Most supervisors don’t anticipate being faced with an employee who discloses having suicidal thoughts. Given the seriousness of these situations, they often generate anxiety for the supervisor and co-workers. We will examine how the supervisor can use the EAP to best address the safety and security of the individual and the potential impact on co-workers. As always, we are interested in your feedback and questions. Please email the EAP at ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com or contact an EAP account manager at 1.800.647.3327.

Tom Koloc, LPC, NCC
Angela Surovec, MSW, LSW

Overview

Suicide is a significant cause of death among Americans. Though there are differences in suicide rates based on age, gender, and ethnicity, most people who seriously consider suicide have been “worn down” by 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. While some people are natural loners, others may be deprived of supportive personal ties by a move, death, or divorce.

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.

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 thoughts.

How to Respond if an Employee Admits to Thinking About Suicide

It is important not to dismiss suicidal thoughts the employee shares with you. You should link your employee to professional help. The way you approach the issue can affect 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.

Acknowledge the employee’s pain and despair and offer hope that, with appropriate help, solutions can be found for the problems that are leading the person to feel so desperate.

Do not question the employee about personal problems, as he or she may wish to keep them out of the workplace, but listen with empathy if the employee chooses to share them. It is important to remind the employee that you are suggesting a professional assessment so he or she gets the best possible help.

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. For example, management would need to know that the employee is temporarily working a reduced schedule on medical advice, but not the specific reason why — that is, the intimate personal information the employee may have confided in you as his or her immediate supervisor. LifeSolutions suggests you consult Human Resources before sharing any information.

When Should You Call the EAP?

◆ When dealing with an employee who is talking about suicide, we strongly encourage you to call the EAP. You are not alone in dealing with these situations. LifeSolutions can discuss immediate safety issues and make arrangements for the employee to be assessed.

◆ This is very important to do before you allow the employee to leave the worksite. This could potentially put the employee at risk.

◆ If at all possible, try to keep the employee on site while you contact the EAP for a risk assessment. Sometimes a mobile crisis response team or family member may need to be contacted to help ensure the person’s safety. The EAP has the knowledge and experience to help. Supervisor consultation is available 24/7.

If you have concerns about an employee or questions about dealing with suicide threats or at-risk behaviors, please call LifeSolutions at 1.800.647.3327, or your HR Representative.

Nothing in this information is a substitute for following your company policies related to information covered here.