REAL LIFE
SOLUTIONS

SEPTEMBER 2012

The Role of Co-Workers in **Preventing Suicide**

September is National Suicide Prevention Month

Each year, more than 34,000 Americans take their own lives (CDC, 2007). A large number of suicides and suicide attempts are related to treatable emotional conditions including depression, other mood disorders, or alcohol and drug abuse. People often want to conceal their suicidal thoughts, depression, or alcohol and drug abuse. They may be embarrassed or fear that public disclosure will hurt their careers (although the Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA] prohibits discrimination in employment because of mental impairment).

Suspecting that a co-worker is considering ending his or her life can be frightening and confusing. You may not know when you should become involved in the problems of someone who is not family or a close friend, unsure of what you can do to help, or uncertain whether your co-worker is actually in serious trouble.

Recognizing the Warning Signs

People who are in danger of suicide often display warning signs. You may be in a good position to recognize these signs in the people with whom you work, even if they are trying to conceal their problems. The warning signs below may mean someone is at high risk for suicide.

- Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or buying a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

There is no foolproof way of telling that someone may be thinking of taking his or her life. But these warning signs can indicate that a person has serious problems that affect his or her life, productivity, and work environment. By recognizing and acting on these signs, you can help a co-worker find professional assistance and become healthier, happier, and more productive.

> ***Keep in mind:*** *While you support your co-worker, maintain healthy boundaries in the context of your responsibility for the personal welfare of him/her. You are responsible for your own thoughts, feelings and actions, not those of your co-worker.*

Responding to the Warning Signs

You should respond to warning signs that a co-worker is thinking of suicide. If you are comfortable speaking with this person, ask the difficult questions that can help you understand that person's state-of-mind and intentions. Approach the issue directly, "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" or "Do you feel like you want to die?" If they have been considering suicide or having suicidal thoughts, ask them to find help immediately; accompany them to your company's employee assistance program or help them call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

If you think a person is in immediate danger, do not leave him or her alone until you find help. Ask co-workers or the person's friends or family for help. If a crisis seems imminent, accompany your co-worker to an emergency room or community mental health crisis center. If your co-worker is unwilling to seek help, is uncooperative or combative, call 911 or 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

If your relationship with a co-worker is such that you do not want to talk to him or her about these issues, express your concern to someone else— a colleague who is friendly with that person, Human Resources or the employee assistance program.

Seeking Professional Help

The emotional problems associated with suicide are difficult conditions requiring professional help. One of the most important things you can do for someone who may be considering suicide is help him or her find that help.

Source: SPRC Suicide Prevention Resource Center http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/CoWorkers.pdf

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