

Managing members of your team or workplace who are suicidal

Having to deal with someone who is suicidal in the workplace is likely something that is new for you. You may or may not have experience with suicide, and so this guide is to help you navigate how to respond.

Key points

- Organisational culture is important and will impact how willing someone is to be open and honest with you
- Regardless of your views of suicide, the best way to respond to someone is in a kind and compassion, non-judgemental manner.
- Your role is not to counsel someone through their suicidality, but to help support them in their workspace and to facilitate their help-seeking.
- Ideally, an organisation will have a mental health policy and will have guidance about how to support people who are suicidal.
- If you work in a high-risk industry, you may want to consider further training in areas that may help to improve employee wellbeing such as creating a psychologically safe workspace; responding to suicide risk; and managing burnout.

How should I respond to someone who is suicidal?

As mentioned above, finding out that someone is suicidal can lead to different reactions in different people. You may feel overwhelmed, anxious, or stressed and be unsure what to do. One helpful way to work through how to respond is using BRAVE mnemonic:

Be calm and take some slow breaths. Even professionals can feel panicked when someone is suicidal, but it is important to calm yourself as much as you can in order to help the person who is suicidal. Take several slow breaths and focus on being present (and not the anxious thoughts in your head).

Reassure them that you are there to help, that they can take their time to talk, and that you will keep what they say as confidential as possible. Many people worry about opening up at work because they think that other members of their team will find out. You might want to say things like:

"I know this might feel really strange talking to me about this and it might feel too personal to talk about at work. I want to let you know that I am here to support you and to help get you some support. Take the time that you need and share

what you feel okay sharing with me. I also want to let you know that I won't be sharing this with other members of the team unless I need some support to support you more, and in that case, I will talk to you about it first. So, you can feel safe that you won't hear people talking in the lunchroom about what we have talked about."

Allow them to talk. Don't rush them. This is not a 5-minute conversation and if they feel rushed, they will assume it's because you don't care or that you are not comfortable talking to them about their distress. It will also mean that they are unlikely to ask for help in the future if they need it.

Validate their feelings. Validation means connecting with someone as a person and showing them that you understand what they are saying. This includes recognising the distress that they have been feeling. Validation can be as simple as statements like:

"That sounds really overwhelming"

"It sounds like you have been going through a really tough time lately".

Validation is not telling them that they have a lot to live for, interrupting them, or judging them.

Establish safety. Work with the person to develop a plan to get them help and support. This will depend on if the person is imminently at risk or not. The sections below give you further information.

What do to if someone is at immediate risk of suicide

If you think that your employee or team member is at immediate risk of attempting suicide, it is important to get help to intervene. In the case where there is immediate risk (where the person is known to be suicidal and is engaging in an act of suicide or who has absconded or taken off), call the police on 111. It is important to emphasise the following to the police:

- The person is known to be suicidal
- They are at imminent risk/engaging in a suicidal act.
- A description of what they are wearing if possible.

When you call the police for someone who is suicidal, once the person is located the police will take the person for an emergency assessment at the hospital.

What to do if you are worried about their wellbeing, they need urgent help, but they are not at imminent risk

If someone is highly distressed or seems really unwell, or is suicidal and does not have good supports, it may be appropriate to arrange a crisis assessment for them. Each hospital has a specialist team to do this. The number of all crisis teams in New Zealand can be found <https://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/services-and-support/health-care-services/mental-health-services/crisis-assessment-teams>.

Key things to tell the crisis team are:

- The person is highly distressed or agitated
- They are feeling suicidal
- You are not a mental health clinician but are someone from their workplace.

It is important to note that there can be a wait for a crisis assessment and so it may be important to consider if you can continue to support that person while they wait, or what supports need to be engaged. You may also consider taking the person to the local emergency department for an assessment instead of waiting at work for the crisis team.

Consider what supports need to be engaged

People who are suicidal can often experience a sense of whakamā (shame), disconnection from others, a sense of being a failure or embarrassment. They may deliberately try to keep their feelings from loved ones or to actively push loved ones away in order to protect them. In fact, feeling like they don't belong or that they are a burden really increases their risk of suicide.

It is therefore important to consider who might need to be contacted to support your colleague or team member, both at work and when they are at home. At work, key things to consider are:

- Does the potential support person have an existing relationship with the person that could be helpful?
- Is the potential support person someone who is known to be trustworthy (not a gossip)?
- Is the potential support person in a place where there can support another person?

- Will there be a conflict of interests created in this situation that could be managed by a different relationship.?

When contacting a support person for your team member or employee, it is helpful to work with them to find out who the best person will be to do this. It may be a spouse or whānau member, or a friend.

Ensure that there is external follow-up

If your employee or team member does have a high level of distress or is struggling with mental health difficulties, it may be helpful to arrange follow-up with their general practitioner (GP). GPs are able to do a mental health screen and arrange for referral to appropriate agencies and so are a good place to search for further support.

An alternative could be arranging for an appointment with your employee assistance programme (EAP) if your company offers this. It is important to remind your team member or employee that any information shared in these sessions is confidential and won't be shared with you. It's a safe space for them to talk about what they are going through and to help to find some solutions to cope.

Make a plan for organisational follow-up

Whilst it is important to arrange follow-up with appropriate supports outside of the workplace, it is also important to arrange follow-up for the employee within the workplace. This is not to offer counselling but show that ongoing support is available and to work out how best to support the employee on an ongoing basis.

This follow-up is also important to highlight that wellbeing is an ongoing conversation and not only something responded to a crisis point. Also, imagine how uncomfortable it would be for the employee if they shared all this personal information with you and it was never spoken about again. Having a plan to check-in signals to the employee that you are okay to continue to support them and that their ongoing wellbeing is important.

Make a plan with the employee about how often, where and when you will follow-up with them so that they can feel reassured that you will follow-up and that it will be in an appropriate time and place that can ensure privacy.

Check in with yourself

Finally, talking to someone who is suicidal can feel like a lot of pressure and you may feel responsible for their wellbeing. Whilst it is important to support them, you are not responsible for their wellbeing and need to help facilitate support to take over this.

Sometimes this can be hard to let go and so it is important to check how you are feeling and if you need any support. This may be particularly important if the person does not want to talk to you or is leaning heavily on you for support. If you feel like you need additional support, talk to your managers or EAP.