

Virtual Work: When an Employee is Struggling

While we always face challenges in work and life, employees today may be coping with many significant and stressful changes in a short time. The signs that someone may be struggling are not always obvious, especially in a virtual environment when face-to-face interaction may be limited. If you're managing a virtual team, you will need to be alert to changes that are beyond what you would normally expect. Being able to recognize and respond to these cues is a valuable way to support your employees.

Be aware of changes

Be mindful of your staff's regular work patterns and communication styles. Without the visual cues that tell you that an employee is struggling, staying more "tuned in" to subtle cues or changes to their normal behaviors gives you valuable information:

- **Communication style:** Pay attention to the differences in the way they interact with you or the team. Listen for long pauses or changes in emotional tone – for example, a usually outgoing person who becomes withdrawn, noticing that someone's speech sounds more rapid or pressured, or a friendly, easy-going person who becomes argumentative.
- **Mood shifts:** Someone with a normally positive outlook may become more pessimistic or negative. You might hear or see statements of hopelessness, a sad or empty mood, or "I don't care" attitudes in their phone or electronic communications. They may be irritable or angry in their responses.
- **Withdrawal from others:** The person may be increasingly unavailable or unresponsive to you or teammates. They may miss or decline meetings without providing an explanation, or don't participate when they otherwise would.
- **Job performance:** Look for new or unusual patterns in productivity. Their work may be late, have increased errors, or not be of the quality that you're accustomed to seeing. You may notice an increase in absenteeism, signing in late, or signing off early consistently and without permission.

- **Relationships with coworkers:** You may hear concerns from colleagues who notice changes in work style, mood, or productivity. There may be increased conflicts or lack of cooperation with you or their teammates.
- **Change in work habits:** A person who is normally organized and "on top of it" suddenly becomes scattered, forgetful, having trouble concentrating or making decisions. Regular tasks might take more time than you would expect (even with changes to the work environment).

Possible signs of mental health concerns

If an employee tells you or you see indications that they are experiencing the following, it is important to recommend support for that employee:

- Feeling hopeless, helpless, worthless, sad
- Loss of interest in life
- Changes in eating, sleeping patterns
- Tiredness, low energy, or more hyper-active behavior
- Feeling anxious, irritable, restless
- Noticeable drop in performance
- Trouble focusing or making decisions

Trust your instincts. Don't be afraid to check out your concerns with the employee using the strategies below. If they are experiencing these indicators frequently (on a weekly basis), it may be helpful for them to talk to a professional. Inform them of EAP should they need additional support for these concerns.

Respond proactively

- **Have regular check-ins, personally or as a team exercise.** For personal check-ins, use a phone call or set up a video chat session so you can hear your employee's voice. Don't rely on email or instant message (unless privacy in the home is a concern). Electronic communication can be impersonal and make it harder to detect changes in speech patterns, tone, or personal reactions. It's okay to give them an opportunity to discuss personal matters if you are aware of a specific concern.
- **Be sensitive to privacy.** Know that they may not be able to provide a private space to talk right now if they live in close quarters with others who are at home. Try to coordinate check-in conversations at a time when they can be candid about their experience.
- **Find the right words.** Think about how you'd want a conversation to begin if it were directed towards you. Use words that you're comfortable with and that show your concern without putting the person on the spot or diagnosing. Examples include, "I'm concerned," or simply, "How is it going for you?"
- **Ask open-ended questions about your concerns,** such as, "I've noticed you've been quiet in team meetings lately. How are team meetings going for you?" Pause for their response and ask for their input. Just listen to their concerns and be alert for issues. Let them share as much or as little as they wish.
- **Be compassionate, not judgmental.** Without face-to-face interaction to add valuable context, it's important to be especially mindful of your tone as well as your words. Use a sincere tone and calming voice to communicate a caring demeanor.
- **Offer support and get them connected to help.** "Please let me know what you need from me," affirms your support as a manager. Proactively share resources, such as EAP, where they can connect with professional and work/life services to address concerns.

Warning signs of suicide:

People may give clues that they're thinking of suicide. It is important to recognize the signs that might warn of a suicide attempt:

- Making direct statements about ending one's life.
- Making indirect comments like, "What's the point of living?", "Life is meaningless."
- Talking or writing about death or dying, including social media posts.
- Mentioning having means and/or a plan for self-harm (i.e., access to pills, guns, other weapons).
- Giving away meaningful possessions.
- Asking about life insurance policy details, especially those related to cause of death.
- Showing interest in end-of-life affairs, such as making a will, discussing funeral preferences, etc.
- Voicing hopelessness or helplessness.

If there is any indication in your conversations with the employee that would indicate risk of suicide or self-harm, get them help immediately.

Notify Human Resources and consult with EAP right away for next steps.

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Responding to Suicide Warning Signs

When an employee is struggling with suicidal thoughts, there are often warning signs that manifest in the workplace. An employee may share thoughts with a coworker or make comments that are overheard. Coworkers or a manager might notice changes in behavior that are concerning. It is important to take action if there are any concerns for an employee's safety. This handout is designed to give you a better understanding of how to respond if an employee shows signs that might point to a risk of suicide.

Warning signs of suicide risk:

- Making direct statements about ending one's life.
- Making indirect comments like, "What's the point of living?," "Life is meaningless," "No one would miss me if I were gone."
- Talking or writing about death or dying (one's own or the topic in general), including social media posts.
- Mentioning having means and/or a plan for self-harm such as access to pills, guns, or other weapons.
- Giving away possessions.
- Asking about life insurance policy details, especially as it relates to cause of death.
- Showing interest in end-of-life affairs, such as making a will, discussing funeral preferences, etc.
- Noticeable changes in behavior or mood. The person might appear uncharacteristically sad, quiet, depressed, or withdrawn. You might see neglect of work, appearance, or hygiene.
- Voicing hopelessness or helplessness.

Increased risk:

Seeing one or more warning signs in a person who has suffered a significant loss may indicate increased risk. Examples include:

- A death
- Divorce or relationship breakup
- Loss of child custody
- Home foreclosure
- Bankruptcy
- Job loss

Other significant risk factors include:

- Ongoing physical or mental health challenges
- Severe financial stressors
- Legal problems
- An event causing disgrace or shame
- Substance misuse
- Impulsivity
- Access to lethal means

There are about
130 suicides per day
in the U.S.

That is roughly
1 suicide every
11 minutes.

(American Foundation for
Suicide Prevention, 2021; CDC, 2021)

Most suicidal people do not want to die; they want the emotional pain to stop and can no longer see another way to get relief. Discussing suicide openly, in practical terms, is one of the most helpful things you can do.

What to do if an employee shows warning signs of suicide:

It's important as a manager to act quickly and gather information. You are not expected to do a suicide risk assessment, but asking questions can help determine appropriate next steps. Take all responses seriously.

Ask the employee about any suicidal thoughts

- Take all reports of suicidal thoughts seriously. If a colleague reports concerning statements made in the workplace or social media posts (even if made outside work hours), take immediate action.
- As soon as you become aware of warning signs, find the employee and don't leave them alone, as long as you are not in danger. Attempt to reach remote employees by phone and keep them on the line. If you are unable to reach a remote employee, you may need to call 911 for a welfare/safety check.
- For in-person interactions, take them to a quiet, private place away from crowded areas or colleagues to have a conversation and determine next steps.
- Be direct about what you've observed or heard from others. You might start with, "I have heard that you said, 'My life is not worth living.'"
- Ask the employee if they have had thoughts of ending their life. You might be concerned that this will give them the idea if they didn't have it already, but research shows that talking about suicide reduces stigma and allows individuals to seek help (Fuller, 2020). You are giving them a sense of hope and relief by making it OK to talk about it.
- Give the employee a chance to explain. Listening is the most important thing you can do at this time.
- Show your concern and support. Let the person know you care for and value them. Be compassionate, even if you feel angry or upset about what the person is considering.
- Don't minimize their pain with comments like, "It's not so bad." Acknowledge their pain and despair.
- Offer hope that with the right help, solutions can be found for the problems that are leading the person to feel suicidal. Do not offer advice or brainstorm solutions. Remember, it's not your job to "fix" the situation, but rather to assist with getting them help.
- Protect the employee's privacy as far as is practical, but do not promise complete confidentiality. Rather, say you'll do everything you can to protect their privacy and will only share information as necessary for their safety.
- If the employee works offsite or is not at work, check company policy regarding calling the employee to have the above conversation.

Starting a conversation

- *I feel like you haven't been yourself lately. I am concerned about you.*
- *I want to respect your privacy, but I can tell something is wrong.*
- *I know you've been having a tough time recently. Can you share what has been going on?*
- *It's come to my attention that you said, "____" on social media. Can you share why you said that?*

Phrases you could use

- *How long have you felt like this?*
- *Have you been feeling hopeless?*
- *How are you coping with what's been going on in your life?*
- *I'm here to support you.*
- *Can you think of anything I could do to help you?*
- *I am concerned for your safety. It's my responsibility to get you the help you need.*
- *I don't know exactly how you feel, but you matter to me and I want to help.*
- *Your safety is the most important thing right now.*

Key questions to ask

- *Do you ever find yourself thinking that you would hurt yourself?*
- *Are you having thoughts of suicide?*

Phrases that may not be helpful

- *You don't really want to do that.*
- *It can't be that bad.*

If the employee confirms they intend to harm themselves:

- Call 911. Safety is your priority. Never transport the employee to the hospital yourself. This could be dangerous for you or the employee.
- Explain to the employee that given what they've shared, you have concerns about their safety, and that it is your responsibility to ensure they get immediate help.
- When calling 911, give all the details that the employee has shared with you and any statements the employee reportedly made to others, including social media posts.
- When the emergency responders arrive, they will talk to the employee to assess further and determine next steps.
- If the employee works remotely and is unable to be reached or working offsite, you may need to call 911 to do a welfare/safety check. If you wait until the next day to see if they report to work, it may be too late to prevent a tragedy.
- Once the immediate safety concern is addressed, consult with the appropriate resources within your company.

If the employee doesn't indicate a plan to harm themselves but you remain concerned:

- Make sure that the employee has the EAP number and understands that they can call that number at any time, 24/7, for help.
- As a manager, you can call the EAP and state that the situation is serious and needs a quick response. Ask to speak with an EAP Consultant immediately.
- The EAP Consultant will gather the details from you and help you put a plan together that might involve offering an urgent appointment to the employee, talking to the employee over the phone, setting up a management referral, or offering the employee EAP referrals.

Managing the employee going forward

- After addressing immediate safety concerns at the workplace, the EAP can help you determine if a follow-up plan is needed.
- Sometimes a formal management referral is appropriate to make sure the employee is following through with the help they need.

Take care of yourself

It can be very stressful when an employee displays warning signs of suicide. In addition to supporting your employee, don't hesitate to get support for yourself, either from your own manager or the EAP. You can call the EAP and talk to someone about *your* reactions to the situation. Your conversation will be confidential.

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is here to help you before, during, and after a crisis.

References

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Starting a Conversation

It's understandable that a manager might be uncomfortable approaching the topic of suicide with an employee. It's a highly personal matter that's difficult for many to understand, let alone talk about. However, the best course of action is talking directly and openly when there is a threat of suicide. Use the scenarios below to practice starting this conversation with an employee.

Instructions: Break into pairs or small groups for this activity. One person will play the employee while the other plays the manager. The manager will start a conversation with the employee about the scenario. Debrief together afterwards, providing feedback on how it felt to have the conversation, what worked, and whether it could be approached in a different way.

Scenario 1

You've been managing Korey for about a year. Lately you've noticed Korey arriving to work late, often looking disheveled and fatigued, as if they haven't been sleeping. This week they missed a deadline on an important project, which is out of character for them. You overhear Korey mutter to themselves, "I am worthless. Everyone would be better off without me."

Scenario 2

You manage a virtual team. Ebony has been on the team for three years and is typically very engaged and one of the highest performers on the team. Lately, Ebony signs into her computer late, and her coworkers have commented that she is unresponsive when they attempt to reach her. In a group video chat, you notice that Ebony isn't as talkative as she normally is, and it looks like she's been crying. Today, another employee calls you and shares that she has concerns about Ebony. She shows you her social media feed that contains several concerning posts. On one of them she has written, "I want to die."

Communication reminders

- Be direct, honest
- Ask open-ended questions
- Remain non-judgmental
- Show your concern and support
- Listen rather than advise
- Know the goal – help them connect with help

Scenario 3

Cameron has been on your team for about six months. He tends to be quiet in team meetings and doesn't share a lot of personal details with you in your 1:1 meetings. You overhear his coworkers talking and learn that Cameron has recently gone through a breakup. Walking past his desk, you notice that he is scrolling through a website that sells firearms. A concerned employee approaches you and shares that she is worried that Cameron might hurt himself.

EAP Consultation and Referral Services

Management Consultation:

A Management Consultation is a discussion between a manager and an Employee Assistance Consultant about work performance issues and behavioral improvements requested by the manager. It is an opportunity to problem-solve, brainstorm, role play, and get specific topic information.

Informal Management Referral:

Informal Management Referrals are most appropriate when a manager either knows about an associate's personal problem or suspects it based on such behavior as crying, social withdrawal, or changes in personal appearance. The employee is either not experiencing job performance problems or is in the early stages of a performance decline. To make an informal referral, managers simply offer employees the EAP phone number, with a reminder that the program is free, confidential and voluntary. Managers will have no further involvement in the process and not receive feedback.

Formal Management Referral:

Formal Management Referrals are performance-based referrals where EAP is offered voluntarily as a way for an employee to address personal issues which may be impacting their work performance. Contingent upon the employee's written permission on an EAP Consent for the Release of Confidential Information form, the Employee Assistance Consultant will report to the manager compliance with EAP appointments and compliance with recommendations that result from that assessment.

Continuation of Employment Referral:

Continuation of Employment Referrals occur when the manager declares that an employee's referral to EAP and compliance with treatment recommendations are conditions of continued employment. This includes, but is not limited to, EAP referrals occurring as a consequence of a positive drug or alcohol screen. The EAP Consent for the Release of Confidential Information form would also apply.

Fitness-for-Duty Evaluation (available on a "Fee-for-Service" basis):

The Fitness-for-Duty Evaluation and Behavioral Risk Assessment program provides employers with access to a network of specialized behavioral health professionals who have the expertise to deliver comprehensive, independent assessments of employees' behavioral fitness for duty and behavioral risk. Evaluations can be coordinated by contacting your EAP and asking to speak to an Employee Assistance Consultant. These services are paid for by the employer on a "fee-for-service" basis. They are not included in the EAP benefit.