



**Official Newsletter of Drug Free Workplaces**  
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To talk to someone about self-injury or if you are experiencing suicidal thoughts, text the **Crisis Text Line** at 741-741 or call the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** at 1-800-273-8255.  
[www.LiveDrugFree.org](http://www.LiveDrugFree.org)

# DrugFree@WorkPlace

## Substance Abuse and Suicide

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, more Americans are dying by suicide today than at any other point in the past 30 years. Suicide kills more than 41,000 people every year in America, and the suicide rate has been climbing since before the beginning of the year 2000. Suicide is one of the leading causes of death for children and young adults, but it is rising among middle-aged Americans as well.

Suicides at work are also increasing. In the U.S. in 2013, the last year for which data is available, there was a 12% increase in suicides in the workplace over the previous year. A death by suicide occurs every 13 minutes in America, and in addition to the loss of life, suicide costs the U.S. almost \$12 billion in lost income annually.

The reasons for suicide are complex, usually with many contributing factors—but according to the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), one of the biggest risk factors for suicide is substance abuse.

There is substantial evidence that drug and alcohol abuse increases the chances of suicide, and substance abuse has been found to be second only to depression when it comes to risk factors for suicide. Research has shown that drug and alcohol disorders are associated with a 6x increase in the risk of suicide attempts.

The good news is that people who suffer from mental health disorders and substance abuse can be treated and can recover before the problems escalate to suicide. While diagnosis and treatment are critically important, of course, prevention is the key. To reduce the number of suicides in our country everyone must be involved. All risk factors must be addressed and mitigated, including substance abuse, and the general population must be informed of the best practices of prevention.

## Suicide Prevention in the Workplace

One way to reach a large percentage of the population is through the workplace—60% of Americans are employed. Suicide prevention information provided within mandatory drug free workplace training programs can make much needed prevention information available to a majority of Americans. Even for companies without drug free workplace programs, many have policies and procedures in place for disseminating information about health risks, and for linking employees to resources such as employee assistance programs (EAPs). Simply making resources available—such as SAMHSA's National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at <http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/> and 1-800-273-8255—along with the Suicide Prevention Resource Center at <http://www.sprc.org/>, has the potential to save untold lives.

Workplaces can be critically important partners in preventing suicide for many reasons. Often, the workplace is the last point of sustained human contact for many people who commit suicide, which provides an opportunity for coworkers to intervene and save a life. Because of the amount of time spent at work (on average we spend almost 60% of our lives at work), coworkers usually have more access to an individual than neighbors or even family members, and when given information on warning signs may be better able to pick up on things like changes in appearance, behavior, or mood.

Twenty percent of workers in the U.S. experience some form of mental disorder, and substance abuse and depression are the most common. Of the more than 41,000 people who die by suicide each year, the majority are employed and the remainder have a loved one who is employed somewhere. The burden of suicide in our country is carried by our working population and their families.

The U.S. Surgeon General has said that it is in the best interests of companies to

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prevent suicide. Death by suicide of a family member can be so devastating that an employee becomes grief stricken to the point of no longer being able to work, and a coworker's suicide can be so distressing to employees that productivity is lost. Suicides that take place at work can affect hundreds of employees and have lasting effects for years to come. After a workplace suicide, coworkers often feel that they might have contributed to the suicide in some way, or have feelings of guilt for not having prevented it. Supervisors might feel that they should have been in closer contact with the worker or that their management style was too harsh and contributed to the death. Close work-friends of the suicide victim could feel angry and rejected and/or somehow betrayed by the fatal act of their friend. All of these feelings result in performance issues such as: increased absenteeism, reduced productivity, increased employee turnover, increases in the number of short- and long-term disability days, and increased disability claims. In short, suicide in the workplace is a costly proposition for employers.

### **Suicidal Employee: Warning Signs**

Too often, when an individual is experiencing mental or emotional problems, coworkers will distance themselves, thinking that a hands-off approach is best. But this way of thinking could cause colleagues to miss the one and only chance to save someone's life. If a coworker is displaying the following warning signs, it is important to contact the appropriate professionals who can intervene and help:

- Talk of feeling isolated and lonely
- Constantly dwelling on unsolvable problems
- Expressing feelings of failure
- Becoming withdrawn

- Impulsivity and/or aggression
- Inability to relate to friends/ coworkers
- Lack of hope
- Loss of self-esteem
- Loss of, or fragmented sleep
- Complaints of a lack of support
- Speaking about tidying up affairs
- Outlining an exit plan (from life)
- If asked, giving definite ideas about how to commit suicide

While there are no hard and fast rules to follow to help one recognize when a coworker may be suicidal, the majority of people who commit the act do give definite warning signs like the ones listed above in the weeks or months leading up to their death. People who are demonstrating these warning signs are at even greater risk if there has been:

- A serious or embarrassing work-related event
- An upcoming layoff, demotion, or other serious workplace change
- A serious reprimand, disciplinary action, or accusation of criminal wrongdoing or sexual impropriety
- An adverse change in health
- A history of family suicide
- Depression, job burn-out, or unexplained fatigue
- Recent loss of a close relationship
- Increased misuse of alcohol or other drugs

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