Suicide Prevention and **Mental** in the **Workplace**

benefits
MAGAZINE

Health Support

by | **Chad Myler** and **Christiana Castillo**

Suicide is a serious public health concern, yet many people are reluctant to discuss it in the workplace. Employers, benefit administrators and human resources leaders can make a difference by creating a work environment that supports mental health and providing suicide prevention training and resources.

Have you ever stood around a workplace watercooler and talked openly about a physical injury sustained over the weekend? You may have squished a finger while building a garden bed or strained your back moving furniture. Maybe you even embellished a little to bring in a larger crowd.

Now, have you ever talked openly about a mental health struggle or experience with suicide?

It can be common to openly discuss with co-workers, supervisors and others the physical aches and pains you feel. But when it comes to mental health, those conversations are much less open.

The World Health Organization's definition of *health* includes physical, mental and social well-being.[1] Getting closer to a state of complete well-being requires people to start focusing on all aspects of their health with the same respect and openness. Mental health *is* health.

With that in mind, it's important to recognize suicide as a serious public health concern. Every year, more than 700,000 people globally die by suicide.[2] But there is hope. Suicide can be one of the most preventable causes of death if timely action is taken through empathy, listening and implementing evidence-based and even low-cost interventions.

There are many workers waiting at that watercooler wanting to talk. The good news is that those workplace watercooler talks among colleagues provide low-hanging fruit for taking action. People spend most of their waking hours at work, and you can make a difference by taking steps to help those who are reaching out. These steps can include participating in suicide prevention training, learning more about the signs and symptoms of mental illness or suicide, or even just asking your colleagues how they are doing and really listening.

Where Do I Start?

As a benefits administrator, employer or HR leader, your primary focus should be on establishing a workplace environment that is supportive of mental health and on reducing the stigma of mental health issues. This is accomplished with open communication, education for managers and supervisors, and top-down support.[3] You should also aim to set standards for how workers interact with one another and encourage social support networks.

One of the first steps you can take is to build a blueprint. The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention has put together a template called the Comprehensive Blueprint for Workplace Suicide Prevention.[4] The blueprint includes all the elements and resources that an organization needs to build suicide prevention practices into the workplace.

Each workplace is going to build comprehensive suicide prevention and mental health support differently, so it is important to ask yourself the right questions to know where to start. The alliance suggests the following initial questions.[5]

- What is the sense of urgency?
- How does the price of not doing suicide prevention compare with the price of implementing suicide prevention?
- Do major stakeholders (both within and outside of the organization) support suicide prevention?
- How does leadership within the organization view suicide prevention?
- How will suicide prevention align with intended organizational core values and goals?
- How will planning and implementation for suicide prevention be supported and sustained?

Implementing Suicide Prevention in the Workplace

Now that you have asked these questions, it is time to plan and implement a suicide prevention blueprint. To start, your organization can implement one of many free or low-cost options within the workplace.

Quick suicide prevention ideas include the following.

- Post phone numbers for crisis lines in visible spaces.[6]
- Tap into existing employee assistance program (EAP) services.
- Schedule employee training sessions.
- Provide workers with tools to self-assess mental health concerns.

If your organization has an established EAP, its services can fulfill many of the categories within the Comprehensive Blue-

print for Workplace Suicide Prevention, such as life skills and social network promotion, education and advocacy, mental health services and resources, screening, crisis management and suicide prevention training.[7] EAPs allow you to lean on experts to assist in achieving the goal of promoting mental health and suicide prevention resources within the organization.

Mental health and suicide prevention programming can seem daunting. Blueprints provide the ideas and plans, but your organization needs to map out how the specific elements within each blueprint category will be executed. A simple way to do that is by tapping into turnkey, expert-developed solutions.

Learning from trusted experts in the field can also help you identify gaps in the suicide prevention framework at your organization, learn more about the complex nature of suicide and, more importantly, understand how to make strides to accomplish the goal of preventing suicide. Learning from trusted experts can be something straightforward such as setting up training for your employees.

Suicide prevention training programs can be a minimal-to no-cost way to start these conversations with your organization. Training can be presented to employees in as little as one hour or may be planned as more intensive, multiple-day events. The key is to start.

The following organizations and training programs are examples of the various types of training that you can implement within your organization to help achieve this goal.

- **LivingWorks Start:** This program lasts 60 to 90 minutes and teaches participants how to recognize the signs of suicide and take life-saving action by connecting someone to hope and support.
- **LivingWorks safeTALK:** This in-person, four-hour training provides in-depth skills to recognize signs of suicide, engage someone and ensure a connection to safety.
- **LivingWorks ASIST:** This in-person, two-day program teaches participants how to provide a skilled intervention and develop a collaborative safety plan to keep someone safe and alive. Living Works training programs can be accessed at www.livingworks.net /trainings.
- **More Than Sad:** Offered by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (https://afsp.org/more-than -sad), this training lasts up to two hours and teaches parents, teachers or teens how to recognize signs of

takeaways

- Suicide is a serious public health concern but is one of the most preventable causes of death if timely action is taken through empathy, listening and implementing evidence-based and even low-cost interventions.

- Employers that want to focus on suicide prevention should focus on establishing a workplace environment that is supportive of mental health and reducing the stigma of mental health issues.

- Free or low-cost ideas for suicide prevention include posting phone numbers for crisis lines in visible spaces, tapping into existing employee assistance program (EAP) services, training employees on suicide prevention and providing mental health self-assessment tools.

- A wide variety of organizations provide resources and training on suicide prevention. Training programs can range from an hour or so in length to a few days.

depression and other mental health problems, initiate a conversation about mental health and get help.
- **Talk Saves Lives:** Also offered by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (https://afsp.org/talk -saves-lives), this education program is roughly one hour and teaches participants how to recognize common risk factors and warning signs associated with suicide and how to keep themselves and others safe.
- **QPR Gatekeeper Training:** This training offered by the QPR Institute (https://qprinstitute.com) lasts 60 to 90 minutes and focuses on the skills of how to recognize warning signs of suicide, offer hope and get help for someone to save a life.

Additional education, support and resources are available from the following organizations.
- **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention** (https:// afsp.org): A voluntary health organization that gives those affected by suicide a nationwide (U.S.) community empowered by research, education and advocacy to take action against this leading cause of death. It hosts local programs and events in all 50 states.

A great starting point: "Learn the Facts" tab on the home page. Learn from one of the foremost expert organizations what has been learned about suicide through research, suicide prevention interventions and treatments, and find out what you can do to help achieve a world without suicide.

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Chad Myler is the health promotion manager for life and work connections, a department under the division of human resources at the University of Arizona. He oversees and evaluates programs that impact the population health of university employees, such as preventive health screenings, suicide prevention training and financial literacy workshops. He is a certified health education specialist through the National Commission for Health Education Credentialing as well as a question, persuade, refer suicide prevention gatekeeper instructor through the QPR Institute. Myler has worked in health promotion and employee wellness in the private and public sectors, including a civilian position with the U.S. Air Force and roles at Usana Health Sciences and the Salt Lake County Health Department. He earned a B.S. degree in health promotion from Weber State University and an M.S. degree in health promotion and education from the University of Utah.

Christiana Castillo is the project coordinator of Project Lifeline, a SAMHSA Garrett Lee Smith Campus Suicide Prevention grant working to reduce the incidences of suicide and suicide attempts and their related risk factors at the University of Arizona. She currently coordinates and facilitates QPR Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper training on campus for faculty, staff and students, and she provides workshops for students on various health topics, including general health and wellness, mental health, physical health, self-care, resilience, stress and sleep. Castillo holds a B.A. degree in psychology and began her career working for CODAC Health, Recovery & Wellness, Inc., in Tucson, Arizona. She also earned an M.P.H. degree in the health behavior health promotion concentration from the University of Arizona and has since been working for the University of Arizona Campus Health Service.

- **Living Works** (www.livingworks.net): International (U.S., Canada, Australia offices) suicide prevention training programs organization. Programs are available for individuals, communities and organizations.

  A great starting point: "Saving Lives from Suicide" tab on the home page. Learn more about why suicide prevention matters and how you can help through a community-based approach.

- **Man Therapy** (https://mantherapy.org): A multi-agency effort that focuses on providing resources to men to help with problems such as suicide and mental health by showing working-age men that talking about their problems and getting help is masculine.

  A great starting point: "Head Inspection" tab on the home page. This 20-question self-assessment provides insight on where you excel and where you can improve with your mental health.

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** (https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org): A national network of crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

  A great starting point: "Learn" tab on the home page. Learn about the risks, factors and warning signs of suicide and how you can help, and read stories of hope and recovery.

- **Suicide Prevention Resource Center** (www.sprc.org): Federally supported resource center devoted to advancing the implementation of the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention.

  A great starting point: "About Suicide" tab on the home page. Learn about risks and protective factors for suicide.

Many state, local and tribal health departments also provide suicide prevention programming to workplaces depending on grant awards and funding.

It is important to recognize that this is not an exhaustive list of all suicide prevention resources applicable to the workplace. Remember, you must understand your audience and its needs, as well as your organization's culture, when implementing suicide prevention programming. Organization climate culture surveys or needs assessments can aid in better understanding the employee population. Don't be afraid to get creative when implementing suicide prevention programming in your workplace. Suggestions include:

- Hold training over the lunch hour and encourage employees to bring their lunch and learn with their co-workers
- Open a meeting with an educational, while also humorous, video on breathing, cooking or even yoga
- Encourage workers to invite their dependents to attend training along with them to broaden your reach.

Conclusion

Suicide is a serious topic, but it doesn't have to be uncomfortable. Over the past two-plus years, many people have had to learn creative ways to reach out and connect. Use existing expert resources and templates to build something at your workplace for those reaching out. Those people waiting at that watercooler will thank you for starting the conversation. You can make a difference. ◉

Endnotes

1. World Health Organization. www.who.int/about/governance/constitution.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "Environmental Support," www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/health-strategies/depression/interventions/environmental-support.html.
3. WHO. "Suicide," www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide.
4. National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention. "Comprehensive Blueprint for Workplace Suicide Prevention," https://theactionalliance.org/communities/workplace/blueprintforworkplacesuicideprevention.
5. Ibid.
6. "Suicide Hotlines and Prevention Resources Around the World," *Psychology Today*. www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/suicide/suicide-prevention-hotlines-resources-worldwide.
7. National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention. "Comprehensive Blueprint for Workplace Suicide Prevention." theactionalliance.org/resource/comprehensive-blueprint-workplace-suicide-prevention.