

# Supporting someone in the workplace at risk of suicide



**If someone you manage has attempted suicide or may be at risk, it can be hard to know how to respond and support them. Many people are unsure what to say, or how to approach the situation.**

While everyone's experience is different, there are a number of simple, positive things you can do. By knowing what to look for, having the skills and confidence to have a conversation and provide support, you can make a huge difference to someone at risk. Showing concern and helping the person feel connected and valued can lessen the likelihood of another suicide attempt.

Work can play a significant part in recovery for someone who has attempted suicide or is at risk,

providing structure, a sense of purpose and social interaction. As a manager or employer you have an important role in ensuring an employee who has attempted suicide is supported to return to work, and that the process is as safe and smooth as possible for everyone involved.

The question 'Why did they attempt to take their life?' is complex and unfortunately may never be fully resolved. The most honest answer is that we don't fully understand suicidal behaviour, and there are normally a number of factors to consider. For more information visit [www.beyondblue.org.au/understanding-suicide](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/understanding-suicide)

## What to look for

While people at risk of suicide may try to hide how they are feeling, they often give out warning signs. You might notice changes in their behaviour or be aware of events in their life that could be affecting them.

Signs to look for include:

- previous suicide attempt/s
- talking about suicide
- talking about being a burden to others
- talking about feeling trapped or having unbearable pain
- agitation, anxiety and/or irritability
- trouble sleeping
- changes in appearance
- taking time off work
- a recent stressful event or loss
- social withdrawal/feeling alienated
- seeming preoccupied with an internal thought or problem.

Act immediately if you notice any warning signs or if another team member comes to you with concerns about a colleague.

If you feel out of your depth, consider asking the person if you can contact someone else who could help.

A colleague who has been trained in suicide first aid may be better placed to offer support, or you could help the person to call a crisis line, such as Lifeline.

**If the situation is urgent and you're worried that the person is in immediate danger, do not leave them alone**, unless you are concerned for your own safety. Call the person's doctor, mental health crisis service or **dial 000** and say that the person's life is at risk.

## Having the conversation

If you're concerned that someone you manage may be suicidal, start by having a conversation. You might feel unsure about what to say, but the main thing is to be calm and non-judgmental. You don't need to solve their problems or understand 'why' – just listen and encourage them to seek support or check in with their health professional.

Don't be afraid to ask directly if they are thinking of suicide. Asking the question does not increase the person's risk, but their response will help you understand how they are feeling.

If someone in your team tells you they've thought about or attempted suicide, it's important not to let any preconceived ideas you may have get in the way of listening openly. You may be shocked or find it hard to understand, but your role is to provide reassurance and offer support.

Be aware of the person's journey to get to this point and how difficult the conversation is likely to be for them. Talking about suicide takes courage – acknowledge this and thank the person for being honest with you.

Additional resources to help you have a safe, effective conversation about suicide are listed at the back of this fact sheet.

## Supporting someone who has attempted suicide

A person returning to work after a suicide attempt is likely to feel isolated and alone. They may also feel ashamed or embarrassed.

Any genuine care and concern you can offer will help the person feel connected and can lower the risk of another suicide attempt. Include them in meetings and social events or ask their opinion on work issues – anything to make them feel like a valued member of the team.

Keep in touch with the employee on a regular basis to see how they are, whether they are taking time off or have returned to work, and include a safety check.

### Suicide safety check

Reinforcing that you are there to support the person at risk is really helpful, but don't be afraid to also ask direct questions to determine if you need to take immediate action. Asking the person if they are intending to take their life will not plant ideas of suicide – rather, it gives them an opportunity to release any negative thoughts and gives you a better sense of how they're feeling. If the situation is an emergency and the person is planning to kill themselves, do not leave them alone and seek help immediately.

For more information visit [www.beyondblue.org.au/responding-to-warning-signs](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/responding-to-warning-signs)

The first three months after a suicide attempt are critical in a person's recovery as they are at a higher risk of another attempt. Between 15 and 25 per cent of people who try to kill themselves will attempt again, so it's important to provide support and be aware of warning signs or changes in their behaviour. If a person at risk of suicide is absent from work, especially without warning, make contact regularly to check in.

*beyondblue's The way back* resources provide practical guidance and support for people who have attempted suicide and those close to them. For more information visit [www.beyondblue.org.au/the-way-back](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-way-back)

## Developing a return to work plan

A structured approach to returning to work is essential, and any plan should be a collaborative effort between the employee and manager. Start by setting realistic goals and objectives, as well as a process for monitoring their progress and fine-tuning the plan.

Rather than making assumptions about what the person needs or what would be helpful, try and ask open questions such as:

- Which tasks do you enjoy?
- What do you find stressful?
- What can I do to support you?
- What should I do if I notice changes in your behaviour?
- How regularly would you like to catch up?
- How often would you like to review the plan?

The person may need some changes to their role as they reintegrate into the workplace – these can be temporary or permanent, and may include adjustments to their schedule, work hours, tasks or responsibilities. Rebuilding someone's confidence after a suicide attempt is an ongoing process, and it's important to allow for a gradual return to work.

## Making adjustments – your legal responsibility

Under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, employers must make changes to the workplace to enable someone who has been mentally unwell to remain at or return to work, providing they can continue to meet the core requirements of their role. These changes, or 'reasonable adjustments', can be temporary or permanent.

Because everyone's experience and circumstances are different, there's no 'one size fits all' approach. Together with the employee, identify what sorts of changes and support will work for them, and document these as part of the work plan.

Some examples of common adjustments include:

- offering flexible hours to allow the person time off for medical appointments
- shift or location changes
- reduced hours and/or workload



- providing access to professional mentoring, coaching or peer support
- modifying tasks that the employee may initially find difficult or overwhelming, such as managing others, public speaking or customer service.

### Maintaining confidentiality

While it's important to inform the wider team of any changes that affect them, such as reallocating workloads or changes to their colleague's role, any details about the employee's suicide attempt or treatment must remain confidential unless the employee gives their permission. Talk to the person about what they would like other colleagues to know and how they would like to share this information.

### Barriers to working

For many people who have attempted suicide, concerns over colleagues' reactions or a lack of support can add to existing stresses. Managers have an important role to play in identifying and taking steps to minimise potential barriers, for the benefit of all employees.

Factors that can make it difficult for someone to return to work following a suicide attempt include:

- stigma associated with suicide
- perceived or actual lack of planning or support from employer
- fear that colleagues may find out and/or have negative reactions
- worry about discrimination and the impact on future career prospects
- concerns that causes of work-related stress have not been dealt with.

While a certain amount of stress might be thought of as 'normal' in your workplace, be aware that someone recovering from a suicide attempt is likely to feel vulnerable and less able to cope than previously. Talk to the person about any work-related stress factors or issues and how these could be improved. Another way you can ensure their return to the workplace is as smooth as possible is by reallocating their work across the team so they don't face an overwhelming backlog.

### Suicide prevention in the workplace

Think about what suicide prevention measures already exist in your workplace and how you can get involved. Your organisation's Employee Assistance Program or HR team are good places to start. If you work for a small company or one that currently doesn't have a formal structure in place, you can get advice on suicide prevention and how to introduce an approach that suits your workplace from the organisations listed under

'Suicide prevention training' at the end of this fact sheet.

Key steps include:

- establishing policies and procedures for supporting someone who may be suicidal, has attempted suicide or is bereaved by suicide
- making emergency contact numbers readily available to all staff
- training key staff in suicide first aid and letting all employees know who they can talk to
- providing access to a phone and privacy to allow people to call a suicide crisis line if required
- providing education and training for all employees
- encouraging and modelling help-seeking when you have difficulties.

Regardless of the policies and procedures your organisation has in place, everyone can help to reduce stigma by speaking openly about suicide in the workplace.

**Suicide can seem like a scary subject and it's OK to feel uncomfortable. You can make a huge difference to someone at risk by being supportive and showing concern – you may even save their life.**



## Where to find more information

### Crisis lines and further support

#### Lifeline

[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

13 11 14

Free, confidential, 24 hour telephone and online crisis support service. The website also provides a range of information.

#### Suicide Call Back Service

[www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

1300 659 467

Free, confidential, 24 hour telephone and online counselling service for people who are suicidal and anyone wanting to talk through concerns. The website also provides a range of information and resources.

#### beyondblue

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Learn more about anxiety, depression and suicide prevention, or talk through your concerns with our Support Service. Our trained mental health professionals will listen, provide information and advice, and point you in the right direction so you can seek further support.

☎ 1300 22 4636

✉ Email or 💬 chat to us online at [www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport)

### General information

#### Living is for Everyone (LIFE) Resources

[www.livingisforeveryone.com.au](http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au)

The Federal Government's suicide prevention framework and supporting resources for people across the community wanting information on suicide and suicide prevention. Includes a range of fact sheets about rates of suicide in Australia, suicide warning signs and how to respond to suicidal thoughts.



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[@beyondblueofficial](https://www.instagram.com/beyondblueofficial)

Donate online [www.beyondblue.org.au/donations](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/donations)

### Having a conversation about suicide

#### Mental Health First Aid Suicide Guidelines 2014

[www.mhfa.com.au/cms/guidelines](http://www.mhfa.com.au/cms/guidelines)

Community guidelines for responding to suicidal behaviour.

#### Conversations Matter

[www.conversationsmatter.com.au](http://www.conversationsmatter.com.au)

Practical online resource to support safe and effective community discussions about suicide.

### Suicide prevention training

#### LivingWorks Australia

[www.livingworks.com.au](http://www.livingworks.com.au)

1300 738 382

Suicide awareness training programs to improve understanding and help people intervene to support a colleague at risk.

#### Mental Health First Aid

[www.mhfa.com.au](http://www.mhfa.com.au)

Courses teach mental health first aid strategies to members of the public. The training equips participants to support someone developing a mental health problem, or experiencing a mental health-related crisis, until appropriate professional treatment is received or the crisis resolves.