality, understanding that some elements are not in their control. Additional guidance from HR, if available, will help managers handle this sensitive topic with the family.

Communicate: Dispel rumors and reduce potential contagion.

In the aftermath of a suicide, some vulnerable individuals in the workplace may be at risk for responding to the suicide by attempting their own suicide. This is also known as a contagion effect. In other words, the death by suicide of a coworker may trigger suicidal thoughts and feelings in some already vulnerable individuals, and may increase their risk for copycat behavior. The reasons for contagion are many. For example, the death, particularly of an executive or perceived leader,

may instill a loss of hope (e.g., “If he could not deal with his problems, given all he had going for him, what chance do I have?”); or, corporate and media attention to the death may offer just what the vulnerable person lacks and desires (e.g., a sense of importance and value, even though that attention could not be appreciated by a deceased person).

Given how prevalent suicidal thoughts are at any given time, a larger workplace might find that at the time of a suicide death several other people might simultaneously experience suicidal distress and may be at risk for an attempt. This domino effect of suicide can be very disruptive to a workplace. Management can minimize the potential for contagion by setting an appropriately respectful tone when acknowledging and communicating about the employee death. Alternatively, when a culture acknowledges or memorializes a suicide death in a dramatic or sensational manner or focuses too much on the detailed means of death, there is an increased risk that some vulnerable individuals will imitate the behavior.

One of the most challenging elements in an effective suicide postvention response in the workplace is for leadership to accurately, respectfully, and carefully communicate the information regarding the death of an employee. Occasionally, the death by suicide in the workplace setting involves other employees as witnesses. In these cases, information about the suicide death may spread quickly, especially in an era of rapid information exchange that occurs via texting, social media, and the like. Leaders should be aware that even before any official company announcement, there may already be a great deal of inaccurate information circulating within the workplace. Timely and accurate information briefs can help dispel rumors.

Action Points

- Review safe messaging guidelines for external and internal communication strategies and media recommendations for reporting on suicide for help developing public communication plans.
- Develop an internal communication plan to document what is and is not known and what to say if the family does not want the cause of death revealed.
- Develop an external communication plan that identifies a spokesperson, and draft a statement for the media.

Support: Offer organized and practical assistance.

In the immediate aftermath of a suicide, people affected by the suicide often do not need counseling, but rather practical assistance to help them get through their day. While family members and coworkers who were closest to the deceased are usually profoundly affected, the impact of suicide often spreads to many other areas of an organization and may include clients, vendors, previous coworkers, mentors, and so on. Additionally, colleagues wishing to support the bereaved are often looking for ways to help.

The main coordinator of the postvention effort can ask the bereaved family if the following support would be useful and assign volunteers to assist:

- Bring easy-to-heat and nutritious frozen meals to the grieving family.
- Offer the family of the deceased assistance by packing up the personal belongings at the workplace and bringing them by the home. Always call ahead to be sure the family will be there when you deliver the items.
- Ask the bereaved person or family what can be done to help, and when possible, make arrangements to provide the support. Some common supports that help are
 - Keeping a list of phone calls, visitors, and people who bring food and gifts
 - Organizing the mail (e.g., bills, cards, newspaper notices)
 - Offering to make calls to people they wish to notify
 - Helping with errands (e.g., child care, house-sitting, lawn care, laundry)

Source: Carson J Spencer Foundation, Crisis Care Network, National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, & American Association of Suicidology. (2013). A manager's guide to suicide postvention in the workplace: 10 action steps for dealing with the aftermath of suicide. Denver, CO: Carson J Spencer Foundation. Retrieved August 13, 2018, from the Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention website: <http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org/>

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. My employee's father died of COVID-19 last fall, and there was no real funeral. She appears depressed, and some days not very functional. Friends are worried because she was previously treated for drug addiction and is now drinking. How should I approach EAP referral?

A. Consult with the EAP when employee situations are compounded by multiple issues, like this one is. If your employee is drinking now but had previously been treated for drug addiction, then she is considered to be relapsed. Addictive disease patients in recovery are directed to abstain from alcohol and psychoactive drugs as part of their recovery program. If your employee is no longer an EAP client, encourage her to self-refer for the sadness and the difficulties she is having on the job. Many people experience a phenomenon known as prolonged grief disorder (PGD). This is a recognized condition that can result from the inability to participate in a normal bereavement and grief process. If her ability to function at work diminishes, consider more formal steps to encourage EAP participation.

Q. Complaints and problems that employees seem to "drop on my desk" are the part of my job that I like least of all. Sometimes I snap at employees when they walk in and "deliver" me problems. How do I better manage this process for less stress and so I feel like the boss, not a support desk?

A. Show supervisees how to implement a process for bringing problems to you that maximizes their opportunity to solve problems on their own and properly conveys only the problems needing your attention. Here's a possible start to a dialogue: "When bringing problems to me, please 1) share the impact the problem is having on your work situation or work unit. 2) Share with me what you've done or tried to do in order to solve the problem. If it did not work, let me know why. 3) Give me a recommendation. 4) If there are options, share them, but be specific so I do not try a solution that won't work. 5) Let me know which solution you think is the best one and why. 6) Offer ideas for how to go about implementing the solution." This is one approach for teaching a process to solve more problems faster, but avoid being so strict that employees don't come to you at all.

Q. EAPs help resolve personal problems such as stress, depression, workplace conflicts, and substance abuse. What about the EAP's ability to teach critical skills, like better listening? That's what my boss recently said I should consider improving.

A. The history of employee assistance programs has caused them to naturally be associated with resolving personal problems, but EAPs can offer other types of help. Further, EA professionals also specialize. Some may have expertise in organizational development, while others are seasoned pros at addiction recovery, imparting supervisory skills, conflict resolution, parenting, and more. Meet with the EAP, but zero in on the aspect of the skill about which you are trying to be more efficient. For example, regarding listening skills, key aspects include active listening, summarizing, using empathy, following up, running meetings, listening to learn, listening to evaluate and analyze, listening to understand feelings and emotions, and more. What about your listening skills are you trying to improve? Are you a good listener but experiencing problems that interfere with listening? Meeting with the EAP can help you explore these questions, too. It might lead you to a different approach or solution for improving listening skills.

Information contained in this newsletter is for general information purposes only and is not intended to be specific guidance for any particular supervisor or human resource management concern. Some of it might not apply to your particular company policies and available programs. This information is proprietary and intended only for eligible EAP members. For specific guidance on handling individual employee problems, consult with Deer Oaks by calling the Helpline.