



Supervisor Newsletter

Suicide Prevention at Work

Lost revenue from suicides costs companies in the U.S. \$1.3 billion per year, but for each suicide that is prevented, an average of \$1,182,559 could be saved, including \$3,875 in medical expenses and \$1,178,684 in lost productivity. Suicide prevention programs in the workplace are critically important, not only for the lives that can be saved but in the impact to the bottom line.

Supervisors are often in the best position to recognize when employees are struggling with mental or emotional disorders that could lead to suicide, and it is important for supervisors to be aware of the link between suicide and substance abuse. The following statistics illustrate the enormity of the problem:

- More than 1 million Americans attempt suicide every year
- Suicide is the 4th leading cause of death among people from the ages of 18 to 65
- Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for ages 15 to 24
- Men are 4 times more likely to die by suicide
- Men are 15 times more likely to kill themselves at work
- The peak years for suicide among women are from the ages of 45 to 54
- Men and women between the ages of 65 and 74 are almost 3 times as likely to kill themselves at work as people of other ages

Substance abuse is the number 2 risk factor for suicide in America.

- More than 15 million employees in the U.S. abuse substances

- 1 in 10 workers abuses alcohol
- 1 in 12 employees uses illegal drugs
- The majority of illegal drug users from the ages of 16 to 25 are now entering the workforce
- 1 in 3 people who die from suicide is under the influence of drugs or alcohol

There are many factors that contribute to a suicide—including genetics and mental or physical health—but substance abuse always exacerbates the problems leading up to the act. Thirty-eight percent of suicide victims test positive for illegal drugs.

Breaking Through Denial

Too often, employers are hesitant to implement suicide prevention programs because of denial of the possibility of suicide in their workplace. Managers have said, "We don't have the time or money for this," and supervisors have said, "No one has ever committed suicide at this company so we don't have a suicide problem here." Business owners always want to know how suicide prevention is relevant to the company's bottom line.

While these obstacles to building a workplace suicide prevention program do exist, the benefits of implementing a program are substantial. Supporting workers through tough times nurtures a sense of loyalty that helps raise morale and increase retention. The promotion of good mental and emotional health is an investment in a company's greatest asset: its employees.

First Steps

While creating a formal suicide prevention program may seem to be too much work for companies to take on, there

are many prevention strategies that do not take much effort but yield tremendous results. Here are some simple steps supervisors can take to help prevent suicide:

- Develop a proactive, prompt, and consistent approach to work-related problems, as this is essential in helping employees feel safe, protected, and able to do their best work
- Define a clear no-tolerance policy for harassment, bullying, or intimidation, and ensure that the policy is communicated and enforced at all levels
- Offer workshops on how to reduce stress or improve sleep
- Provide information that lets people know they are not alone if they are thinking about suicide and that many resources exist to help
- Make links to organizations such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline available on the company's intranet, and encourage employees to make use of resources such as the Lifeline's 24-hour, toll-free, confidential suicide prevention hotline
- Invite Employee Assistance Professionals (EAP) or other local mental health service professionals in to provide "lunch-and-learn" sessions that increase awareness about the signs and symptoms of depression, bipolar disorder, drug/alcohol dependence, and other mental illnesses that can lead to suicide

Supervisor Training

Supervisors spend a great deal of time at work engaged in day-to-day contact with

employees. Supervisors get to know their subordinates over time; they see them at critical points in their lives, and can observe changes in their behavior. It is therefore extremely important that supervisors be trained on, and alert to, problems that increase the risk of suicide. Some of the most significant risk factors are:

- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Mood and anxiety disorders like depression, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Access to a means to commit suicide (lethal means)

Some signs of an immediate risk for suicide include:

- Talking about wanting to die
- Looking for a way to kill oneself
- Talk of feeling hopeless or no reason to live, extreme mood swings, or showing rage
- Talk of being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of drugs or alcohol

As workplaces become more stressful and the use of drugs becomes more widely acceptable in America, the rate of suicide will continue to increase. But supervisors are in a position to prevent these needless tragedies. For more information on suicide prevention, please visit: <http://workingminds.org/> and http://www.valueoptions.com/suicide_prev/html%20pages/Support.htm.

To help us combat substance abuse, go to www.LiveDrugFree.org and click on "Donate!"