

# SUICIDE PREVENTION:

## Corporate Best Practices

The average employed American spends more time working than doing anything other than sleeping. Data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services shows 76% of U.S. workers report experiencing at least one symptom of a mental health condition each year. The workplace is a key space to make changes that can help improve mental health and prevent suicide. Employees who are supported in their mental well-being are more productive, have higher productivity, have reduced absenteeism and reduce overall healthcare expenses for employers. According to the National Safety Council, every \$1 employers invest in mental health treatment yields a \$4 return in improved health and productivity.

## HOW TO HELP

### 1. Evaluate Where You Are Now

The first step is to assess your company's capacity to address employees' mental health. Look beyond your employee manual to examine company culture and analyze the types of mental health training you provide. Explore tools such as employee assistance programs (EAPs). Free and paid scorecards are available to help assess where your company stands and provide ideas about how to level up.

### 2. Address Common Concerns

Creating positive change necessitates proactively working through any concerns corporations may have. The Workplace Suicide Prevention & Postvention Committee outlines common corporate questions about liability, training and accommodations and provides answers, case studies and ideas for implementing different mental health initiatives.

### 3. Adopt New Mental Health Training Initiatives

When it comes to mental health education, the key is committing to implement consistent wellness practices. Organizations with no formal mental health training can start by inviting mental health nonprofits in to speak or by using free or low-cost online courses. If you already have training in place for management, consider expanding it company-wide.

### 4. Create a stigma-free environment and referral process

Integrating mental health into your company culture improves employee well-being and supports increased productivity and reduced absenteeism. Start by including mental health articles in newsletters, posting suicide warning signs and 988 information in common areas, and holding lunch-and-learn events. Promote resources like health insurance plans, EAP programs and sick leave policies that include mental health days. Ensure employees know they can discuss mental health with HR without worrying about confidentiality or job jeopardy. Develop a process for sharing concerns about struggling colleagues.

### 5. Empower Your Employees to Become Peer Advocates

With more than 47 million people in the U.S. living with a mental health condition, many employees have lived experience. Some may be open to serving as peer advocates once educated about suicide. Consider starting an employee resource group (ERG) to champion mental health. The American Psychiatric Association's Center for Workplace Mental Health offers a free Mental Health Guide with a variety of ideas.



## BENEFITS OF INVESTING IN EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH

- Attract superior talent
- Boost retention rates
- Decrease absenteeism
- Improve productivity
- Lower healthcare costs
- Reduce legal exposure
- Enhance corporate reputation

Source: Deloitte Insights – The ROI in workplace mental health programs [www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/workplace-mental-health-programs-worker-productivity.html](https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/workplace-mental-health-programs-worker-productivity.html)



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# COMMON CORPORATE CONCERNS

The first step in providing mental health support for employees is acknowledging and addressing common concerns that sometimes trouble company leadership. Whether it's a large company concerned about being sued or a small business nervous about productivity issues when making accommodations for a struggling employee, it's something that is better to address directly and proactively. The greater threat lies in lost productivity and reactive legal challenges. In fact, with an estimated 20% of U.S. adults managing a mental health condition each year<sup>1</sup>, companies are already feeling the impacts of increased absenteeism, decreased efficiency and expensive turnover. That's why it's essential for company leadership to proactively seek legal or expert HR advice on the subject when possible – or at minimum, educate themselves with free resources. Below are common corporate concerns regarding workplace mental health and considerations for addressing them.<sup>2</sup>

**Concern:** *"If we reach out to a struggling employee, we'll trigger an ADA or FMLA claim."*

**Considerations:** It's important to know the ADA and FMLA laws<sup>3</sup> that govern how to address a concern you have with an employee who may be struggling. For instance, you can't directly ask an employee if they have a health condition unless the employee can't perform essential responsibilities of their job or if they pose a threat to others. Even then, you should be fully informed about the proper way to do so and obtain legal advice if possible. That said, providing support to an employee early offers the best chance for their recovery and can foster a trusting employee-employer relationship. The keys are to ensure corporate leadership: 1) knows and shares company benefits such as EAP programs, 2) shows empathy and maintains confidentiality, 3) follows up with the employee and 4) helps coordinate medical leave if needed.

**Concern:** *"If the employee discloses a mental health condition and requests accommodations, it will become a challenging process, potentially lead to job duty changes and make it difficult to act if the employee is not performing."*

**Considerations:** The fact that the employee confided in you shows trust and a desire to make things work. You should consult legal counsel and human resources once this request has been made, but in essence the important steps are to: 1) initiate action as quickly as possible, 2) make the process collaborative and 3) document the process with written accommodation agreements to clearly outline expectations on both sides.

Contrary to popular belief, the ADA focuses on employers making reasonable accommodations to help the employee fulfill their job responsibilities, rather than changing or eliminating those tasks. Courts have consistently sided with employers on this issue. If the employee continues to underperform despite accommodations, best practices typically dictate follow-up meetings and potentially changing the accommodations, but disciplinary actions can be taken when needed. Again, it's advisable to get legal advice when this occurs.

**Concern:** *"If I make an accommodation for one employee that needs it, I'll have to provide it to all employees."*

**Considerations:** This is not typically the case. Best practices dictate preemptively detailing job role descriptions within the company, noting what accommodations can be made for each and in what circumstances. Teleworking is an accommodation that may be coveted by other employees but does not necessarily need to be granted universally.

It is important to communicate properly with other employees while protecting the confidentiality of the employee who is receiving the accommodation. Establishing such statements in advance is a good idea. A sample statement might be something like, *"Our company makes accommodations based on different job positions and the individual needs of those holding that role, which can result in varying accommodations. Under the ADA, we need maintain confidentiality about these decisions. We hope this inspires confidence in how we help our team and in the support and privacy you can expect if you are ever in need."*

**Concern:** *"Mental health or suicide prevention training will be too expensive and could expose us to liability."*

**Considerations:** While training is often the first thing to be eliminated when budgets are tight, there are plenty of free or inexpensive resources available. Check with local community mental health providers or nonprofit organizations as many offer free or reduced-cost trainings or can speak at your office for a lunch-and-learn event. For larger companies, providing specialized training mental health seminars for human resource and other management roles is a worthwhile investment in your corporate wellness culture and may also prove useful as an affirmative defense to lawsuits.

Sources:

1. NAMI: [www.nami.org/about-mental-illness/mental-health-by-the-numbers/](http://www.nami.org/about-mental-illness/mental-health-by-the-numbers/)

2. Information from 2022 white paper by Workplace Suicide Prevention & Postvention Committee: [workplacesuicideprevention.com](http://workplacesuicideprevention.com)

3. ADA: <https://www.ada.gov/resources/disability-rights-guide/> and Department of Labor's Guidelines for Mental Health Conditions and FMLA: [www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/280-mental-health](http://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/280-mental-health)



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