



**Talking about suicide
and providing
support at work.**

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Workplace

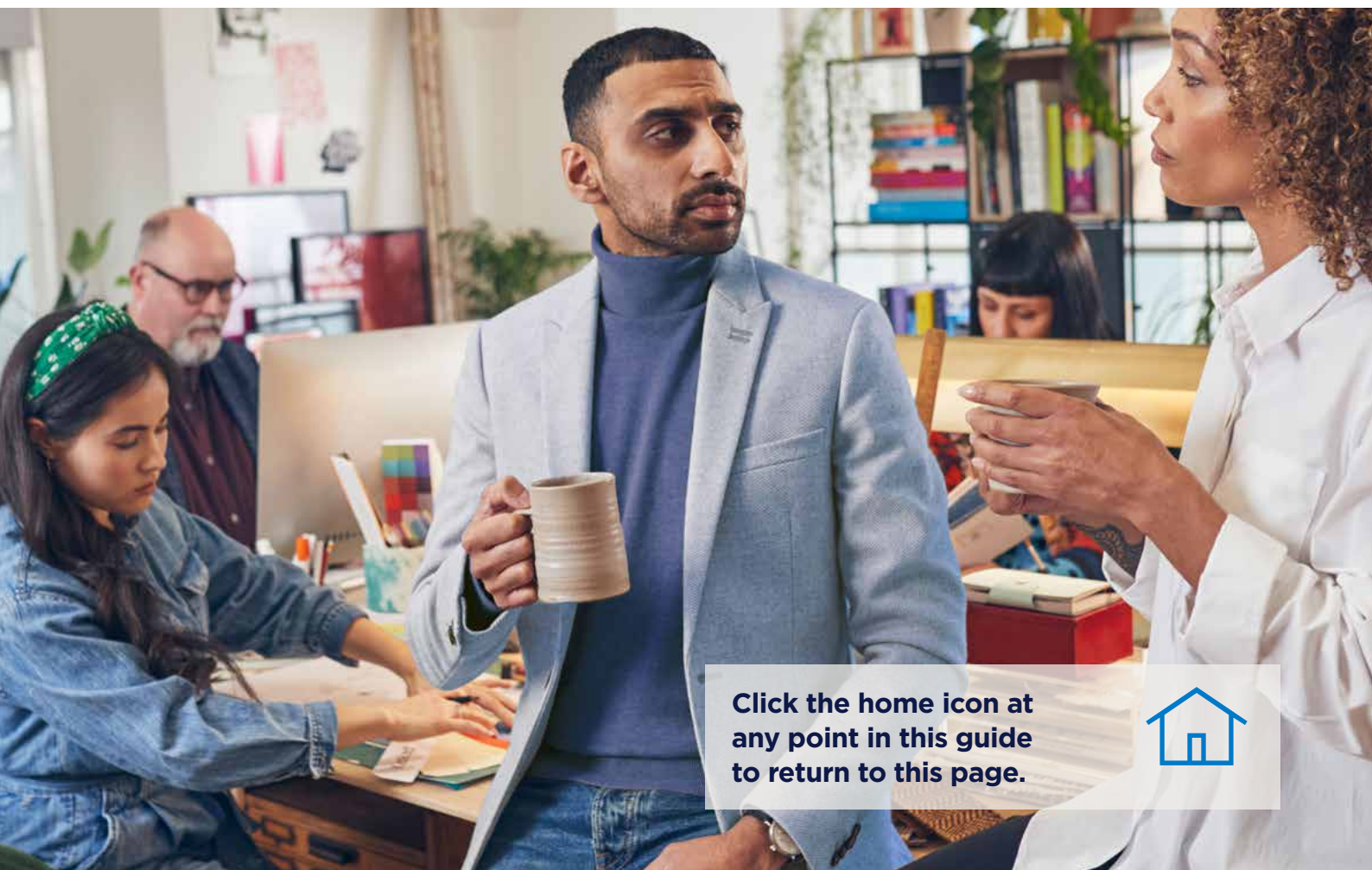
Health and Wellbeing Academy

Introduction.

Here, we'll look at some of the ways employers can reduce the risk of suicide amongst employees. We'll also discuss how to provide support for any colleagues who have been affected by suicide.

Suicide can be a very sensitive and emotive subject to talk about, and there is often stigma and misconceptions surrounding it. So it's important for organisations to foster a supportive working environment where people can talk openly about their mental health. As an employer, it's ok to understand that you're not solely responsible, qualified or expected to act as a counsellor for someone who is feeling suicidal.

But providing a safe space that enables someone to disclose their feelings if they are experiencing suicidal thoughts - and knowing how to signpost them to the right support services - could help someone get the support they need.



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Suicide and the workplace

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How common is suicide amongst people of working age?

Suicidal thoughts are more common than you might think. One in five of us are believed to have experienced suicidal thoughts at one time or another. So it's important to be mindful of the possibility that someone you work with may be experiencing suicidal thoughts, even if they're unlikely to act on them. People often keep their feelings to themselves at work, so you may simply not know if someone is struggling to cope with their emotions.

In the UK, suicide is unfortunately a leading cause of death for people aged 20 to 34. And the highest rates of suicide are among males aged 50-54. This means that more people than you might think will have been affected by a death by suicide. This could be an employee, a friend or family member of an employee, or perhaps someone you work closely with, like a client.



In 2021, males aged 50-54 and females aged 45-49 had the highest rates of suicide in England and Wales.

Suicides in England and Wales: 2021 registrations. Office for National Statistics. ons.gov.uk, released 6 September 2022



In the UK, suicide is a leading cause of death among 20 to 34 year olds.

Suicide risk mitigation. BMJ Best Practice, last updated 8 December 2020

What are the risk factors for suicide?

There's no straightforward answer to this. The reasons for suicide are multifaceted and can't be simplified, so we can never know for sure. Ultimately, suicide isn't limited to any particular groups of people and often can't be predicted. But being aware of the known risk factors for suicidal behaviour might help you to spot the signs that someone is at risk, and signpost them to the support they need.

We do know that around nine in every ten people who take their own life have a mental health problem at the time of their death, whether or not the problem has been formally diagnosed. Someone may also be at higher risk of suicide if they:

- have a history of suicidal behaviour or self-harm
- are male (men are three times more likely to take their own lives than women)
- are a member of the LGBTQ+ community
- are from a more disadvantaged socioeconomic background, for example they may be unemployed or homeless
- are going through a significant negative life event, such as a bereavement, family breakdown, job loss or financial difficulties

- struggle with alcohol or drug problems
- are living with a long-term health problem, such as chronic pain, degenerative disease, disfigurement, loss of sight or hearing, or a terminal illness
- work in certain occupations, for example, factors such as stressful work environments, low pay and low job security can increase the risk of suicide

There are also some things that can make suicide less likely. These are known as supportive or protective factors, and can include:

- being able to talk openly about mental health and suicidal thoughts
- having a support network of family and friends
- access to professional mental health services
- feeling engaged in your work and hobbies



Men are three times more likely to take their own lives than women.

Mental health facts and statistics. Mind. Mind.org. Published June 2020

Steps you can take to reduce the risk of suicide in your workplace

Suicide isn't inevitable; most people who have suicidal thoughts don't go on to take their own life. It's important to remember that you're not a mental health expert or solely responsible for anyone's care or safety. But taking the steps below could help you to start a conversation and understand how to access professional support:

Create an open culture

Create an open and honest culture within your organisation. Encourage people to start a conversation about mental health and aim to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable asking for help if they need it.

Implement prevention strategies

Make sure you have a suicide prevention strategy in place and know how you will respond and support your workforce if it does happen. This should aim to mitigate workplace risk factors such as stress, discrimination, bullying and harassment, and form part of your wider mental health framework.

Provide training and education for all

Provide mental health training and education for both managers and employees, including how to talk about suicidal feelings and spot the early warning signs.

Know how to signpost in the right direction

Make sure you know how to signpost someone to the appropriate support services if they do disclose suicidal thoughts. This should be their GP in the first instance. But services can also include Employee Assistance Programmes, occupational health support, counselling and professional mental health services. If you don't provide these services, specialist charities such as Samaritans and Mind have free helplines and resources you can signpost to.

Strengthen relationships

Build positive working relationships with your team members, so you can recognise any unusual changes in their behaviour. Look out for the welfare of anyone going through a particularly difficult time, and have policies, procedures and guidance in place for employees who need support. This could include support with mental health, long-term health conditions, domestic violence, financial problems, a bereavement, disciplinary action, dismissal or redundancy.

Raise awareness

Raise awareness of suicide and the support available across your organisation. For example, use your internal communication channels to ensure employees know about the support available to them and put-up posters for national charities and helplines.

You might worry that talking about suicide could encourage someone to attempt suicide, but this isn't true. Removing the stigma that surrounds talking about suicidal feelings in your workplace is a critical step in reducing the risk of suicide. Some people who have been experiencing suicidal thoughts have expressed feeling relieved by being able to talk about it.



The impact of COVID on suicide

The coronavirus pandemic caused a huge amount of worry and uncertainty and has negatively impacted many people's mental health. Because of this, there has been some concern that this might lead to an increase in suicides. At the time of writing, this doesn't appear to be the case. But it's important to note what data is available is still in the very early stages, because deaths by suicide are often only registered over a year after they happen.

As an employer, it's important to keep checking in on the mental wellbeing of your team members. Particularly those who are at risk of redundancy, losing their job, have money worries, or have lost loved ones during the pandemic. Some of your team members might also still be working from home and may continue to do so. This can make it more difficult to know if they're struggling at work or having poor mental health. So, it's important to continue to stay connected with these individuals by having regular check-ins, and asking how they're doing.



Managing in the event of a suicide

When suicide does happen, it can have a huge and long-lasting emotional impact on those who'd been close to the person, which may well include their colleagues. It's essential for organisations to prioritise the wellbeing of those who have been affected by suicide in your workplace. This is likely to include psychological support, through measures such as compassionate leave, bereavement counselling, peer support and support services. It will also include practical support, like adjusting workloads and schedules. It's also necessary to ensure your communications are conducted in a sensitive and compassionate manner. The way you communicate about death by suicide with your employees can impact how they react and cope with it.

It's recommended that organisations have a postvention plan in place to prepare for such a situation. The organisations and resources below have a wide range of free information and advice that can help you to develop suicide prevention and postvention plans in your workplace.

- Public Health England and Business in the Community have produced a number of toolkits for employers, including [Reducing the risk of suicide](#) and [Crisis management in the event of a suicide](#) that can help you to develop your plans.
- The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) have also developed a guide for professionals on [Responding to suicide risk in the workplace](#).
- The Samaritans have produced [media guidelines](#) which contain practical advice for reporting suicide safely.
- You may also want to develop and communicate a bereavement policy. The CIPD also have [guidance on compassionate bereavement support in the workplace](#).

Further support.

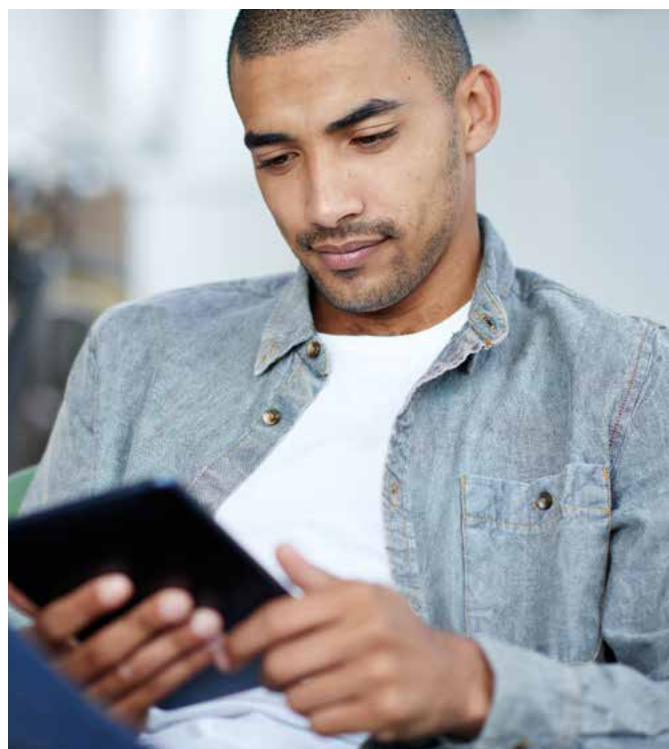
Samaritans provides free, 24-hour telephone and online support to anyone struggling to cope with their emotions. You can call them on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org.

Mind have free information and advice on mental health conditions and support services.

Bupa has more information about [workplace mental health](#) that you may find useful.

Sources

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