

# Workplace SUICIDE PREVENTION

By Lori A. Schroth

**The trend of occupational suicides creates a need for workplaces to assess availability of resources and outreach materials to promote mental health and wellness. While suicides often take place outside the workplace, occupational suicides and workers with suicidal ideations nevertheless occur and recognizing the warning signs is key.**

**Organizations should encourage** a work-life balance to support positive mental health and wellness. This article explores proactive strategies and approaches that organizations can employ to address this evolving workplace dilemma.

Occupational suicides continue to be a reality that many organizations face. Over the past 10 years, more than 2,800 suicides have occurred in the workplace (BLS, 2018). This calculates to an average of 284 suicides each year, or five per week. These numbers do not include nonoccupational suicides, which account for approximately 44,000 suicides each year (AFSP, 2018). The numbers hold steady in the U.S. (Figure 1), therefore suicides remain an important public health issue, especially since these figures are thought to be underreported (AFSP, 2018; BLS, 2017; 2018).

Suicides can impact any workplace and have a lasting effect on employees, their families and the community. Workplaces are slowly embracing this reality and recognizing the importance of promoting good mental health and wellness.

Mental health impacts the safety and health culture of an organization, which influences business operations and productivity. The overall goal of suicide prevention is to reduce risk factors and promote resilience (CDC, 2018). With this information in mind, organizations can improve suicide prevention awareness by employing best practices such as those outlined in this article.

## Wellness Program & Committee

A wellness program is designed to augment the workforce's physical, mental, emotional, occupational and spiritual well-being. The goal of a wellness program is to create an environment that supports positive and healthful behaviors (Ho, 2017), which is a key element in preventing suicide.

A wellness committee is a good supplement to a wellness program. The committee can facilitate the wellness program by allowing all levels of the workforce to formally meet, opening

lines of communication and supporting activities to promote good health and wellness. As with any committee, identify objectives, appoint dedicated committee members and set up meetings. Utilize the committee to share opinions, employ initiatives and develop action plans. Be sure to document and track the status of assigned actions and evaluate the overall effectiveness of the committee's efforts. The committee may also organize events to promote employee engagement, which is especially important for employees new to the area or organization, those with life status changes (e.g., divorce, separation, widow) or those who feel they do not belong.

Whether a committee carries out these actions or identifies other ways to execute a wellness program, it encourages the discussion and engagement of mental health and wellness.

## Support Groups

Workplaces can consider forming an internal support group if poor mental health and wellness is a trend, or if a suicide has occurred. This provides employees an opportunity to discuss their feelings and offers a place they can feel safe, while receiving the support of co-

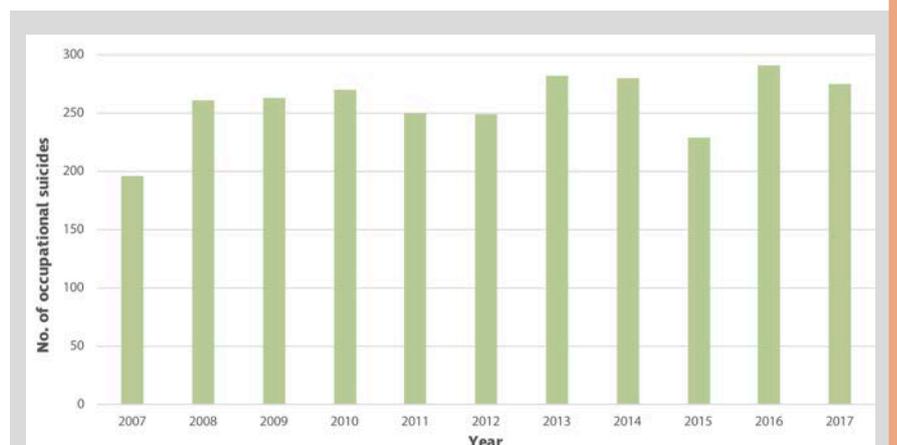
workers who may have similar feelings, or who have encountered a similar situation. "Findings suggest that acknowledging and talking about suicide may in fact reduce, rather than increase, suicidal thoughts" (NIMH, 2018), making support groups a viable option to prevent occupational suicides. Support groups can help employees stay in touch after a crisis and can reduce the risk of suicide when follow-up communications are made (NIMH, 2018).

Keep in mind that employees may not be comfortable sharing information with people they know, or may require additional medical intervention and assistance to help them cope with their feelings and thoughts. Communicate community-sponsored support groups to the workforce by posting the information on a bulletin board or sending out a short e-mail with the details so they can confidentially seek out these resources.

## Communication of Resources

Organizations can gather a list of resources that allow personnel to talk about their feelings and thoughts in a confidential setting. Consider pulling together these available resources, communicating them to employees and

**FIGURE 1**  
**OCCUPATIONAL SUICIDES, 2007-2017**



Note. Adapted from "All Worker Profile, 2003-17" by Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018.

posting them in a conspicuous area. It is a good idea for the human resources department and supervisors to have suicide prevention resources on hand to quickly provide to an employee in need.

A few resources organizations can communicate to employees include (CDC, 2018; Pappas, 2017):

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Available 24 hours a day; confidential; gives options of a phone call, (800) 273-8255, or online chat,

- National Suicide Hotline: Text CONNECT to 741741 to chat via text with a trained counselor.

- Trevor Project: A resource for the LGBTQ community, gives options of a phone call, (866) 488-7386, online chat, or text TREVOR to (202) 304-1200.

- Suicide Prevention Services of America: Focuses on depression, (630) 482-9696.

- Veterans Crisis Line: Press 1 to speak to a counselor, (800) 273-8255.

## Work-Life Balance

A healthy work-life balance is important to any employee, yet challenging to manage. Studies show that a healthy work-life balance may reduce stress and increase job satisfaction, performance and productivity (Shalini & Krishna, 2017). Organizations can work to improve this balance by implementing benefits that allow employees to balance work and personal demands (e.g., telecommuting, flexible work options, time to allocate toward fitness activities; Shattell, 2017). Organizations can also integrate work-life principles into policies and programs to make them official.

Employees are typically more willing to take advantage of these opportunities when there is management buy-in and promotion. Consider encouraging employees to use paid time off occasionally and take breaks throughout the workday to relax. It is always best to lead by example and show how management adopts this lifestyle to balance their own work and life demands.

## Soft Skills Development

Employees are an organization's most valuable asset. Without employees, the work would never get done. Consider implementing programs and avenues for employees to develop soft skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem solving), many of which can positively impact the employee's personal life, but also can benefit the organization (Symonds, Schwartz & Ferguson, 2011).

There is an endless list of options to consider when it comes to developing soft skills. Organizations can sponsor, pay for or promote seminars, workshops, lunch-and-learn presentations, or even consider implementing a tuition reimbursement policy that covers higher education courses or programs to refine or facilitate existing skills. The organization can use these personnel to fill open positions or fulfill other organizational needs. Motivate employees to take advantage of these opportunities and communicate available resources to help them develop their skills.

## Mental Health Advocate

Some organizations benefit from designating an employee as a mental health advocate; this is especially true for organizations that perform sensitive work or tasks that are mentally or emotionally draining (e.g., mortuaries, funeral services, hospital employees, hospice workers). A mental health advocate listens to employees who need to talk about their concerns or the obstacles they are facing at home or in the workplace (Allen & Campbell, 2018). This can help relieve stress and provide guidance and resources. Consider using a title other than mental health advocate to avoid any stigma that may prevent employees from utilizing this resource.

Carefully select mental health advocates, ensuring that they are respected among the workforce and maintain a level of trust. Mental health advocates can work with the human resources department or wellness committee to identify community resources and information that will benefit the workforce. Communicate the intent of this resource to the workforce, the name of the individual and the process for getting assistance.

## Awareness of Warning Signs

Educating supervisors and employees on the signs and symptoms of potential suicide may help prevent such a crisis in the future. The workforce can watch each other for behavioral changes, which may signify that something is not right. Sometimes it may be as simple as recognizing odd behavior and inquiring about someone's feelings to get them to start talking; however, this can only happen if employees are educated on the warning signs. Warning signs to communicate may include feelings of hopelessness, insomnia, panic attacks, social isolation, irritability, rage, feeling of being a bur-

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den to others, mood swings, change of eating or sleeping habits, increased use of drugs or alcohol, or putting affairs in order (NIMH, 2018; Pappas, 2017; Ramchand, Franklin, Thornton, et al., 2017). Consider integrating this information into safety briefings or existing training sessions.

## Suicide Prevention Awareness

Organizations can use World Suicide Prevention Day and National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month in September to promote suicide prevention awareness. Use this as an opportunity to remind employees about the importance of addressing suicidal ideation, to promote mental health and wellness, and to encourage communication before taking action.

Consider involving employees in organization-wide events such as:

- demonstrating how suicidal ideations not only impact the organization, but the personal lives of everyone linked to the employee;
- speaking to the workforce about the importance of seeking assistance or how to stabilize mental health;
- discussing an experienced suicide attempt or loss of a close friend or family member due to suicide;
- wearing suicide awareness ribbons to show support.

## Employee Assistance Program

Most organizations have an employee assistance program (EAP) in place to help employees with personal issues and concerns. EAPs are "programs operating within an organization for the purposes of identifying troubled employees, motivating them to resolve their troubles and providing access to counseling or treat-



ment for those employees who need these services” (Sonnenstuhl & Trice, 2017). Given the continued trend of occupational suicide, it is important to integrate suicide prevention measures into the EAP. This aspect may address:

- mental health and wellness support;
- access to an in-house mental health professional or mental health advocate;
- a mental health support plan to help the workforce cope with difficult feelings and thoughts;
- awareness and prevention strategies;
- recognizing employees in distress or having a difficult time;
- steps to intervene when a person is identified as having poor mental health or suicidal ideations;
- referral system to mental health professionals.

As with any written plan, identify responsible individuals to lead different aspects of the plan and assign timelines to activities and actions that must be taken to execute the plan. Continually monitor the plan to determine whether it is effective and to evaluate the efficiency of the plan based on organizational and workforce needs (Sonnenstuhl & Trice, 2017). Many organizations make the mistake of having a plan in place, but not taking employee feelings seriously. Communicate about the EAP and the availability of resources, and take action when necessary to make the EAP effective.

### **Bullying & Harassment Prevention & Intervention Plan**

Everyone has the right to a safe and healthful workplace, including freedom from bullying and harassment, two issues frequently associated with suicide

and poor mental health. Organizations can integrate bullying and harassment prevention in existing plans to communicate their stance on the topic. Make sure plans describe the steps to address a situation when bullying or harassment occurs.

### **De-Escalation Training**

In the event that an occupational suicide occurs, ensure that there is a supportive structure in place to assist employees who are having a difficult time dealing with the situation. A part of this process is to debrief the workforce after an incident occurs to relieve some of the stress experienced, and to prevent additional suicides from occurring (Allen & Campbell, 2018). Debriefings should include an overview of the incident (withholding private details and information), what was done correctly, what could have been handled better and how the response can be improved if a similar situation occurs. Remember that this information varies for each incident. No matter what the situation, encourage the workforce to express their feelings and take advantage of provided resources.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, suicide prevention continues to be an area that many organizations must improve. Many organizations have employee assistance resources in place, but lack an emphasis on mental health promotion and suicide prevention awareness due to the sensitivity of the topic. While occupational suicides continue to hold steady in the U.S., organizations must take steps to integrate suicide prevention provisions into existing programs and communicate the available resources to the workforce. Using a combination of intervention strategies, promoting mental health and wellness, and communicating the warning signs and symptoms may help reduce the stigma associated with suicides and help ensure that the plans and resources are in place to address this issue. There are many best practices an organization can integrate into its day-to-day operations to promote suicide prevention awareness, but each work-

place must be evaluated to determine which measures work best based on organizational needs and the work environment. **PSJ**

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