

# + VIRTUAL WORK: WHEN AN EMPLOYEE IS STRUGGLING

## Suicide Awareness for Managers

While we always face challenges in work and life, employees today may be coping with many significant and stressful changes in a short time. The signs that someone may be struggling are not always obvious, especially in a virtual environment when face-to-face interaction may be limited. If you're managing a virtual team, you will need to be alert to changes that are beyond what you would normally expect. Being able to recognize and respond to these cues is a valuable way to support your employees.

### Be aware of changes

Be mindful of your staff's regular work patterns and communication styles. Without the visual cues that tell you that an employee is struggling, staying more "tuned in" to subtle cues or changes to their normal behaviors gives you valuable information:

- + **Communication style:** Pay attention to the differences in the way they interact with you or the team. Listen for long pauses or changes in emotional tone – for example, a usually outgoing person who becomes withdrawn, noticing that someone's speech sounds more rapid or pressured, or a friendly, easy-going person who becomes argumentative.
- + **Mood shifts:** Someone with a normally positive outlook may become more pessimistic or negative. You might hear or see statements of hopelessness, a sad or empty mood, or "I don't care" attitudes in their phone or electronic communications. They may be irritable or angry in their responses.
- + **Withdrawal from others:** The person may be increasingly unavailable or unresponsive to you or teammates. They may miss or decline meetings without providing an explanation, or don't participate when they otherwise would.
- + **Job performance:** Look for new or unusual patterns in productivity. Their work may be late, have increased errors, or not be of the quality that you're accustomed to seeing. You may notice an increase in absenteeism, signing in late, or signing off early consistently and without permission.

- + **Relationships with coworkers:** You may hear concerns from colleagues who notice changes in work style, mood, or productivity. There may be increased conflicts or lack of cooperation with you or their teammates.
- + **Change in work habits:** A person who is normally organized and "on top of it" suddenly becomes scattered, forgetful, having trouble concentrating or making decisions. Regular tasks might take more time than you would expect (even with changes to the work environment).

### Possible signs of mental health concerns

If an employee tells you or you see indications that they are experiencing the following, it is important to recommend support for that employee:

- + Feeling hopeless, helpless, worthless, sad
- + Loss of interest in life
- + Changes in eating, sleeping patterns
- + Tiredness, low energy, or more hyper-active behavior
- + Feeling anxious, irritable, restless
- + Noticeable drop in performance
- + Trouble focusing or making decisions

**Trust your instincts.** Don't be afraid to check out your concerns with the employee using the strategies below. If they are experiencing these indicators frequently (on a weekly basis), it may be helpful for them to talk to a professional. Inform them of EAP should they need additional support for these concerns.

## Respond proactively

- + **Have regular check-ins, personally or as a team exercise.** For personal check-ins, use a phone call or set up a video chat session so you can hear your employee's voice. Don't rely on email or instant message (unless privacy in the home is a concern). Electronic communication can be impersonal and make it harder to detect changes in speech patterns, tone, or personal reactions. It's okay to give them an opportunity to discuss personal matters if you are aware of a specific concern.
- + **Be sensitive to privacy.** Know that they may not be able to provide a private space to talk right now if they live in close quarters with others who are at home. Try to coordinate check-in conversations at a time when they can be candid about their experience.
- + **Find the right words.** Think about how you'd want a conversation to begin if it were directed towards you. Use words that you're comfortable with and that show your concern without putting the person on the spot or diagnosing. Examples include, "I'm concerned," or simply, "How is it going for you?"
- + **Ask open-ended questions about your concerns,** such as, "I've noticed you've been quiet in team meetings lately. How are team meetings going for you?" Pause for their response and ask for their input. Just listen to their concerns and be alert for issues. Let them share as much or as little as they wish.
- + **Be compassionate, not judgmental.** Without face-to-face interaction to add valuable context, it's important to be especially mindful of your tone as well as your words. Use a sincere tone and calming voice to communicate a caring demeanor.
- + **Offer support and get them connected to help.** "Please let me know what you need from me," affirms your support as a manager. Proactively share resources, such as EAP, where they can connect with professional and work/life services to address concerns.

## Warning signs of suicide:

People may give clues that they're thinking of suicide. It is important to recognize the signs that might warn of a suicide attempt:

- + Making direct statements about ending one's life.
- + Making indirect comments like, "What's the point of living?" "Life is meaningless."
- + Talking or writing about death or dying, including social media posts.
- + Mentioning having means and/or a plan for self-harm (i.e., access to pills, guns, other weapons).
- + Giving away meaningful possessions.
- + Asking about life insurance policy details, especially those related to cause of death.
- + Showing interest in end-of-life affairs, such as making a will, discussing funeral preferences, etc.
- + Voicing hopelessness or helplessness.

**If there is any indication in your conversations with the employee that would indicate risk of suicide or self-harm, get them help immediately.**

**Notify Human Resources and consult with EAP right away for next steps.**

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