

# The Role of Co-Workers in Preventing Suicide

If you are thinking of hurting yourself, or if you are concerned that someone else may be suicidal, call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](https://www.suicidalhelp.org/) at **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**.

*Hector had worked with Dolores for 3 years. While they were not good friends, they were friendly. Recently, Hector noticed that Dolores had changed. Dolores had always kept to herself, but lately she seemed to avoid her co-workers as much as possible. She stopped eating in the lunchroom and ate by herself in the park across the street. She was becoming uncharacteristically abrupt with customers. On a number of occasions, Dolores looked like she had been crying. But Hector just did not feel comfortable asking Dolores about this. Instead, he asked Martha, another co-worker, if she thought anything was wrong with Dolores. Martha seemed relieved that someone else had noticed and confirmed all of Hector's observations. She also said that Dolores had told her that she had been "really sad" and "just didn't know if she could go on." Hector did not know what to do. He was concerned, but was not sure if any of this was really his business. The next day he saw Dolores crying in the stockroom. He told the head of his company's human resources office about Dolores. She said that she would tell Dolores that some of her co-workers were concerned about her and remind Dolores that she could talk to a counselor at the company's employee assistance program about what was troubling her.*



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## Introduction

Each year, more than 34,000 Americans take their own lives (CDC, 2007). An additional 375,000 Americans visit emergency rooms for self-inflicted injuries (CDC, 2009). A large number of suicides and suicide attempts are related to treatable emotional conditions including depression and other mood disorders as well as alcohol and drug abuse. People often want to conceal their suicidal thoughts, depression, or alcohol and drug abuse. They may be embarrassed by these problems or fear that public disclosure will hurt their careers, although the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination in employment because of mental impairment.



Suspecting that a co-worker is considering ending his or her life can be frightening and confusing. You may not know when you should become involved in the problems of someone who is not a family member or close friend. You may be unsure of what you can really do to help someone with emotional difficulties or feel uncertain whether your co-worker is actually in serious trouble. Being wrong could be embarrassing. But being right could save a life. This publication will help you recognize and help co-workers who may be considering suicide.

## Recognizing the Warning Signs

People who are in danger of suicide often display warning signs. You may be in a good position to recognize these signs in the people with whom you work, even if they are trying to conceal their problems. You see co-workers on a regular basis and know how they talk, act, and react to stress in the workplace. You can recognize changes in their behavior, personality, or mood. Such changes may be a proverbial “cry for help.”

The warning signs below may mean someone is at high risk for suicide. The risk is greater if a behavior is new or has increased and if it seems related to a painful event, loss, or change.

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

These signs are especially critical if the individual has attempted suicide in the past or has a history of or current problem with depression, alcohol, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

There is no foolproof way of telling that someone may be thinking of taking his or her life. But these warning signs can also indicate that a person has serious problems that affect his or her life, productivity, and the work environment. By recognizing and acting on these signs, you can help a co-worker find professional assistance and become healthier, happier, and more productive.

## Responding to the Warning Signs

You should respond to warning signs that a co-worker may be thinking of suicide. If you are comfortable speaking with this person, you should ask the difficult questions that can help you understand that person's state-of-mind and intentions. Don't be afraid to approach the issue directly and just ask: "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" or "Do you feel like you want to die?" If their response gives any indication that they have been considering suicide or having suicidal thoughts, ask them to find help immediately. Offer to accompany them to your company's employee assistance program (EAP) and make an appointment with a counselor. If your company does not have an EAP, offer to help them find another source of mental health counseling. More information on how to find such counseling is provided below. You can also suggest they call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). The Lifeline provides crisis counseling and referrals 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

If you think a person is in immediate danger, do not leave him or her alone until you have found help. This may require mobilizing other co-workers or the person's friends or family. If a crisis seems imminent, accompany your co-worker to an emergency room or community mental health crisis center. If your co-worker is unwilling to seek help or is uncooperative or combative, call 911 or 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Tell the dispatcher that you are concerned that the person with you "is a danger to themselves," or "they cannot take care of themselves." These phrases will alert the dispatcher that there is an immediate threat. Do not hesitate to make such a call if you suspect someone may be on the verge of harming him or herself.

Some of your co-workers may be personal friends. You may maintain a more professional relationship with others. And some of your relationships with co-workers may be strained or even antagonistic. If your relationship with a co-worker who may be thinking about suicide is such that you do not want to talk to him or her about these issues, express your concern to someone else—perhaps a colleague who is friendly with that person or a member of the human resources department or employee assistance program (if you have one). If you need assistance in deciding who can help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

## Seeking Professional Help

The emotional problems associated with suicide—including depression, bipolar disorder, and the abuse of alcohol and other drugs—are difficult conditions requiring professional assistance. One of the most important things you can do for someone who may be considering suicide is help him or her find professional help. This may require overcoming his or her reluctance to go to a mental health professional. Your company's human resources department or employee assistance program can provide assistance in locating professional help, as can many of the resources included below.

## If a Suicide Happens

The suicide of a co-worker—even if it does not occur on the job—can have a profound emotional effect on the workplace. Other employees may struggle with guilt and unanswered questions about what they should have done to help. Some employees may experience depression or suicidal thoughts after such an experience. Many EAPs or private mental health professionals offer grief counseling or "postvention" services for exactly these situations. For additional information on helping yourself and others recover from such a trauma, see the Survivors publication <http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/survivors.pdf> in this series.

## References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2007). *Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS)*. Retrieved July 12, 2011 from <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2009). *Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS)*. Retrieved July 12, 2011 from <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/nonfatal.html>

## Resources for Employers

### **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Home Page** (<http://ada.gov/>)

A U.S. Department of Justice website providing information and technical assistance on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This website includes guidelines, documents, and other resources concerning compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The U.S. Department of Justice also operates a toll-free ADA Information Line for employers, employees, and others needing information and assistance. It can be reached at 800-514-0301 and 800-514-0383 (TTY)

### **Handling Traumatic Events: A Manager's Handbook**

[http://www.opm.gov/Employment\\_and\\_Benefits/WorkLife/OfficialDocuments/handbooksguides/Trauma/index.asp](http://www.opm.gov/Employment_and_Benefits/WorkLife/OfficialDocuments/handbooksguides/Trauma/index.asp)

by Mary Tyler. Washington DC: Office of Personnel Management, 2003.

This U.S. Government publication contains guidance on anticipating and reacting to traumatic events in the workplace, including suicides, assaults, and natural disasters. Chapters include “How to Listen to Someone Who is Hurting” and “Supervising an Employee with Suicidal Concerns.”

### **Mental Health America: Workplace Information** (<http://www.nmha.org/go/information/get-info/workplace>)

This section of the Mental Health America website provides materials and resources about mental health in the workplace. The resources include “Mind Your Stress--On the Job” and “Returning to Work: Tips for Service Members & Employers.”

### **National Partnership for Workplace Mental Health** (<http://www.workplacementalhealth.org/>)

The mission of the National Partnership for Workplace Mental Health is to develop and support educational efforts focusing on better understanding of the benefits of a mentally healthy workforce, early recognition of mental disorders, effective treatment, and appropriate access to quality mental health care. It is a program of the American Psychiatric Foundation in collaboration with the American Psychiatric Association. The National Partnership's website includes resources on workplace stress management programs, depression, dealing with anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and Mental Health Works Online, a free quarterly publication about mental health in the workplace.

### **ValueOptions Strategic Principles for Suicide Prevention**

([http://www.valueoptions.com/suicide\\_prev/html%20pages/Support.htm](http://www.valueoptions.com/suicide_prev/html%20pages/Support.htm))

This web site was designed by ValueOptions (a managed care provider) to help employers create a comprehensive suicide prevention plan for the workplace. It includes materials for senior management, articles, tip sheets, posters, banner graphics, a self-scoring quiz, and sample public education email messages.

## Resources for Locating Mental Health Services

### **Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)** (<http://www.dbsalliance.org>)

A patient-directed organization focusing on depression and bipolar disorder. The DBSA website includes resources that can be used to locate professional help or support groups, a wide selection of educational brochures on depression, bipolar disorder, and suicide prevention, and an online bookstore. The DBSA supports more than 1,000 peer-led support groups across the nation. These support groups can be located by using DBSA's website or calling (800) 826-3632.

### **Mental Health America (MHA)** (<http://www.nmha.org/index.cfm>)

A nonprofit organization addressing mental health and mental illness. Information available on the MHA website includes fact sheets on depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide; FAQs for consumers of mental health services; and a list of local affiliates who can be of assistance in finding mental health services in your area.

**National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)** (<http://www.nami.org>)

A nonprofit grassroots self-help, support and advocacy organization of consumers, families, and friends of people with severe and persistent mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic and other severe anxiety disorders, autism and pervasive developmental disorders, and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. NAMI has local and state affiliates that can provide support and education in every state. NAMI also provides information and referrals through its Information Helpline which can be reached at (800) 950-NAMI (6264) or (888) 344-6264 (TTY).

**National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse** (<http://www.mhselfhelp.org>)

A consumer-run national technical assistance center serving the mental health consumer movement. Among the resources available on the Clearinghouse Web site is a directory of mental health services that have significant consumer input (that is, input from people who use mental health services).

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**

Information on mental health and recovery for professionals and the general public. This federal agency has:

- A Mental Health Services Locator featuring state directories of mental health and substance abuse treatment facilities and mental health services (<http://store.samhsa.gov/mhlocator>)
- Consumer/Survivor Publications (<http://store.samhsa.gov/facet/Issues-Conditions-Disorders/term/Suicide>)

**Ulifeline.org** (<http://www.ulifeline.org>)

A web-based resource created by the Jed Foundation to provide students with a non-threatening and supportive link to their college's mental health center as well as important mental health information. Students are able to download information about various mental illnesses, ask questions, make appointments, and seek help anonymously via the Internet. Resources offered on Ulifeline.org include a customized version of Go Ask Alice! that allows students to have virtually any mental health question answered 24 hours a day; a mental health and drug information library that features consumer health information from Harvard Medical School; and the Duke Diagnostic Psychiatry Screening Program, which allows the Ulifeline user to be screened for different mental disorders. While this screening is not meant to take the place of an evaluation by a mental health professional, a positive result suggests that the student would benefit from comprehensive mental health screening.

For national organizations and federal agencies with general resources on suicide prevention, go to <http://www.sprc.org/basics/national-organizations>.

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