

Let the workplace speak out for suicide prevention

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Maggie Steven is a Senior Advisor at Acas. Her role includes helping organisations improve productivity through good employee relations, individual and collective dispute resolution and mediation. Maggie has extensive commercial experience, having worked in both the private and public sectors and is currently the Chair of Trustees for a Wellbeing Centre.

This year's theme for World Mental Health Day, set by the World Federation for Mental Health (WFMH), is suicide prevention.

This is a very challenging discussion but one we really need to have. Last month, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) published the [UK suicide rate for 2018](#). The statistics show there has been a significant rise since 2017 and, alarmingly, the first increase since 2013. Three-quarters of suicides are men. For both men and women, the highest suicide rate is for those aged 45 to 49.

Breaking down the stigma

With over 32 million people in UK employment, the workplace offers an opportunity to reach out to people who may need extra support. Mental wellbeing is as much part of our day-to-day health as physical health, and workplaces play an important role in breaking down the stigma of talking openly about how we feel. It's ok to admit if you are struggling to cope and need help.

At Acas we have noticed a significant increase in organisations asking for help in developing a positive wellbeing culture. Creating an environment where workers feel they can talk openly without fear of judgment or discrimination is the foundation of good work and good health.

Reflecting on the [mental health training](#) I have facilitated, it strikes me that no two sessions are ever the same. It's obvious I know, but worth repeating: mental health may have many root causes – and some of these may be triggered by workplaces issues – but the way it is experienced is unique to the individual.

Training to help managers to spot the signs

Part of the Acas training helps to equip managers with the skills needed to recognise the signs and symptoms of someone who may be struggling. On more than one occasion an employee suicide has been mentioned. Workforce substance abuse is also regularly flagged as a challenge. Discussions about anxiety or depression often spark personal insights into how family and friends may be struggling.

Creating this safe space for people to be open about their feelings is a privilege for me. But I am always conscious of that invisible line. I am not a clinician or a trained counsellor and nor are the vast majority of line managers. While we can all be trained to recognise and respond to mental health problems, we are not qualified to diagnose or suggest treatment.

But that doesn't mean we don't have a vital role to play as managers, colleagues, friends or just concerned observers. The sooner you spot the signs, the sooner someone can get the support they need, and the lower the risk of their illness escalating into a longer-term condition.

Supporting the manager

And, finally, let's have a thought for the manager. Being that person you go to, to offload on, can be a demanding and sometimes lonely experience. Yes, they play a key role in the day-to-day responsibility to deliver the organisation's 'duty of care' – but it's not just about seniority or grade. It is often overlooked, but ensuring a line manager's own wellbeing is supported is critical to embed the right wellbeing culture throughout the organisation. I believe we all have innate compassion and want to help each other.