

TUC

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of work for good

Work and suicide

**A TUC guide to prevention for trade
union activists**

Section One

Introduction

There can be few more tragic issues that a union representative has to deal with than the suicide of a fellow worker. Fortunately, this is something that most union representatives will never encounter but the issue of suicide is an important one and can often be linked to issues such as workplace stress, bullying or harassment.

Every year between 5,500 and 6,000 people in Britain end their own lives – well over three times the number of people who die on our roads.

Unions can have a role to play in helping prevent suicides and supporting those who may have suicidal thoughts.

There are two main areas where union representatives can help make it less likely that someone in their workplace will end their lives. These are:

Prevention

Unions can try to ensure that the workplace is not contributing to a person's mental health problems by tackling issues such as stress, bullying and harassment.

They can also ensure that their employer has processes to help identify individuals at risk, support those people and raise awareness of the complex issues surrounding suicide.

That means negotiating policies that cover these areas and reviewing existing policies.

Supporting individuals

Union representatives should not be expected to be qualified counsellors. But often they are the person that a worker will contact when they have a problem and representatives can support these people and ensure that they know where they can get help.

Section Two

Background

Any of us can have suicidal feelings and often it is linked with depression. In some cases it is just a passing impulse, while in other cases it can build up over time. Often there are no warning signs (see Annex 1)

There can be many causes of suicidal feelings. Sometimes it is linked to an existing mental health issue, but often there is an underlying cause such as a traumatic experience, personal, work, financial or health problems, or even a side effect of medication.

Many people who self-harm don't want to kill themselves. Self-harming can be a kind of "survival strategy", providing a person with a way of coping with overwhelming emotions. However, self-harming is usually a sign that a person needs immediate help and support.

Link between work and suicide

In 2017 the government released [figures](#) that showed that there was a strong link between suicide and occupation. Low skilled male labourers are three times more likely to take their own lives than the national average. Other groups with an increased risk are nursing staff, primary teachers and agricultural workers.

Many of these workers are also those who are more likely to experience workplace stress, however, according to a [report](#) by the Samaritans, job insecurity, zero-hour

contracts and workplace downsizing are also important risk factors.

This was borne out by research published by [Hazards Magazine](#) which reported that there was an increase in suicides at times of restructuring and job losses.

The law

Employers have a legal duty to provide a safe working environment for their workers. This is wide-ranging and covers all aspects of work under their control. This means that employers must address any issues that may cause a worker to have suicidal thoughts, including workload, stress, bullying etc.

Yet despite the link between workplace stress and suicidal feelings there are no known cases in the UK where an employer has been prosecuted after a worker has taken their own life because of the pressure they were under at work. This is despite the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act and the Health and Safety at Work Act both potentially applying if it can be shown that the suicide was a result of the employers actions. There has also only once been a successful claim for damages in the civil court after a suicide.

Employers do not even have to report workplace suicides as the HSE reporting rules specifically exclude suicides from the requirements on employers to report deaths that arise from work.

Section Three

What can be done

Role of the employer

An employer can take steps to help suicide prevention regardless of whether work is a major cause of their mental health problems. A good suicide prevention policy does not have to be a separate document. Often it is best to address the issues within the wider occupational health and well-being policies. This is because a workplace that takes measures to prevent stress, gives workers an element of control and has an open and honest approach to mental health, is more likely to ensure that workers are comfortable raising problem issues and know that they will get support.

Public Health England, along with Business in the Community have produced a very useful [toolkit](#) for employers on suicide prevention that unions should make their employers aware of. It says that a safe and healthy workplace can be achieved by:

- Promoting good mental health and destigmatising mental health problems
- Reducing stress at work
- Preventing and taking action against bullying and harassment
- Extending support and psychological health services
- Educating and training managers and other key staff.

The guide also stresses the importance of good absence and return to work policies that ensure that people who are ill, including with mental health problems, are

Safety critical workers

There are some workers who are in critical roles such as transport and energy workers where there is the potential, however remote, of a suicide attempt having a catastrophic impact on other workers or the public. All such sectors should have processes in place to ensure that where it is disclosed to anyone else that the person has been having suicidal thoughts then this information can be relayed to the employer and acted upon though ensuring that the potential risk is identified, and suitable action taken, including supporting and assisting the member.

given the time off they need to get better. It recommends that it is important to maintain reasonable contact with anyone off sick, but not to put pressure on them to return before they are ready.

The risk of suicide is often highest after a person is under threat of disciplinary action or suspended. Regardless of the reasons for the disciplinary action, the employer has a duty of care to the employee during the disciplinary process, especially if the person

is suspended while investigations are continuing. Suspension should not be seen as a neutral act as it can have a significant impact on the person affected.

Employers can assist prevent the risk of suicide by having processes in place to assess the effect of any disciplinary action/suspension on the person under investigation. This should be in place from immediately the suspension takes place.

At the earliest stage, the employer should explain that the suspension is not a presumption of guilt and make plans to ensure the employees well-being.

It may be appropriate to ask the employees permission to contact a person to ensure that they have some support while at home, but this can only be done with the employees permission.

They should also ensure that the investigation and any hearings are concluded in as short a time as possible while ensuring that the process is fair.

Employers also have to consider the effect on mental health in cases of dismissal to ensure that support is offered.

Controlling access to opportunities

Employers can also take action to ensure that they restrict access to locations and materials that can be used for suicide. This can include restricting access to rooftops and restricting the opening of high-level windows.

In some sectors it can involve ensuring that staff have no access to lethal drugs or chemicals by having good security and verification processes.

The role of the union

Supporting individuals

On occasion, a union workplace representative may come across a situation whereby a member states that they have felt suicidal or had suicidal thoughts in the past. Often it is when a person is asking for assistance from the union because of an issue around stress, bullying, harassment, or another workplace problem.

Although these occasions are rare, it can be very distressing to have to talk to a colleague about these feelings.

You are not expected to be a counsellor, or an expert and often the best thing that you can do initially is simply listen and let the member talk to you about their feelings and their problems. For being who have experienced suicidal thoughts, talking about them to someone who will be supportive and who will not judge them can be a first step towards getting help.

You do not need any special training to be able to listen. Simply let the person talk, don't make assumptions and be prepared to ask clear direct questions if it helps the person to open up.

However although talking can help a lot, it is also important to offer practical support that can include:

Encouraging them to seek help. This could be from their GP, the employer's Employee Assistance Programme/OH provider (if there is one), or a body such as the [Samaritans](#).

Trying to deal with the causes. If the member has work-related problems then you can also try to ensure that the issues that are concerning the member are addressed by the employer.

Member threatening imminent suicide

If a member tells you that they are actually going to try to kill themselves rather than they have had suicidal thoughts in the past you should treat it as a medical emergency and call 999.

Dealing with bereavement

Many union activists, will, at some time or another have to deal with a member dying. Often it is because of an illness. Any death of a member can be upsetting for their work colleagues. If however the person is believed to have died by suicide then it can have a major emotional impact and employers should be willing to offer counselling and help to all those effected as well as support for the persons family. There is further advice on this in the publication [Crisis Management in the Event of a Suicide.](#)

Checklist for union representatives

- Ensure that your employer is aware of the issue of suicide and suicide prevention as a workplace issue and that they have accessed appropriate advice and support.
- Jointly review existing policies on stress management, bullying/harassment, mental health, employee assistance, disciplinary procedures and suspension.
- Seek training from the TUC or your union on dealing with mental health issues.
- Ensure that organisations such as the Samaritans are invited to any health or well-being events organised in your workplace.
- Keep in touch with any members who are suspended during disciplinary procedures to ensure they have access to any support they need.
- Encourage members to talk to you about any problems that they are having at work.

Annex

Warning signs (from [NHS choices website](#))

High-risk warning signs

A person may be at high risk of attempting suicide if they:

- threaten to hurt or kill themselves
- talk or write about death, dying or suicide
- actively look for ways to kill themselves, such as stockpiling tablets.

If the person has previously been diagnosed with a mental health condition, contact a member of their care team or the centre or clinic where they were being treated.

If you don't have these details, contact your nearest accident and emergency (A&E) department and ask for the contact details of the nearest crisis resolution team (CRT). CRTs are teams of mental healthcare professionals, such as psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses, who work with people experiencing severe psychological and emotional distress.

While waiting for help to arrive, remove any possible means of suicide from the person's immediate environment, such as medication, knives or other sharp objects, household chemicals, such as bleach and ropes or belts.

Other warning signs

A person may also be at risk of attempting suicide if they:

- complain of feelings of hopelessness

- have episodes of sudden rage and anger
- act recklessly and engage in risky activities with an apparent lack of concern about the consequences
- talk about feeling trapped, such as saying they can't see any way out of their current situation
- self-harm – including misusing drugs or alcohol, or using more than they usually do
- noticeably gain or lose weight due to a change in their appetite
- become increasingly withdrawn from friends, family and society in general
- appear anxious and agitated
- are unable to sleep or they sleep all the time
- have sudden mood swings – a sudden lift in mood after a period of depression could indicate they have made the decision to attempt suicide
- talk and act in a way that suggests their life has no sense of purpose
- lose interest in most things, including their appearance
- put their affairs in order, such as sorting out possessions or making a will.

Find out more

The TUC has published a guide to mental health issues for union activists that may help them with many of the issues surrounding suicidal thoughts and behaviour. There is also an eNote on the issue. In addition, training for workplace representatives can be obtained through [TUC Education](#).

The TUC workbook on mental health issues is at:

<https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/download/file/fid/1078>

You can also access the eNote on mental health at:

<https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/enotes>

Hazards magazine has produced a number of articles about work and suicide:

<http://www.hazards.org/suicide>

Employers should use the PHE/Business in the community toolkit Reducing the risk of Suicide:

<https://wellbeing.bitc.org.uk/all-resources/toolkits/suicide-prevention-toolkit>

The Samaritans are at:

<https://www.samaritans.org/>