

The Successful SUPERVISOR

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Tips from  LifeSolutions

One of challenges a supervisor can face is 'managing an employee with suicidal concerns'. The safety and security of that individual as well as potential impact on co-workers can weigh heavily. Given the seriousness of the situation and the level of anxiety it can generate for a supervisor, the next two issues of The Successful Supervisor will address this workplace challenge. Information is reprinted from A Manager's Handbook: Handling Traumatic Events. U.S. Office of Personnel Management. June 3, 2009., "Managing an Employee with Suicidal Concerns" [http://www.opm.gov/Employment and Benefits/WorkLife/OfficialDocuments/handbooksquides/Trauma/Ch4.asp](http://www.opm.gov/Employment_and_Benefits/WorkLife/OfficialDocuments/handbooksquides/Trauma/Ch4.asp).

We are interested in your feedback. Email your questions and comments to LifeSolutions at ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com

The focus this month is on describing suicidal employee indicators and initial manager responses. Next month will focus on using the EAP as a partner to develop a plan of action.

Overview

Suicide is a significant cause of death among Americans. Though there are differences in suicide rates based on such factors as age, gender and ethnicity, a person from any background can commit suicide, or go through a period of seriously contemplating it.

People considering suicide often have been 'worn down' by many stresses and problems. Actual or expected loss, especially of a love relationship, is often a contributing factor. The suicidal person is frequently lonely and without a solid support system. Sometimes this is a long-term characteristic of the person; in other cases a geographic move, death, or a divorce may deprive an individual of personal ties that were formerly supportive.

Listen carefully to what your employees say – people thinking about suicide often give hints about their intention. Talking about not being present in the future, giving away prized possessions, and making funeral plans are examples of possible hints of suicidal intent. You won't make the situation worse by clarifying it and an open conversation with you may be the person's first step toward getting well.

Be alert to changes in behavior. Deterioration in job performance, personal appearance, punctuality, or other habits can be a sign of many problems including suicidal concerns.

Manager Response If an Employee Admits Thinking about Suicide

You'll want to link your employee to professional help. The way you approach the issue can have an impact on the employee's willingness to receive professional help. Your respect and concern for the employee can contribute to the healing process.

- First offer your own personal concern and support. Let the employee know you care – the employee is both a unique human being and a valued member of the team.
- Show understanding of the employee's pain and despair, but offer hope that with appropriate help, solutions can be

found for the problems that are leading the person to feel so desperate.

- Ask whether any of the employee's problems are work related, and, if so, take initiative in attacking those problems. For example, the employee may feel improperly trained for key responsibilities, or may be having difficulties with leave or some similar issue without having made you aware of it. If you can act as an advocate in remedying some of these problems, you will help in three ways – removing one source of pain, showing concretely that someone cares, and offering hope that other problems can also be solved. Contact human resources for consultation.
- Do not question the employee about personal problems, as the individual may wish to keep them out of the workplace, but listen with empathy if the employee chooses to share them.
- Protect the employee's privacy with regard to other employees. When dealing with higher management, you need to think clearly about what they actually need to know (e.g., that the employee is temporarily working a reduced schedule on medical advice) as opposed to what they don't need to know (e.g., intimate personal information that the employee may have confided in you as the immediate supervisor). LifeSolutions suggests you consult Human Resources before sharing any information.

Taking Care of Yourself

Working with an employee with suicidal concerns can be highly stressful, and you should take positive steps to preserve your own mental and physical health. You should not hesitate to ask for support for yourself, either from your own manager or from the EAP.

When Should A Manager Call the EAP?

When in doubt or if you have any questions or concerns, we strongly encourage you to call the EAP. You are not alone in dealing with these situations. The EAP has the knowledge and experience to help. Supervisor consultation is available 24/7. Tune in next month for particulars.