

A Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace



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About This Document

A literature review reveals an extensive list of research articles, reports, and guidelines that address suicide postvention in the workplace. However, few organizations employ mental health professionals to study the literature, create appropriate protocols, and implement them in the work setting. This document was created to assist those organizations. National guidelines, best practices, and action steps were reviewed in the creation of this document. Major source documents are listed below; other resources for more information are provided in the Additional Resources.

[A Manager's Guide to Suicide Prevention in the Workplace: 10 Action Steps for Dealing with the Aftermath of Suicide](#)

[Responding to Grief, Trauma, and Distress After a Suicide: U.S. National Guidelines](#)

[A Report of Findings to Direct the Development of National Guidelines for Workplace Suicide Prevention](#)

[Tennessee Higher Education Protocol Guidelines for Suicide Intervention and Postvention](#)

[Vermont Suicide Postvention Protocols for Workplace Supervisors](#)

Introduction

What is Suicide Postvention?

Suicide postvention is “psychological first aid, crisis intervention, and other support offered after a suicide to affected individuals or the workplace as a whole to alleviate possible negative effects of the event” (Carson J. Spenser Foundation, 2013, p. 3). For decades, suicidologists have understood that postvention activities are key in preventing future suicides and are part of a robust suicide prevention plan. In addition to family members, individuals affected by a suicide loss can include friends, coworkers, neighbors, classmates, or vendors and business associates; these are often referred to as “survivors” of the suicide loss.

Why Suicide Postvention?

As many as 115 people can be affected by a single suicide death (Cerel, 2018). People who have lost someone they know to suicide can suffer from depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, social isolation, substance abuse, and complicated grief disorders. Additionally, and perhaps most frightening, people who lose someone to suicide are at increased risk for suicide themselves. Experiencing a suicide loss can lead to increased suicidal thoughts, suicidal behaviors, and possibly death. One does not have to witness the suicide; the loss alone can lead to these dangerous complications. The workplace environment is not immune to this phenomenon; a study in Sweden revealed men exposed to a workplace suicide loss were 3.5 times more likely to die by suicide than men who had not experienced a loss (Hedstrom, Liu, & Nordvik, 2008). The possibility of psychological harm and the potential for suicidal behaviors after a suicide loss in the workplace make a compelling argument for immediate and safe suicide postvention interventions.

Goals of Suicide Postvention

Because all deaths affect the workplace, whether that death is accidental, due to illness, or the result of self-inflicted injury, it is important for the organization to respond to and recognize all employee deaths in a consistent manner. Workplace leaders need to develop a plan that includes a workplace response to an employee suicide to decrease trauma experienced by those left behind and to help prevent further suicides. The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention Survivors of Suicide Loss Task Force (2015) provides the following goals for suicide postvention (p. 5).

- To facilitate the healing of individuals from the grief and distress of suicide loss
- To mitigate other negative effects of exposure to suicide
- To prevent suicide among people who are at high risk after exposure to suicide

Suicide as a Manner of Death

Suicide is a manner of death. Families lose a loved one. Employees lose a coworker and friend. In addition to the usual feelings of grief and loss experienced after a death, those left behind after a death to suicide can experience feelings of fear, blame, shame, or anger, complicating the grieving process and

the return to a new normal without the person they lost. While it is easy to focus on the shocking cause of death it is important to remember the people involved are bereaved; they have suffered a traumatic loss. How would your organization treat this death if it were from complications of diabetes? A stroke? An automobile accident? Cancer? It is important to the recovery and well-being of all involved that those affected by the loss feel supported by their workplace and not feel isolated, alone, or abandoned by being shunned or having their loss ignored. Does your organization have a plan in place for the death of an employee? This could be modified to include information from this document. Conversely, this document can be used to create a postvention protocol that would address all manners of death and provide support for employees.

How to Prepare

Leaders must plan ahead to provide an immediate response to prevent or minimize the psychological harm and suicidal behaviors that can occur after a suicide loss in the workplace. Inaction and inappropriate action by leadership can further complicate the already tragic situation. Management must know what to do, what not to do, and how to access resources to provide a safe recovery for the employees and a return to the new normal as soon as possible. As with creating any plan, be aware that every situation is unique and leadership must decide if plans need to be altered or revised. If leadership has an understanding of suicide postvention they are better equipped to make these decisions. Remember, if tragedy strikes, it will also affect the leadership team; preparing ahead will assist them at this painful time.

Create a Postvention Team

Each workplace is unique and, ideally, more than one person will work to create a suicide postvention plan. The size and structure of the workplace can inform the size of the postvention team. As with creating any workplace safety plan, team members must be willing to read and learn safe practices, think about how they might be best implemented in the work environment, and create a plan that can be easily followed if needed. These people will not be experts in postvention, but will know more than others and will be best informed to make decisions if the plan is implemented.

The number of team members should be sufficient to implement the plan. The members on the team should have the authority to make decisions. Decisions include:

- Should the plan be implemented?
- Should we contact mental health professionals for group debriefing? Individual counseling?
- Should we inform the entire workplace, or specific areas? How will we inform them?
- Should we make a statement to the media?
- Who will contact the family? Confirm the death was a suicide? Obtain the family's wishes on addressing the death as a suicide? Ask them how we can support them?
- Who will attend the funeral to represent the workplace? Will the workplace close for the funeral?
- Will we take food to the family? Support the family? Send flowers, etc. (or other activities based on cultural and workplace norms)?
- Who will gather the employee's belongings from the locker or desk and take them to the family?
- Will we conduct our own memorial service or do something in memory of the employee (as we would the death of any employee)?

A good postvention plan will guide leaders after an employee suicide, but each situation is unique and members of the team should be prepared to make safe decisions.

Connect to Mental Health Professionals

Few organizations have counselors, social workers, or other professionals to assess the mental health needs of employees or assist them in healthy grieving after a suicide loss. Leaders customarily handle situations themselves. However, the daunting task of mental health care to lessen psychological trauma and prevent suicidal thoughts is best left to trained professionals. Therefore, it is important to make arrangements with mental health agencies before they are needed and include the contact information in the suicide postvention plan.

People who are acutely affected by suicide loss in the workplace may need individual counseling. Others may be best served with structured small-group debriefing sessions to help them safely process grief. Mental health professionals can assist by triaging employees and providing these services. Additionally, they can assist leadership with decisions and make recommendations for long-term recovery in the workplace.

Some organizations use local mental health agencies in suicide prevention and postvention efforts. Large organizations may create contracts for services; small organizations may function on verbal agreements. Organizations may have Employee Assistance Programs that can provide immediate individual and group postvention care as well as long-term individual counseling. The Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network (TSPN) can provide assistance in locating a mental health agency. In addition to the resource directories located on the web site tspn.org, TSPN can be contacted by calling 615-297-1077 or emailing tspn@tspn.org.

Questions to ask a potential mental health provider include:

- Will they come to the workplace soon after the death?
- Can they stay a day or two if needed?
- Can they perform individual and group debriefings?
- Are they skilled in suicide postvention?
- Can they provide long-term care for employees if needed?

Create a Safe Communication Strategy

Communicating the suicide death of an employee may be one of the most challenging aspects of the postvention plan. While it is important to communicate the death to dispel rumors and harmful speculation, inappropriate messaging can provoke suicidal thoughts in high-risk individuals and do great harm. A goal of suicide postvention is to prevent suicide among people who are at high risk after exposure; safe communication is a key prevention strategy.

Messaging must not glorify or idolize the person who died by suicide, sensationalize the death, or provide details about the cause of death (Brock, 2003). Messaging should include helpful resources for those receiving the message and communicate the wishes of the family as appropriate. In addition to possible counseling services, resources may include the company Employee Assistance Program. The postvention team may wish to consider other resources provided in the Additional Resources section of this document.

A question to consider when preparing a plan is “who needs to know?” Communicating a suicide death to a large group of people who did not know the decedent can traumatize individuals unnecessarily. For example, an accountant may only be known by three people in the office; a twenty-year veteran who worked up through the company may be known by everyone. Communications should be adapted as needed.

Another aspect to consider is how to communicate the loss. The size of the organization, the number of people affected, and the routine communication model used in the organization can determine the means of communication. If only a few people are affected the leadership team may opt for a face-to-face meeting, preferably with mental health professionals present. Large communications may be sent

by carefully worded email or memos that include resources for employees. Shift reports and special meetings are other options.

Prior to communications, however, it is vital to confirm through professional channels that the death was indeed a suicide and to ask the family if they want the death to be reported to others as a suicide. The family may not perceive the death as a suicide or may wish to protect their privacy about the manner of death. The family may have many reasons for their wishes. Confirmation is important because the manner of death may be an unfounded rumor or the manner of death may be vague. In these situations, the postvention team may acknowledge the death, with family permission, but avoid the manner of death in communications.

It is apparent that communication about a suicide death is a skill that requires a lot of thought for safe delivery. Therefore, preparing message templates prior to the loss will be beneficial to the postvention team. *A Manager's Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace* provides sample notifications when the manner of death is shared and when the manner of death is withheld by the family (Appendix A). These may be used as templates to inform workplace communications. The postvention team can create communication templates for their specific workplace to have on hand and attach them to the postvention plan.

In some instances, the leadership may desire external public communications about the death. A sample notification is located in Appendix A. The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention Framework for Successful Messaging accessed at [Suicide Prevention Messaging](#) is a resource for additional information.

Create a Postvention Plan

The next section of this document will provide suggestions on what to include in a basic suicide postvention plan.

What to Include in a Postvention Plan

After creating a suicide postvention team, identifying mental health professionals, deciding on communication methods, and preparing communication templates, the team can create a suicide postvention plan. As previously stated, if the organization has a plan in place for the death of an employee, that plan can be adapted to include the safeguards of suicide postvention. Remember, employees do not have to know the person who died by suicide to be affected. It is important to note that some employees may already have suicidal thoughts, have attempted suicide, have a loved one suffering with suicidal thoughts, may have lost a loved one to suicide, or may be reminded of another death from another cause.

The postvention plan may be extremely detailed or simply list action steps and contact information to guide the leadership in the event of an employee suicide. The [Vermont Suicide Postvention Protocols for Workplace Supervisors](#) (2015) is a sample that provides intricate details as well as basic action steps. A *Manager's Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace* provides a sample flow chart that may be used in postvention efforts (Appendix B).

To create a postvention plan, answer the question “What should we do if we lose an employee to suicide?” Use the questions and action steps below to create your plan.

1. What office or person will be notified of the suspected suicide? In lieu of a person's name, use the title or role, such as Director of Human Resources or Chief Operating Officer, so the plan does not need to be modified with employee changes.
2. Will the above person or office activate a suicide postvention team or lead the postvention process themselves? Read the action steps below. Will it require several people to implement them? Or would it be best for one person to contact specified people or offices to initiate each of these steps? If so, specify the title or the office in each step below.
3. Verify that the death was indeed a suicide. Information might be available from law enforcement or a coroner's office. However, this may best be accomplished in step 4.
4. Contact the family and:
 - Verify the suicide
 - Learn how the organization may assist the family
 - Obtain the family's wishes on presenting the death to coworkers as a suicide. The family may wish to withhold the manner of death. If so, follow the usual procedures and customs for the death of an employee.
 - Ask the family if they have any messages for or requests of the workplace employees.
5. Contact the pre-arranged mental health provider, explain the current situation, and request their services. The plan should include contact information for the provider. Do they have special phone contact numbers for weekends and evenings? It is best to have mental health professionals available when communicating the death to employees. These professionals can assess and triage employees and determine if group debriefings, individual counseling, or both are needed.
6. Communicate the death to employees, honoring the family's wishes. Remember the question “who needs to know?” Will you inform the entire workplace or specific areas? How will you inform them? Will you reveal the death as a suicide? These are questions that can only be

answered as the situation unfolds and can be listed in the plan for consideration. If the postvention team has prepared communication templates they can be retrieved at this time. Remember to mention the support services available to employees, including where to find the mental health professionals or how to contact them, in each communication. As addressed previously, do not glorify or idolize the person who died by suicide, sensationalize the death, or provide details about the cause of death. Refer to resources provided in the previous section if you choose to make a statement to the media. Ideally, create a template before it is needed and attach it to your plan.

7. The mental health professionals will need space for private meetings with employees and possibly a room for small-group work. There may be several new and unfamiliar people in the workplace. Who will show them around and make arrangements for the space they need? Will they need access cards or codes to move around the workplace? Are there unsafe areas they need to avoid?
8. Is it a norm in the workplace to support the family after the death of an employee? If so, include these actions in the postvention plan. Will you take food to the family? Offer your services to the family? Send flowers, etc., or other activities based on cultural and workplace norms? Who will do these things?
9. Is it a norm in the workplace to attend the funeral after the death of an employee? Who will attend the funeral to represent the workplace? Will the workplace close for the funeral? Remember, employees do not have to know the person who died by suicide to be acutely affected by the loss, so an unusually high number of people may wish to attend.
10. Who will gather the employee's belongings from the locker or desk and take them to the family? How is this usually performed after the death of employee?
11. Is it a norm in the workplace to conduct a memorial service or do something in memory of an employee after a death? If so, maintain this tradition. However, as with communication after a suicide, improperly handled memorials can be harmful to already high-risk individuals. The Suicide Prevention Resource Center created the document [After a suicide: Recommendations for religious services and other public memorial observances](#) that can assist in creating safe memorials.

Conclusion

A loss to suicide is a tragic, harrowing experience that is hopefully unprecedented in the typical work environment. Planning ahead to provide for those left behind can decrease the psychological harm and the potential for suicidal behaviors after a suicide loss in the workplace. If, regretfully, your organization must use the postvention plan, a few months after the loss re-convene the team that created the plan, brainstorm on what worked well and what needed improvement, and modify the plan. Additionally, share the plan and your workplace suicide prevention efforts with other organizations that may need the support or have not addressed suicide prevention in the workplace.

May the results of this work be used to save lives.

June 5, 2021

Appendix A

Sample Internal Notification Memo When Manner of Death is Revealed

Date:

To: Staff

From: [Name of CEO]

Re: Death of [name of employee]

[Our workplace] is saddened to learn of the reported suicide of [employee]. The tragic and sudden circumstances of [employee's] death may cause a range of reactions among our workplace, so with the family's permission we are sharing the facts as we know them and are offering support for those who might need it.

[Employee] worked for [workplace] for the last [number] years. On [Saturday night] [s/he] died around [11:00PM] [DO NOT MENTION PLACE OR METHOD USED FOR SUICIDE]. We may never know all the factors leading to this tragedy; however, experts agree that in nearly all suicides there is no single cause or simple explanation.

[Employee's] memorial service will be held on [January 7 at 11:00AM], and all employees who wish to attend may be excused. The family would like to welcome all of [his/her] friends and colleagues who wish to share in the celebration of [his/her] life.

Some of you may be having difficulty coping with the sudden loss of one of our workplace family. We have arranged for the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) professionals to facilitate a debriefing on [January 8th at 5:00PM]. During this group meeting, counselors will be on hand to support us and answer any questions we may have. Others may prefer individual support at this time. If so, please contact our EAP program by calling [1-800-123-4567].

The family has requested that instead of flowers, those who wish to do so may donate to [a local suicide prevention center or other charity as shared by the family] in [employee's] memory.

For those who would like to talk about what has happened, our HR team is available to you.

Retrieved from *A Manager's Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace*, p. 13.

Sample Internal Notification Memo When Cause of Death Withheld by Family

Date:

To: Staff

From: [Name of CEO]

Re: Death of [name of employee]

[Our workplace] is saddened to learn of the death of [employee]; the family has requested that the cause of death be withheld. The tragic and sudden circumstances of [employee's] death may cause a range of reactions among our colleagues, so with the family's permission we are sharing the following information and are offering support for those who might need it.

[Employee] worked for [workplace] for the last [number] years. On [Saturday night] [s/he] died around [11:00PM] [DO NOT MENTION PLACE OR METHOD USED FOR SUICIDE].

[Employee's] memorial service will be held on [January 7 at 11:00AM], and all employees who wish to attend may be excused. The family would like to welcome all of [his/her] friends and colleague who wish to share in the celebration of [his/her] life.

Some of you may be having difficulty coping with the sudden loss of one of our workplace family. We have arranged for the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) professionals to facilitate a crisis counseling session on [January 8 at 5:00PM]. During this group meeting, counselors will be on hand to support us and answer any questions we may have. Others may prefer individual support at this time. If so, please contact our EAP program by calling [1-800-123-4567].

The family has requested that instead of flowers, those who wish to do so may donate to [a local suicide prevention center or other charity as shared by the family] in the [employee's] memory.

For those who would like to talk about what has happened, our HR team is available to you.

Retrieved from *A Manager's Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace*, p. 14.

Sample External Announcement When High Profile Suicide Affects the Workplace

[Our workplace] is saddened to learn of the reported suicide of [employee, title]. Our hearts and condolences go out the family and friends. With the family's permission we are sharing the facts as appropriate and are offering support for those who might need it. Suicide is a complex, multifaceted and tragic event, and thus we will not speculate on the causal factors of this death. Rather our efforts will be focused on pulling together and helping our workplace find supportive resources as necessary. For those outside of our work family who might be affected by this tragic loss, we suggest you contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK [8255]) to get referrals to support groups and other resources in your area.

Retrieved from *A Manager's Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace*, p. 15.

Appendix B

Decision Making Flowchart from *A Manager's Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace*, p. 17.

DECISION MAKING FLOWCHART SUICIDE POSTVENTION

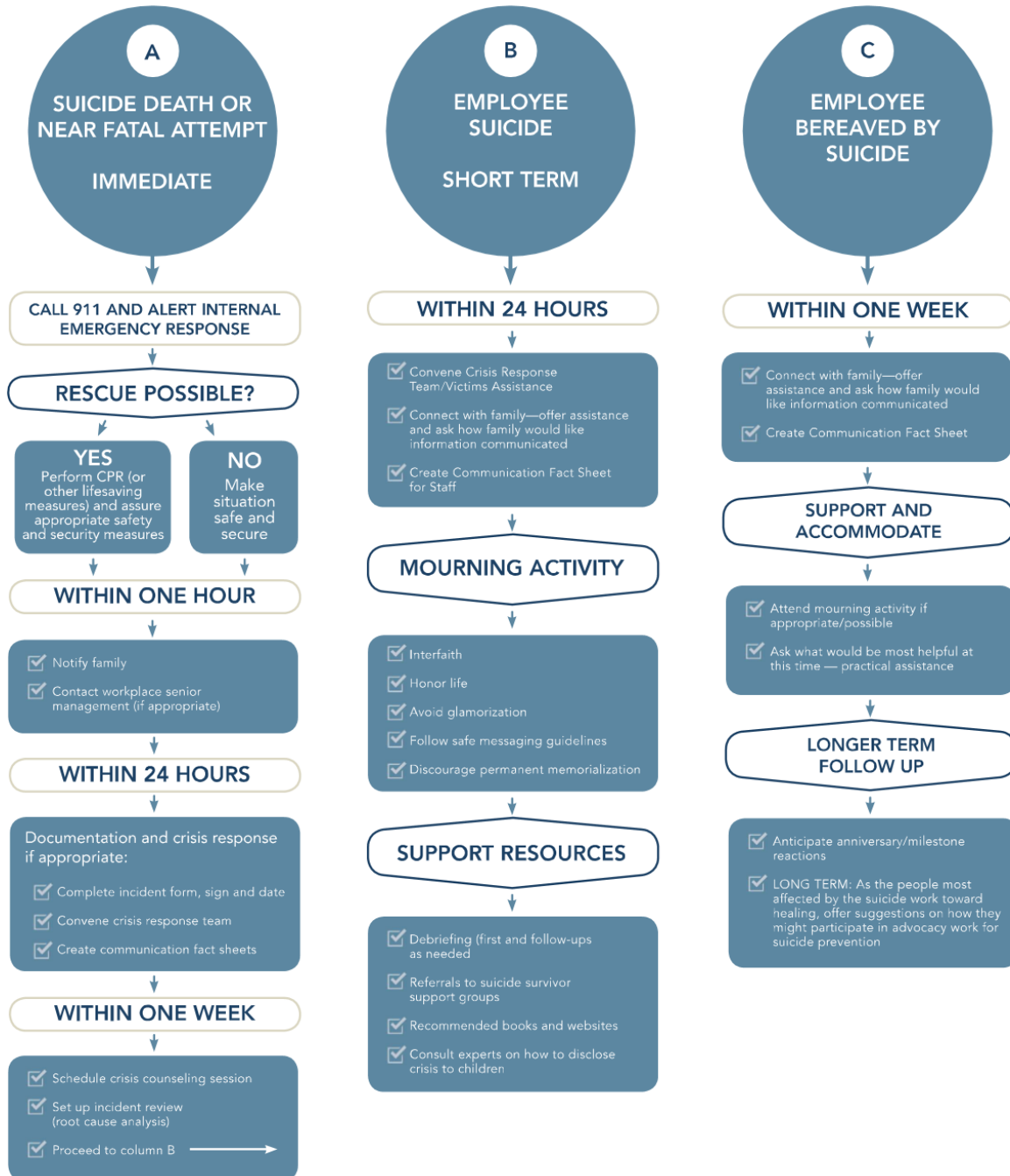


Image Description for Appendix B

Decision Making Flowchart for Suicide Postvention retrieved from *A Manager's Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace*, page. 17.

Column A: Suicide death or near fatal attempt in the workplace

Immediately call 911 and alert internal emergency response. If rescue is possible perform CPR (or other lifesaving measures) and assure appropriate safety and security measures. If rescue is not possible make the situation safe and secure. Within one hour notify the family and contact workplace senior management if appropriate. Within 24 hours, complete an incident form (sign and date), convene the crisis response team, and create communication fact sheets. Within one week, schedule counseling sessions, set up an incident review (root cause analysis), and proceed to column B.

Column B: Employee suicide short-term response

Within 24 hours convene the crisis response team/victim assistance team. Connect with family offering assistance and ask how family would like information communicated. Create communication fact sheet for staff. Ensure mourning activities are interfaith, honor life, avoid glamorization, follow safe messaging guidelines, and discourage permanent memorialization. Provide support resources including debriefing (first and follow-ups as needed), referrals to suicide survivor support groups, recommended books and websites, and consult experts on how to disclose crisis to children.

Column C: Employees Bereaved by Suicide

Within one week connect with family and offer assistance and ask how family would like information communicated. Create a communication fact sheet. Support and accommodate employees by attending mourning activities if possible and ask what would be most helpful at this time, providing practical assistance. Longer term follow-up includes anticipating anniversaries and milestone reactions. As the people most affected by the suicide work toward healing, offer suggestions on how they might participate in advocacy work for suicide prevention.

Additional Resources

Workplace Suicide Postvention Resources

[A Manager's Guide to Suicide Prevention in the Workplace: 10 Action Steps for Dealing with the Aftermath of Suicide](#)

[Responding to Grief, Trauma, and Distress After a Suicide: U.S. National Guidelines](#)

[A Report of Findings to Direct the Development of National Guidelines for Workplace Suicide Prevention](#)

[Tennessee Higher Education Protocol Guidelines for Suicide Intervention and Postvention](#)

[Vermont Suicide Postvention Protocols for Workplace Supervisors](#)

Crisis Response Resources

Tennessee Statewide Crisis Line: Phone 855-CRISIS-1 or 855-274-7471. More information at TN.gov/crisisline

Crisis Text Line: Text TN to 7 4 1 7 4 1

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Phone 1-800-273-TALK or 1-800-273-8255

Suicide Prevention Resources

[Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network](#)

[Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#)

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)

[American Association of Suicidology](#)

Memorialization Guidelines

[After a suicide: Recommendations for religious services and other public memorial observances](#)

Media Guidelines

[Suicide Prevention Messaging](#)

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