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COMMENT AND ANALYSIS

## The shock of a workplace suicide

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News  
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A suicide in the workplace is fortunately a very rare occurrence. But when it does happen, it sets up uncomfortable guilt-feelings among the suicide's colleagues, employers, friends and family, who all may wonder whether they could have done more, or anything, to prevent it.

This kind of agonising is a reaction that is very usual in such sad circumstances - but such guilty feelings are certainly inappropriate.

The 'final straw' that led to the irrevocable decision to take his or her own life, in most cases is never known. The suicide may have been triggered by events unconnected with work.

In all organisations, the most constructive course is to make a formal study of suicide intervention as part of routine stress-management training. Managers can be taught how to identify possible signs of a potential suicide; how to arrange counselling for any such vulnerable person; know what to say to the rest of the workforce in the event of such an incident; train your HR personnel to be aware and source specialist expertise from outside, when necessary.

An individual at risk of suicide may be depressed and withdrawn, unable to relate to those around them and increasingly liable to be absent from work. The risk is obviously greater in the wake of a traumatic event such as illness, bereavement, redundancy or when diagnosed as clinically depressed.

Unfortunately, a confusing factor is that a suicidal person can sometimes appear to be recovering from a desperate and depressed state of mind, when completely unexpectedly, they suddenly take their own life.

What, then, is the best kind of intervention? In principle, an acutely depressed and/or suicidal person, needs someone to be there for them, ready to listen patiently to what may or may not be a complex story, and to accept them as someone who is normal but who needs to be helped over what seems, to them, to be an unlivable-with position.

What they don't need is a brisk pep-talk, a sermon, an appeal to 'snap out of it', or equally the too-easy reassurance that everything will be all right.

Sympathetic and attentive listening is essential - making the person feel they are being taken seriously. Experience shows that, in many instances, it is important to have access to the best

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professional back-up you can source.

The other day I was presented with the case of a van-driver who had tried to hang himself in his van - which, had he succeeded, would have involved his employers in a full inquest. By moving immediately into our emergency procedure, we were able to minimise the chance of another attempt. We provided immediate crisis intervention support, including access to a 24-hour counselling hotline. We also briefed his line-manager on how best to handle this particular situation, which had, in fact, been sparked by the recent suicide of the driver's own son, for which he blamed himself.

#### Key points: Caring for lives

- Identifying suicidal symptoms in advance can be formally taught.
- Sympathetic and attentive listening is essential.
- Expert professional backup should be ready to deploy, without delay, when necessary.

*- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.*

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