



Talking about suicide and providing support at work

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Workplace Academy

Introduction

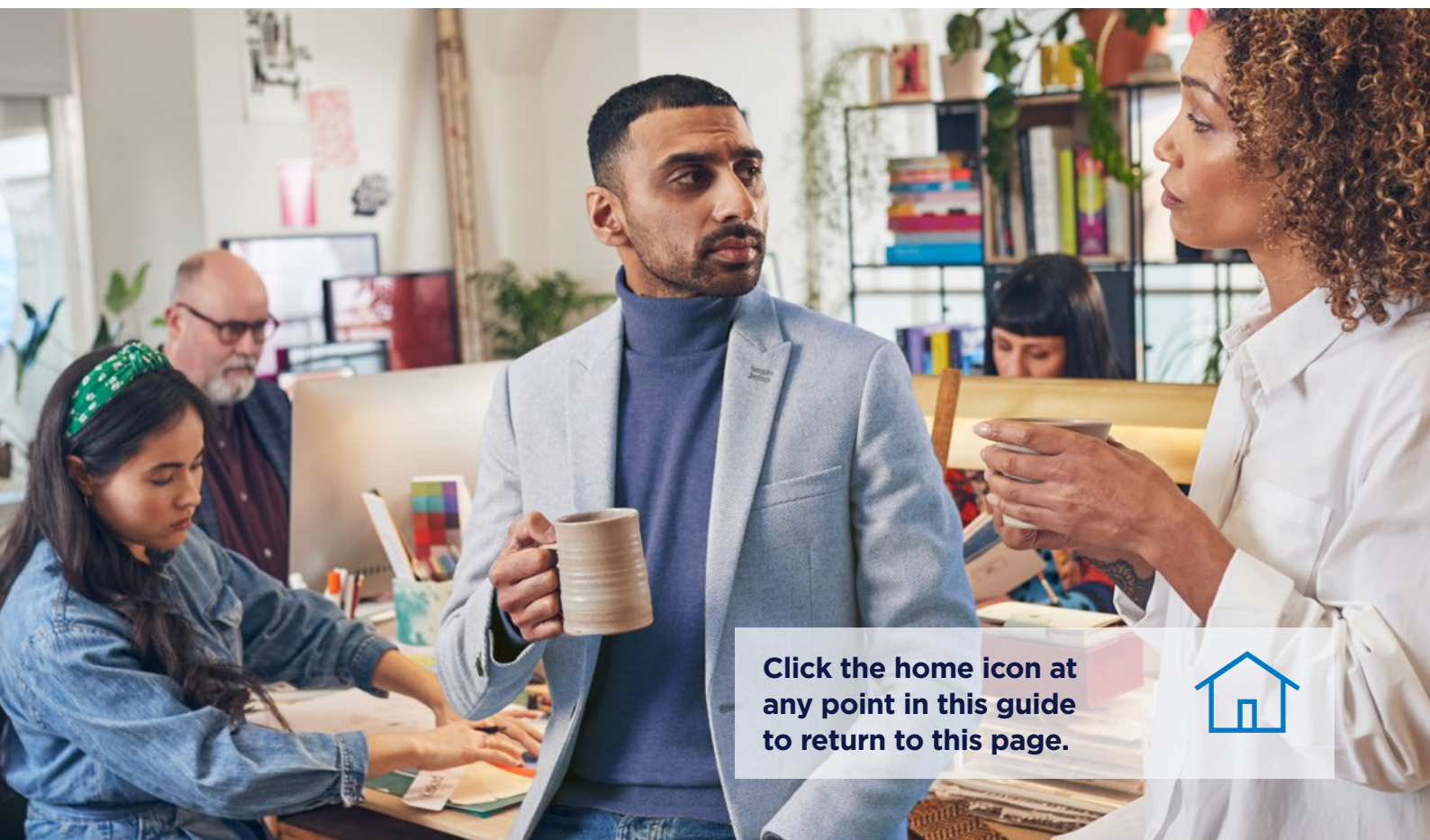
Here, we'll look at some of the ways employers can reduce the risk of suicide amongst employees. We'll also discuss how to provide support for any colleagues who have been affected by suicide.

Suicide can be a very sensitive and emotional subject to talk about, and it's often surrounded by stigma and misconceptions. Here, we'll look at some of the ways employers can have open conversations and reduce the risk of suicide amongst employees. We'll also discuss how to provide support for any colleagues who have been affected by suicide.

It's important for organisations to create a supportive working environment where

people can talk openly about their mental health. As an employer, it's ok to understand that you're not solely responsible, qualified, or expected to act as a counsellor for someone who is feeling suicidal.

But providing a safe space that enables someone to discuss their feelings if they are experiencing suicidal thoughts – and knowing how to signpost them to the right support services – could help someone get the support they need.



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Suicide and the workplace

Steps to reduce suicide risks

Managing in the event of a suicide



How common is suicide amongst people of working age?

Suicidal thoughts are more common than you might think. One in five of us are believed to have experienced suicidal thoughts at one time or another. So it's important to be mindful of the possibility that someone you work with may be experiencing suicidal thoughts – even if they're unlikely to act on them. People often keep their feelings to themselves at work, so you may simply not know if someone is struggling to cope with their emotions.

In the UK, suicide is unfortunately a leading cause of death for people aged 20 to 34. And the highest rates of suicide are among people aged 45-54. This means that more people than you might think will have been affected by a death by suicide. This could be an employee, a friend or family member of an employee. Or perhaps someone you work closely with, like a client.



In 2022, men and women aged 45 to 54 had the highest rates of suicide in England and Wales.

Suicide statistics. House of Commons Library. [Commonslibrary.parliament.uk](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/), Published January 2024



In the UK, suicide is a leading cause of death among 20 to 34 year olds.

Suicide risk mitigation: Epidemiology. BMJ Best Practice. bestpractice.bmj.com, reviewed May 2024

What are the risk factors for suicide?

There's no straightforward answer to this. The reasons for suicide are multifaceted and can't be simplified, so we can never know for sure. Ultimately, suicide isn't limited to any groups of people and often can't be predicted. But being aware of the risk factors for suicide might help you to spot the signs that someone is at risk, and signpost them to the support they need.

We do know that around nine in every 10 people who take their own life have a mental health problem at the time of their death. This is whether the problem has been formally diagnosed or not.

Someone may also be at higher risk of suicide if they:

- have a history of suicidal behaviour or self-harm
- are male (men are three times more likely to take their own lives than women)
- are a member of the LGBTQ+ community
- are from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background. For example, they may be unemployed or homeless

- are going through a negative life event, such as a bereavement, family breakdown, job loss or financial difficulties
- struggle with alcohol or drug problems
- are living with a long-term health problem. This could be chronic pain, degenerative disease, disfigurement, loss of sight or hearing, or a terminal illness
- work in certain occupations. For example, factors such as stressful work environments, low pay and low job security can increase the risk of suicide.

There are also some things that can make suicide less likely. These are known as supportive or protective factors, and can include:

- being able to talk openly about mental health and suicidal thoughts
- having a support network of family and friends
- access to professional mental health services
- feeling engaged in your work and hobbies



Men are three times more likely to take their own lives than women.

Mental health facts and statistics. Mind. Mind.org. Published June 2020

Steps you can take to reduce the risk of suicide in your workplace

Suicide isn't inevitable; most people who have suicidal thoughts don't go on to take their own life. It's important to remember that you're not a mental health expert or solely responsible for anyone's care or safety. But having the following steps in place could help you to start a conversation and help your employees access the right support.

Open and honest culture

Encourage people to start a conversation about mental health. You should aim to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable asking for help if they need it.

Suicide prevention strategy

It's important to know how you will respond to talking about suicide and support your workforce if it does happen, to reduce risk factors such as:

- stress
- discrimination
- bullying and harassment.

Mental health training

Provide mental health education for both managers and employees. This should address how to talk about suicidal feelings and spot the early warning signs.

Access to support

Make sure you know how to signpost someone to the appropriate support services if they do disclose suicidal thoughts. This should be their GP in the first instance. But services can also include:

- Employee Assistance Programmes
- occupational health support
- counselling and professional mental health services.

If you don't provide these services, specialist charities such as Samaritans and Mind have free helplines and resources you can signpost to.

Positive working relationships

Build good relationships with your team members, so you can recognise any unusual changes in their behaviour. Look out for the welfare of anyone going through a particularly difficult time and have procedures and guidance in place for employees who need support.

This could include support with:

- mental health
- long-term health conditions
- domestic violence
- financial problems
- a bereavement
- disciplinary action, dismissal or redundancy.

Suicide awareness

Raise awareness of suicide and the support available across your organisation. For example, use your internal communication channels to ensure employees know about the support available to them. You can also put-up posters for national charities and helplines.

Flexible working

If an employee has disclosed poor mental health or you suspect they might be struggling, allow them flexibility and time to seek support. This may include time off to attend counselling or medical appointments.

You might worry that talking about suicide could encourage someone to attempt suicide, but this isn't true. Removing the stigma about suicidal feelings in your workplace is a critical step in reducing the risk of suicide. Some people who have been experiencing suicidal thoughts have expressed feeling relieved by being able to talk about it.



Managing in the event of a suicide

When suicide does happen, it can have a huge and long-lasting emotional impact on those who were close to the person, which may well include their colleagues. It's essential for organisations to prioritise the wellbeing of those who have been affected by suicide in your workplace. This includes psychological support through measures such as compassionate leave, bereavement counselling, peer support and support services. It will also include practical support, like adjusting workloads and schedules. It's also necessary to ensure you communicate in a sensitive and compassionate manner.

It's recommended that organisations have a postvention plan in place to prepare for such a situation. The organisations and resources below have a wide range of free information and advice that can help you to develop suicide prevention and postvention plans in your workplace.

- Public Health England and Business in the Community have produced a number of toolkits for employers, including [Reducing the risk of suicide](#) and Crisis management in the event of a suicide that can help you to develop your plans.
- The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) have also developed a guide for professionals on [Responding to suicide risk in the workplace](#).
- The Samaritans have produced [media guidelines](#) which contain practical advice for reporting suicide safely.
- You may also want to develop and communicate a bereavement policy. The CIPD also have [guidance on compassionate bereavement support in the workplace](#).

Further support

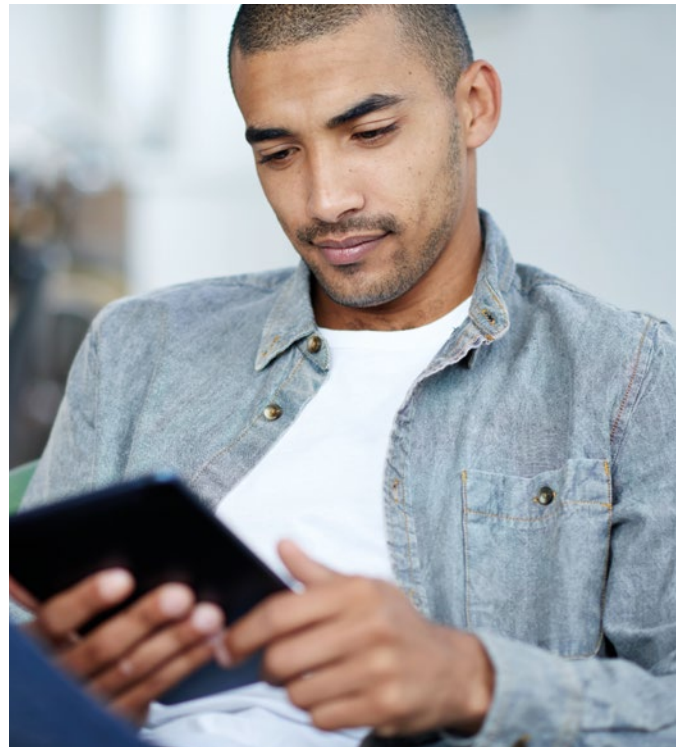
Samaritans provides free, 24-hour telephone and online support to anyone struggling to cope with their emotions. You can call them on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org.

Mind have free information and advice on mental health conditions and support services.

Bupa has more information about workplace mental health that you may find useful.

Sources

1. **Reducing the risk of suicide: a toolkit for employers.** Public Health England and Business in the Community. Bitc.org.uk, published 2020.
2. **Responding to suicide risk in the workplace: a guide for people professionals.** cipd.co.uk, published June 2021.
3. **Position statement. Understanding and preventing suicide: A psychological perspective.** The British Psychological society. Bps.org.uk, accessed June 2024.
4. **Suicide risk mitigation.** BMJ Best Practice. bestpractice.bmj.com, reviewed May 2024.
5. **Suicide statistics.** House of Commons Library. Commonslibrary.parliament.uk, Published January 2024.
6. **Mental health facts and statistics.** Mind. Mind.org.uk, published June 2020.
7. **Suicide Prevention.** Health and Safety Executive. Hse.gov.uk, accessed June 2024.



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