

What to Do If a Co-Worker Is Suicidal



In recent years, it seems that an increasing number of people, when faced with adversity, psychological distress, or despair, have contemplated ending their suffering by turning to suicide. As this can affect anyone, you may face a day where a co-worker reveals to you that they have experienced suicidal ideations.

You may learn that your co-worker is suicidal in one of the following ways: (1) the person tells you directly, (2) You observe signs of psychological distress and/or warning signs that the person is suicidal, or (3) your co-worker is in serious crisis and threatens to attempt suicide soon.

Each of the above situations calls for a specific approach.

If your co-worker tells you directly

If a co-worker tells you they are having suicidal thoughts or contemplating suicide, the best thing to do is to reflect back and clearly communicate that must be feeling overwhelmed, powerless, and hopeless about finding a solution to their problems.

It's very important never to ridicule the person, make them feel guilty, or try to reason with them. Their pain and distress must be heard, so the only way to soothe some of the pain and despair is to get them to accept help while acknowledging their feelings so they feel understood and heard. It's also important to indicate that you understand their distress and that today, at this moment in time, they see suicide as the only solution to their problems. Then you should tell them firmly that they need help, and encourage them to seek it. At this point, you need to make sure that they immediately speak with an employee and family assistance program representative or counsellor. Suggest calling the employee and

family assistance program while they are with you; or, if you need to be even more direct, make the call yourself, ask to speak to a counsellor, and pass them the telephone. If, despite your encouragement, your co-worker does not make the call or refuses help, or if they tell you they are going to attempt suicide soon and resists your offer of help, you should immediately contact the employee and family assistance program and seek expert advice.

Enhancing social connections are key to having meaningful and supportive conversations. With the global pandemic of COVID-19, we all face new realities of increased isolation and loneliness. Unfortunately, the pandemic has also led to loss of employment or has changed our routines and familiar workplace and environment. As more employees move to remote work scenarios, people may feel detached from their coworkers, especially if they were used to being in an environment that provided social interactions. It is important to stay in touch with your coworkers throughout the day, just as you would have if you were all still in the office.

If you notice signs of emotional distress

It may be that you suspect a co-worker is distressed because they are clearly not themselves. The most common signs of emotional distress are when a coworker:

- Withdraws, or conversely, is much more sociable than usual.

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- Talks much more or much less than usual, especially about their difficult situation and its consequences for themselves and those close to them.
- Is experiencing a difficult situation but seems “above it all,” as if they are not in touch with reality.
- Seems overcome with sadness (ruminates, cries, seems “elsewhere”), or in deep despair.
- Complains much more than usual. Looks haggard, seems to be in a daze. Is more irritable than usual.
- Acts more aggressive than usual for no reason, or out of proportion to the situation.
- Often talks about how difficult their situation is, how they can't see any way of improving it, and how there's no way out.

The warning signs that a co-worker is contemplating suicide are when they:

- Make direct or indirect references to the fact that they have found a solution to their problems, and that soon everything will be settled or they won't be bothering anyone any more, or that other people's problems will soon be settled.
- Talks directly or indirectly about suicidal thoughts (they may even describe how they will attempt to take their life).
- Suddenly seems happier and more carefree, after having gone through a period of deep despair.
- Is suddenly extremely generous with everyone, paying off debts (big and small) and giving away possessions (including things of great value) to friends and co-workers.

If you notice any of these signs, try to “open the door” by sitting with your co-worker, telling them about the signs you've observed, and asking if there's anything you can do to help.

“If they open up to you, use the strategies described in the first scenario above. If they don't open up, raise the subject of suicide with them directly by sharing your observations. Tell them that you're concerned, and that if they are feeling suicidal, help is available.”

If you think that someone is about to attempt suicide soon

Another possible (although rare) scenario is a colleague who is about to attempt suicide very soon. They have a method immediately available or is threatening to take their life now (e.g. they have a weapon, are standing near an electrical panel, is threatening to jump off a platform or roof of a building, or calls you and tells you they have swallowed poison or are about to do something irreversible). The only thing you can do in these situations is to talk to your co-worker, tell them you understand how much they must be suffering, and get them to talk about their suffering, distress, and problems. If possible, ask other co-workers for help. Call 911 (if available in your area) or the police, explain the situation, and ask for immediate assistance. If you can't call yourself, get someone else to call immediately.

If you're near the suicidal person, maintain a good distance. If they are armed, don't approach unless they put down the weapon, move far enough away from it, and gives you permission to approach. Never try to restrain someone who is threatening to jump or end their life in a violent manner, as you may be seriously injured or killed. When emergency workers arrive, let them take charge of the situation. If you were the person to whom the suicidal co-worker was talking, don't leave the scene until you're told to do so (the suicidal person may want to continue talking to you because they trust you). After this type of incident, contact your employee and family assistance program to talk about it. A counsellor can help you express your feelings, make sense of your experience, and process your reactions.

If you suspect that a co-worker is suicidal or if they have let you know directly or indirectly that they are contemplating suicide, we strongly advise you to call one of the specialized counsellors at your employee and family assistance program for advice on the best way to help your co-worker.

Need more information or assistance? All calls are completely confidential.

1-800-663-1142 | TTY: 1-888-384-1152 | International (Call Collect): 604-689-1717

Numéro sans frais - en français : 1-866-398-9505

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