

Responding to an Employee Suicide in the Workplace



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HR Checklist

These situations can be overwhelming and it can be hard to know where to begin, so below is a checklist that provides a template of the key actions the HR/People department can take at any time, depending on the circumstances of the situation you are responding to. You can also discuss this on your consultation call.

Activity	Tick
You should identify team members and colleagues who were closest to the deceased and prioritise their support.	
Send an email to the deceased employee's team, using our email template provided on the platform to inform them of the loss of their colleague and direct them towards the support available through Suicide&Co.	
Send an email to the rest of the organisation using our email template provided. It is important to inform the wider company of the loss of this employee.	
Send an email to the next of kin of the deceased employee, if you are in contact with them, using the template provided, to pass on condolences and provide the family with information and support through Suicide&Co.	
Send our Understanding Suicide Guide to members of the organisation (this can be found at the end of this resource). Suicide is a very complex topic and no two situations are the same. Our Understanding Suicide Guide can be sent to managers, team members or anyone within the organisation who could find it useful in order to better understand what has happened. It can also be sent to family members and next of kin when appropriate.	

If an employee dies on site, there are a few different steps that will need to be taken. Follow the below steps and then continue to follow the steps in the checklist above..

Activity	Tick
It can be hard to know what to do in this scenario due to shock, but the first thing that you will need to do once someone within the organisation becomes aware of this situation, is to co-ordinate arrangements with emergency services.	
Once the initial emergency services responses have taken place, you should send an email to the deceased employee's team, using our email template provided here, to inform them of the loss of their colleague and direct them towards the support available through Suicide&Co.	

Communications Guide

Introduction

When a situation such as a suspected suicide occurs in the workplace, effective and appropriate communication from the HR department and Leadership Team is crucial. This is often an unfamiliar situation and one that can be extremely difficult and distressing for all involved, however inappropriate and ineffective comms can be detrimental to an organisation at this time.

This guide will provide you with advised communication tips and the steps to take in order to help you support your employees and staff at this time.

Communication Steps

The first step to take when an employee dies by a suspected suicide is to speak to the deceased's family. You should ask the family for permission to inform your staff of how the employee passed away. Be aware that some families may not want the organisation to know it was a suspected suicide for religious, cultural or for privacy reasons. It is vital that you respect their wishes.

The next step is to inform your team about what has happened by either telling them that the employee has died by a suspected suicide or what the family has advised you to say. You should always use the term 'suspected suicide' at this stage. This is extremely important as until the coroner has concluded how they died, a suicide cannot be confirmed and this decision could take several months or even years. However, you should ultimately be guided by the language that the deceased's family feels comfortable with.

In some situations the news should be sent via email to the entire organisation where this feels needed and appropriate, however, we do advise that you should deliver the news in person to the deceased's immediate team, especially if it is small. When informing your employees you should stress how important it is to be respectful to the deceased's family. We have an email template which you can download and the same structure can be used to deliver the news in person. You should encourage your employees to use the Suicide&Co resources provided, and stress that you are always there for a chat if needed.

Social Media Steps

Even before the news is announced to your workforce, due to social media there may already be harmful information spreading about the deceased which could be disrespectful to their family. Additionally, some team members may want to pay tribute to the deceased on social media, however you should remind your employees to be mindful of the fact that some of the deceased's wider community may not be aware of their passing yet. Employees should ideally follow the family's lead when using social media and they should only do so when the official death notifications are made to the deceased's family and wider community. If this is not followed it can be very detrimental, for example, a close friend of the deceased could find out about their death by reading an employee's Facebook post, instead of being informed by the family or police. As you can imagine, this could be extremely upsetting for them which is why your employees should be sensitive during this difficult time. Additionally, your employees should not talk to the press.

Providing Support to Staff

When an employee dies by a suspected suicide it can have a significant effect on your staff and the business/organisation itself. During this extremely difficult time, it's important to give your employees a strong and stable support network so that they can grieve for their deceased colleague. Suicide&Co, offer many resources including access to trained members of our Suicide Bereavement Advisor team and resources that can be accessed in someone's own time. To help your employees grieve healthily and create a safe working environment you could:

- Share signposting resources - let your team know what support is available.
- Be visible - be present around the organisation by doing a few walk rounds to check in on employees.
- Set up a reflection room- a safe space in the workplace where employees can go to talk about their feelings either together or individually with you.
- Access support for yourself - mirroring is a great way to show people that they have permission to take this time for themselves.
- Allow space - people may wish to access support during their working day and may need some buffer time around this.

Suicide can bring up a lot of distressing emotions, especially anger and blame. It is important to be aware that as an employer or line manager, you could be subject to some of these expressed feelings. Remember that you can book a counsellor debriefing session to discuss things like this.

Managing Work Duties

It's important to be empathetic and sensitive during this time as some of your employees may not be able to cope and continue with their normal workload productively. Others may have been very close to the deceased and need immediate support. It can be daunting and awkward to discuss completing workloads and tasks when a tragic event like this happens, but it is an important conversation to have. You should encourage your employees to complete their work to the best of their ability but be aware that some may find this very hard, especially if the police become involved. Let them know that you understand this and that you will take a flexible approach.

As an employer/line-manager, you should identify which team members are struggling with their workload and offer one on one chats with them to discuss openly how they are feeling about the situation as well as asking how you can help them cope at work/if they need time off. It's important to be compassionate for these employees and be aware that those who are bereaved by suicide are vulnerable to developing mental health issues as a result of their bereavement. Thus, this is why it is crucial to give your employees access to support such as our counselling service/resources. Be prepared to identify which employees are coping effectively during this time and ask them to step in and take on some additional tasks.

Email Templates

When you are in a moment of crisis finding the words can be extremely difficult. We always recommend talking face to face within your organisation, but written comms are also important for signposting and getting across the necessary information. We've built email templates for you to tailor to your specific company policies and needs.

Email Template to the Team

Breaking the news to your team about the loss of a colleague can be daunting. We have created an email template which can be used by managers/HR to inform the employee who died's team of their loss. The template contains appropriate phrasing and guidance about the support available to them through Suicide&Co.

Subject: Support available regarding the loss of {insert name of employee who died}

Hi all

I hope you're all doing okay today. As I'm sure you are aware, our team member {insert name of employee} has sadly passed away. {Insert personal line such as: X was an important member of our team who was such a kind and caring person, a great person to work with and I know will be greatly missed by us all...}.

At {insert name of organisation} we partner with the charity [Suicide&Co](#) who support those bereaved by suicide. They have lots of great resources that you can access to provide support and help you navigate your grief.

Their [Early Bereavement Support service](#) is available to anyone who has been impacted by a suicide loss in the last 6 months. They provide emotional and practical support with a trained member of their Suicide Bereavement Advisor Team. These support calls can be scheduled flexibly and around your needs.

Their App is another helpful resource that can be accessed at any stage during your grief journey and at your own pace. It provides both general mental health exercises and personalised, suicide bereavement-specific resources to help you find the right support for you.

Please continue to look out for one another and communicate as a team to ensure everyone feels supported at this time. Please let me know if anyone would like to discuss workload or further support.

Best wishes,
{insert name}

Email Template to the Organisation

Subject: Update and support regarding the loss of our colleague

Hi all,

I hope you're all doing okay today. As I'm sure you are aware, our employee and colleague {insert name of employee who died} has sadly passed away.

Our HR team are working with {insert name of employee who died}'s team and family members to provide bereavement support during this difficult time.

At {insert name of organisation} we partner with the charity [Suicide&Co](#) who support those bereaved by suicide. They have lots of great resources that you can access to provide support and help you navigate your grief.

Their [Early Bereavement Support service](#) is available to anyone who has been impacted by a suicide loss in the last 6 months. They provide emotional and practical support with a trained member of their Suicide Bereavement Advisor Team. These support calls can be scheduled flexibly and around your needs.

Their App is another helpful resource that can be accessed at any stage during your grief journey and at your own pace. It provides both general mental health exercises and personalised, suicide bereavement-specific resources to help you find the right support for you.

Please let me know if you have any questions or if there is anything further we can do to provide you with support at this time.

Best wishes,
{insert name}

Email Template to the Family

Subject: Condolences and Support from {insert name of organisation}

Hi {insert name of next of kin of employee who died}

I hope you're doing okay today. We are so sorry to hear about the loss of {insert name of employee who died}. {Insert personal line such as X was such a kind and caring person, and a great person to work with and will be greatly missed...}.

At {insert name of organisation} we partner with the charity [Suicide&Co](#) who support those bereaved by suicide. They have lots of great resources that you can access to provide support and help you navigate your grief.

Their [Early Bereavement Support service](#) is available to anyone who has been impacted by a suicide loss in the last 6 months. They provide emotional and practical support with a trained member of their Suicide Bereavement Advisor Team. These support calls can be scheduled flexibly and around your needs.

Their App is another helpful resource that can be accessed at any stage during your grief journey and at your own pace. It provides both general mental health exercises and personalised, suicide bereavement-specific resources to help you find the right support for you.

Please let me know if you have any questions or if there is anything further we can do to support you at this difficult time.

Best wishes,
{insert name}

What to expect: The Inquest and Internal Workplace Investigations

Introduction

When an employee dies by suicide it can be an extremely emotional and stressful time for the entire workforce. This is why it is crucial to access our support networks as well as being there for your employees. Additionally, a coroner may contact your organisation to be part of an investigation into why the deceased employee has died by a suspected suicide, especially if they were not fit for work at the time or had discussed taking their own life openly in the workplace. The most important thing to remember is that no one should blame themselves for what has happened to the employee. There are many reasons why someone might take their own life, you can learn more about it in our 'Understanding Suicide Guide'.

The Inquest

When someone dies by suicide there is an inquest into their death. An inquest is an inquiry into the circumstances surrounding how the person died in order to provide the details needed for their death to be registered. The coroner will collect evidence such as medical records and other records relating to the deceased, along with written witness statements. Normally, the deceased's family is involved in giving the coroner most of the relevant information needed. For example, the coroner will find out if the deceased had a history of mental illness, if they were under any financial stress as well as any relationship problems. All of this information is gathered in order to prove that the person intended to end their life.

Suicide&Co's website shares some more information about the inquest process, which you can [read online](#).

An Inquest in the workplace

If relevant, the coroner may contact the deceased's employee's workplace. This is where you as an employer/line-manager may become involved. The police may wish to speak to you about the deceased employee's recent work performance/state of mind. You should assist the coroner in identifying the relevant team members/those who were closest to the deceased colleague in order to help them with their investigation.

You and your employees may spend a lot of time answering the police's questions as well as locating documents to help the coroner with their investigation. Answering these questions may be distressing and could leave you/your employees feeling like you could've done more. However, remember that inquests do not seek to establish whether anyone was responsible for a person's death, reassure yourself and your employees that their colleague's death was not their fault and that no one is to blame for what has happened. Be aware that completing these tasks for the police may have an impact on your employee's emotional state and they will have to do this on top of their normal workload.

This may become too difficult or overwhelming for some of your employees and they may request some time off which is why it is important to be prepared for this and have a plan in place. Remember as an employer/manager you should be continually checking in on these employees to see how they are doing.

Internal Investigation in the Workplace

You or those in a more senior level to you, may decide to hold an internal investigation into the deceased's colleagues death regardless of whether or not a coroner gets involved, especially if the deceased requested time off or if the organisation wants to re-evaluate their mental health and wellbeing policy (if they have one).

You will need to ask your employees for their cooperation to be involved in the investigation. Remember that this internal investigation is not to establish whether anyone was responsible for the person's death. During the investigation, you may need to ask employees to collect any emails, handwritten notes or request that they do an interview. During the interview, the employee can have someone accompany them for support. The interviewer should explain the nature of what is being investigated and how they have the obligation to do this as a company/organisation. They will also inform the employee that no conclusions will be made about the investigation until they have fully gathered all of the evidence.

Understanding Suicide Guide

Introduction: Statistics and the Prevalence of Suicide

At Suicide&Co, we believe in the power of education. If you have not had personal experience or exposure to the subject of suicide and want to know how to best support and understand someone who has lost someone to suicide or is feeling suicidal, this guide will give you the information and understanding that you need.

World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that at least 800,000 people die by suicide each year on a worldwide scale. This translates to as many as 108 million people newly exposed to suicide annually (O'Connor, 2021). There are said to be between 6 - 135 people impacted or directly bereaved by each suicide. Meaning that many colleagues may feel the impact of a suicide loss with the organisation.

Suicide is among the top 20 leading causes of death worldwide and is the second leading cause of death amongst 15-29 year-olds (O'Connor, 2021). Suicide accounts for 1.5% of global mortality. In the UK, suicide is the leading cause of death for men aged 35-49, and the leading cause of death for men and women aged 20-34 (O'Connor, 2021). Whilst men are 3 times more likely to die by suicide, women are more likely to report suicidal thoughts.

Whilst these statistics put the prevalence of suicide into perspective, it is important to remember that each suicide is different and that behind these numbers are people who suffered with their mental health, and bereaved families and friends who are left behind.

What it means to be suicidal and why people may feel this way

1/5 of us will think about suicide in our lifetimes. It is important to remember that if you are feeling suicidal, these feelings will pass and that there is help available to keep you safe and to help with the problems that are causing you to feel this way.

Being suicidal can feel confusing, frightening and complicated and these feelings can range from fleeting thoughts about not wanting to be here, to actually making plans to end your life. It is important to understand that those who feel suicidal do not always feel like they want to die; they more often simply want to stop the pain that they are experiencing.

When someone has suicidal thoughts, they might be feeling some of the things below (Rethink Mental Illness):

- I have let myself and other people down
- I am a burden and a failure
- No one needs me or cares about me
- I'm not good enough
- There's no point in living
- Things will never get better and I will never find a way out of my problem
- I'm weak, I can't bear this pain
- I have lost everything
- If I die, it's the best for everyone

They may often be feeling:

- Hopeless, trapped and desperate
- Tearful, anxious and overwhelmed by negative thoughts
- Tempted to do risky or reckless things due to a lack of care about what happens to them

Whilst suicide does not have one single cause, there are various reasons as to why someone might be feeling suicidal and there are multiple risk factors that can make someone more likely to experience suicidal thoughts or consider suicide:

- A previous suicide attempt
- A family history of suicide
- Difficult life events, such as experiencing trauma or abuse
- Stressful life events like a relationship ending or losing your job
- Feeling hopeless, isolated or not having social support
- Acute emotional distress
- Excessive use of drugs or alcohol
- Mental illness
- Physical health conditions, especially if causing chronic pain or disability
- Problems with work or money
- Being personally bereaved by suicide

Warning Signs

Significant changes in someone's personality or behaviour may be a sign that they are having suicidal thoughts. There are some common warning signs that could indicate that someone is in need of immediate support, but each person's experience is unique and so you may be the best judge of whether someone you are close to is behaving differently.

Some things to look out for include (Rudd et al, 2006):

- Talking about wanting to die or ending their life
- Looking for a way to end their life
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no purpose
- Talking about feeling trapped or being in unbearable pain/ no way out
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing use and dependence on alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious, agitated, or reckless
- Sleeping too little or too much and lacking in energy
- Withdrawing from society/loved ones or feeling isolated
- Expressing rage or being more confrontational
- Displaying extreme mood swings
- Saying negative things about themselves and their future

The following things could indicate that someone is thinking of attempting suicide:

- Threatening to hurt or kill themselves
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide
- Saying goodbye or sending messages that feel like an ending
- Preparing or making plans to end their life, such as storing up medication
- Putting affairs in order, e.g giving away belongings or making a will

Myths about Suicide:

Understanding the facts and dispelling the myths about suicide can make you better able to support someone experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Myth:

People who talk about suicide aren't serious about it and won't go through with it.

Fact:

People who kill themselves have often told someone that they feel life is not worth living or that they have no future. Some may have actually expressed their wishes or plans to die. It's possible that someone might talk about suicide as a way of calling out for help. It is very important to always take someone seriously if they talk about feeling suicidal. Helping them get the support they need could save their life.

The majority of people who feel suicidal do not actually want to die, they do not want to live the life they currently have. However, people who talk about suicide do sometimes act on their feelings so it is best to assume that they are telling the truth and take what they say seriously.

Myth:

If a person is serious about killing themselves then there's nothing you can do to stop them.

Fact:

Often, feeling actively suicidal is temporary, even if someone has been feeling this way for a long period of time, it is likely that these feelings will at some point pass. This is why getting the right support at the right time is so important. Encourage them to seek help they are comfortable with e.g help from a doctor or counsellor, or support through a charity.

Myth:

To think about suicide you must have a mental illness.

Fact:

Not all people who die by suicide have mental health problems at the time they die. However, many people who die by suicide do suffer with their mental health. Sometimes this is known about before the person's death and sometimes not; all suicides are different and sometimes it can come as a complete shock, and other times if there has been a history of mental illness or suicide attempts there is less shock.

Myth:

You shouldn't talk about suicide as it can put the idea into someone's head and it may give someone the idea to try it.

Fact:

Suicide can be a taboo topic and it is often very hard to talk about. People who are feeling suicidal may not want to worry or burden anyone with how they are feeling and so they may keep these feelings to themselves. Once someone opens up about these feelings they have a better chance of discovering ways to cope. There is no evidence to suggest that talking about suicide can cause someone to try it.

What you can do to help yourself and others

There are simple actions that can help to support someone if you are worried they are feeling suicidal. It is always best to take action if you have a gut feeling that someone is having suicidal thoughts, or that they are experiencing mental health issues and you're worried about them.

It can be extremely distressing if you are worried that someone you love may feel suicidal or may be planning to end their life. Encouraging them to talk about their feelings with someone they trust is really important. Talking about suicidal feelings can feel uncomfortable and you might not know what to say or how to start a conversation like this. Simply asking someone if they're suicidal can help. Asking directly about suicide and even just saying the word out loud can give that person the permission they need to open up and shows they're not a burden. If someone feels suicidal, it can be a huge relief to talk about how they feel.

If someone does share their suicidal feelings with you, it is so important to listen non-judgmentally and to respond with empathy, but to acknowledge that you do not know exactly what it is like to have these feelings, rather than giving advice or opinions. You can offer emotional and practical support and help them to create a support plan and seek help.

Sources: (Mentalhealth.org, 2021), (Rethink.org), (Mind, 2020), (Samaritans.org)

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Suicide&co