

How to respond to a suicidal colleague

There may be occasions when we encounter a colleague in a distressed state. There may be rare occasions where a colleague is feeling suicidal. There is no expectation that you will have the skills to provide professional support to suicidal colleagues and you cannot be responsible for the actions of another person.

The information in this document may be useful if faced with a situation of a distressed or suicidal colleague. This document gives guidance on when to offer listening and empathy, when to signpost someone to a qualified health professional, and when to call for more urgent assistance.

1) Contact by email and/or phone with a distressed colleague you suspect may be suicidal

It isn't always easy to tell if someone is suicidal as sometimes there are no signs at all, but you may notice behaviour changes by comparison with what has been typically experienced. Signs may include withdrawal, irritability, expressions of helplessness, hopelessness, isolation, loneliness, expressing concrete plans or timeframes for suicide.

Asking someone if they are suicidal will not encourage suicide. Research has shown that speaking openly about suicide to someone who is suicidal decreases the likelihood of the person acting on their feelings. If you feel confident in doing so, ask directly if they are experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Consider the following options:

- Ask for their phone number and location if you are concerned they are in danger and emergency services are required.
- Talk to them /active listening/non-judgemental /discuss support options.
- Encourage to contact friend /family or offer to contact them yourself.
- Call the First Response Service (if in Devon or Cornwall), these are expert mental health support services, available 24/7 providing mental health care, advice and guidance. It is available for those experiencing mental health crisis or for those concerned about someone's mental wellbeing. Devon and Cornwall – Dial NHS 111 and select the mental health option. If Somerset based: [Somerset NHS Foundation Trust](#) 0800 138 1692
- If there are no immediate concerns for safety, advise they contact their GP surgery and arrange an urgent appointment - offer to make this call if appropriate.
- Give the Samaritans contact number 116 123.
- If you have concerns about the colleague's immediate safety and their location is known, call 999 and ask for police and ambulance. This can seem like a daunting decision to make, but better to feel embarrassed than devastated by the loss of a colleague (the person's consent isn't required if you think there is an imminent threat to their safety or someone else's).
- If emergency services are needed but the colleague's location is unknown and they refuse to disclose their location, then contact the colleague's line manager if known, and ask their whereabouts/if at work.

- If emergency services are needed and they are at home but their address is unknown, then contact the line manager if known or Human Resources (humanresources@exeter.ac.uk) and ask for their home address on Trent (stating this is an urgent safety issue).

2) Contact face to face with a distressed colleague you suspect is suicidal

It isn't always easy to tell if someone is suicidal as sometimes there are no signs at all, but you may notice behaviour changes by comparison with what has been typically experienced. Signs may include withdrawal, irritability, expressions of helplessness, hopelessness, isolation, loneliness, expressing concrete plans or timeframes for suicide.

Asking someone if they are suicidal will not encourage suicide. Research has shown that speaking openly about suicide to someone who is suicidal decreases the likelihood of the person acting on their feelings. If you feel confident in doing so, ask directly if they are experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Consider the following options:

- Talk to them /active listening/non-judgemental /discuss support options.
- If the colleague is on campus, contact Estate Patrol /Security/Safety and Support (depending on your location), they will have mental health first aiders within their teams.
- Encourage to contact friend /family or offer to contact them yourself.
- Call the First Response Service (if in Devon or Cornwall), these are expert mental health support services, available 24/7 providing mental health care, advice and guidance. It is available for those experiencing mental health crisis or for those concerned about someone's mental wellbeing. Devon and Cornwall – Dial NHS 111 and select the mental health option. If Somerset based: [Somerset NHS Foundation Trust](#) 0800 138 1692
- If there are no immediate concerns for safety, advise they contact their GP surgery and arrange an urgent appointment - offer to make this call if appropriate.
- Make sure they're not left alone. If you are unable to stay with them yourself, you could consider calling a family member or friend, arrange for someone to take them to their GP surgery or accompany them to A&E.
- Remove anything they could use to take their own life, e.g. tablets, weapons, rope, without putting yourself in any danger.
- Encourage them to call the Samaritans contact number 116 123.
- Call 999 and ask for police and ambulance if someone's life is at risk, for example they have seriously injured themselves/taken an overdose or if you do not feel you can keep yourself or someone else safe. This can seem like a daunting decision to make, but better to feel embarrassed than devastated by the loss of a colleague (the person's consent isn't required if you think there is an imminent threat to their safety or someone else's).

What to do next

You have the option to speak to the colleague's line manager if you have continued concerns. You should ask for the colleague's consent to do so, but where there are serious concerns

around preserving safety, consent is not required. The HR Advisor or HR Partner team are available to provide advice to the manager on responding to this type of situation and on supporting the colleague and team as a whole. You can contact them via Microsoft Teams or email them using the info on this web page. If you have managed the colleague's distress, signposted them to a suitable support service and feel satisfied with the outcome for both your colleague and yourself, you may not feel the need to inform another internal service. However, you would have the option to if required. It is recommended you contact HR by email/Microsoft Teams or in person if there are continued concerns for the colleague or if the situation has impacts in the workplace. The manager and HR can consider an Occupational Health Referral.

Self-care

Being in these situations helping a suicidal colleague can be traumatic for you and may cause feelings of anxiety, guilt, stress or low mood. If after the event, you are feeling impacted by these feelings, please consider seeking support for yourself. Free, 24/7, confidential support and advice is available from our Employee Assistance Programme Spectrum Life. You can also speak to your line manager about any concerns. If there is a Mental Health Champion in your area, you can also talk it through with them. If you feel this event has significantly impacted on your health or wellbeing, Occupational Health are also available to discuss any health concerns and are available to provide advice on the best support options available for you. Colleague Wellbeing also have tools and resources on their web pages to support wellbeing.

References:

NHS (2023) Help for suicidal thoughts. Accessed 5th January 2023 from: Help for suicidal thoughts - NHS (www.nhs.uk)

Public Health England (2017) Reducing the risk of suicide: a toolkit for employers. Accessed 5th January 2023 from: [bitc-wellbeing-toolkitPHESuicidePreventionToolkit-Feb2020.pdf](#)

Samaritans (2023) How to support someone you are worried about. Accessed 5th January 2023 from: [What to do if you think someone is struggling | Samaritans](#)