



News in Brief

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When an employee came into work one day dressed in black and asked her co-workers in an offhand manner, “Don’t you think this dress would look good in a coffin?” no time was wasted.

“We took her right over” to a psychiatric hospital, said Jan Zoucha, vice president of human resources at the employee’s firm, Lincoln, Nebraska-based Assurity Life Insurance Co.

Educating employees on signs a colleague is considering suicide is a key element in its prevention, observers say.

It is an issue of growing concern. There was a 28 percent increase in the number of suicides committed in the workplace last year—251—compared with the prior year, according to a census by the U.S. Department of Labor released in August.

And that number does not include the much greater number who kill themselves elsewhere, experts say.

[Employers are expressing increasing worry about employee suicide](#), say employee assistance plan providers.

There have been a greater number of calls recently from employers about how to handle potential suicides, said Dr. Doug Nemecek, Eden Prairie, Minnesota-based senior medical director for Cigna Corp.’s Health Solutions organization, which includes its behavioral health and EAP business.

In some cases, employees are informing managers about co-workers who have expressed suicidal thoughts on their Facebook pages, he said.

[But creating a corporate culture where workers feel comfortable seeking help from their company’s EAP or other resources can help](#), experts say.

Those who commit suicide at work may have felt significant stress from their increased workload as well as worries about job security, observers say.

[The general economic environment can cause problems as well.](#)

“They’re financially strained,” said Richard Chaifetz, chairman and CEO of Chicago-based ComPsych Corp., an EAP provider.

“A lot of people are having relationship problems, which tend to get exacerbated” in a financial crisis. People also are concerned about their retirement, as they see their 401(k) assets drop, among other factors, he said.

The fact that a suicide occurs at work may or may not be significant, observers say.

“In many cases, if you’re choosing to do it here, you’re choosing to send a message to your co-workers and your

employers,” Chaifetz said.

Or, “it could be they just don’t want to do it at home,” where a family member would find them, said Bob VandePol, president of Grand Rapids, Michigan-based Crisis Care Network Inc., which provides critical incident response services for workplaces.

Having a corporate culture that encourages employees to seek help is crucial, observers say.

“We create a culture where people feel very cared for, respected, communicated with,” said Zoucha of Assurity Life.

Rich Paul, vice president of health and performance solutions at Norfolk, Virginia-based ValueOptions Inc., an EAP provider, said employers should implement a suicide prevention program.

But, it “has to come from the top down in terms of reinforcing a supportive work environment, communicating and reinforcing the resources that are available to people who are feeling overwhelmed, or feeling that level of distress,” he said.

“One of the most tragic things about suicide is more often than not” those who commit it have “not sought any type of counseling support before,” Paul said. “[We should encourage employees to take advantage of the resources available to address stress before it escalates to this tragic level.](#)”

At Turtle Bay Exploration Park in Redding, California, workers who are perceived to have problems are immediately told of its free [EAP services](#), said human resources officer Jacque Holden at the educational and entertainment complex, who works with San Diego-based EAP provider ACI Specialty Benefits Corp.

“We’re spending more time educating managers on how to intervene with a troubled employee,” said ACI chief executive Ann D. Clark.

“[We’re offering more seminars on coping with stress, whether it’s financial stress or emotional stress,](#)” she said. Sometimes financial counselors will refer workers to mental health counseling after talking with them.

Employers also should train managers and workers to recognize the signs of a potential suicide risk.

At Assurity Life, supervisors are trained “to know all of the resources of our EAP and some of the red flags to look for,” including employees who have personal or performance issues, Zoucha said.

Giving away personal belongings, cashing out a 401(k) plan or making significant benefit changes are signs someone may be considering suicide, said Paul of ValueOptions.

[Employees who are working more slowly, have trouble getting along with co-workers, are missing work or are irritable may be showing signs of mental health issues,](#) and managers should suggest they seek help from their EAP, Chaifetz said.

In addition, “most people who commit suicide talk about it beforehand. They don’t keep it a secret,” Cigna’s Dr. Nemecek said.

If there is a suicide, also crucial is helping surviving co-workers who may feel guilt over the incident.

A worker killed in a plane crash will be memorialized, but if a worker commits suicide, surviving co-workers often are left facing an empty cubicle, said Heidi Bryan, executive director of the Radnor, Pennsylvania-based Feeling Blue Suicide Prevention Council. “A lot of times, companies do nothing, and that’s not acceptable.”

“That’s a traumatic event that can really have a serious impact on the people who are left,” said Oliver Williams, clinical director at Chicago-based EAP provider Bensinger, DuPont & Associates.

It is important for the employer “to have somebody come out and do a formal, critical incident stress management session with the surviving employees,” he said. “I think people really need to have a space where they could talk their feelings through,” Williams said.

After a suicide, companies are faced with continuing their business and “really helping people cope” with what has happened, said Kristine Brennan, executive director of Continuum-Employee Assistance, Training, Consulting, a Lincoln,

Nebraska-based EAP provider.

Not leaving people to “just manage it on their own whatever way they can” pays dividends for the company.

“It bonds them. There is an increased loyalty and appreciation for the company,” she said.

Filed by Judy Greenwald of *Business Insurance*, a sister publication of *Workforce Management*. To comment, e-mail editors@workforce.com

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