

An open door on mental health

There are steps to understanding and dealing with mental health issues in the workplace, writes PEDRO DIAZ.

While we don't know exactly how many suicides are work-related across the country, a study in Victoria found that 17 percent of suicides in Victoria from 2000 to 2007 could be attributed to work. If you apply that across the country, that could equate to as many as 3800 suicides over the decade to 2011 – presenting work colleagues, family and friends with a staggering amount of shock and trauma.

Suicide is a horrible waste. The after-effects reverberate across families and personal relationships, but when it happens at work it can be especially devastating – because it is so preventable. Work is an important part of our lives – we work to generate money, enjoy the sense of a job well done, develop friendships and feel part of something.

If we look at workplace cultures across the world, Australia has the highest level of workplace bullying, nearly double the global average. Bullying leads to depression, which can lead to suicidal thoughts. It is now crucial to incorporate suicide prevention, awareness and support programs into the workplace, for any organisation.

From a business perspective, we now know that the more engaged your workforce is, the more productive your business will be, the more competitive and the more profitable.

How is this related to suicide? Suicide in the workplace is the ultimate expression of disengagement. A suicide at work should immediately cause management to review and improve their engagement practices to include better mental health for all employees.

This is the worst case scenario as nobody wants to start addressing workplace mental health issues after the fact – it is better to put preventative measures in place.

Three areas in particular need the attention of management (see diagram below).

It's a common myth that people contemplating suicide do not want to tell anyone; in fact, eight out of 10 people give definite warning signs of their intention to kill themselves. A complicating factor is that these warning signs are often given in a code, but people can be taught to read the signs. Many realise, after the fact, that a person's comments and actions had a deeper meaning, so it is important to recognise the subtler warning signs of suicide.

Here are some of the examples:

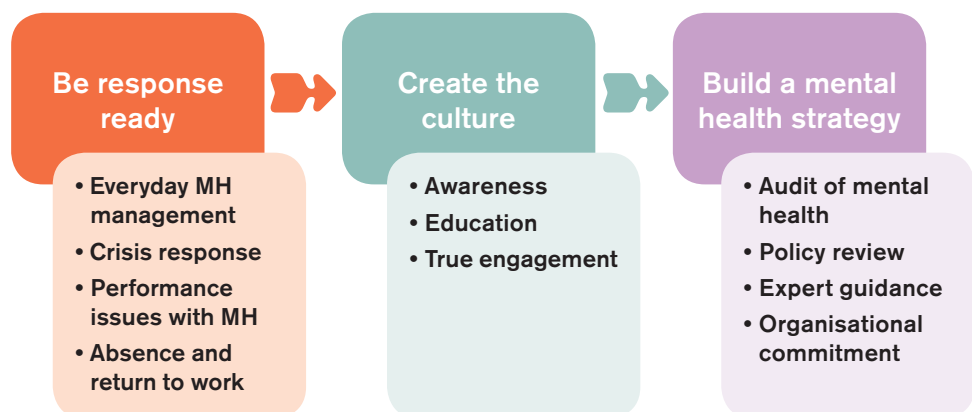
- **A preoccupation with death** – this can extend to talking, writing or joking about death, and includes drawing and other artistic impressions. It's also quite common for this preoccupation with death to show in the choices of clothing.
- **Talking about others who have committed suicide** – they may be glorifying someone who has died, such as talking about how wonderful or brave they were. It could be that they are testing to see what your reaction is, to see whether

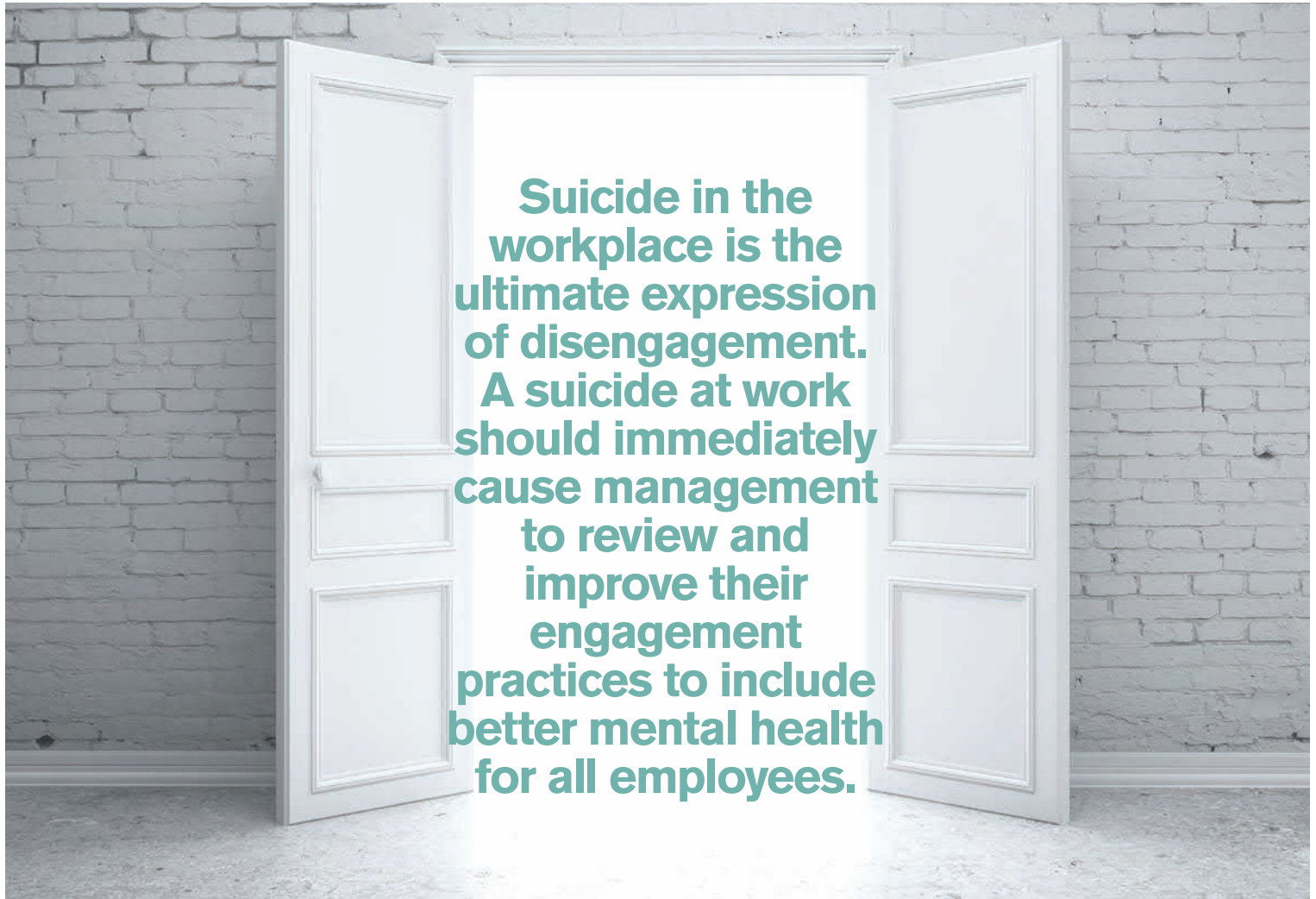
it's safe or not to talk to you about how they are feeling.

- **Withdrawal** – withdrawing or avoiding contact with other people can be a common sign of depression, which increases the risk of suicide. Sometimes the person who is considering suicide first withdraws from those around them to protect them from the pain of their suicide when it happens.
- **Lack of interest in activities they previously enjoyed** – they may have some 'reason' why they are not doing it anymore, but this can be evidence that they have lost joy in life.
- **Sudden calmness, or a good mood** – after a spell of depression it can seem like the person has recovered when actually they are relieved because they have made the decision to end their life.

Workplaces need to ensure that their working environments are mental health literate, and that support staff and managers are appropriately equipped to understand the risks of mental health issues in the workplace.

With increasing pressures on workplaces to cut costs, increase productivity and systematise work processes, organisations need to act. Unfortunately, statistics indicate that market downturns and rising unemployment rates usually result in increased workplace suicides – and





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Australia is operating in extremely challenging economic conditions at the moment.

A lot of the work we do with organisations across Australia and overseas involves assisting businesses to create sustainable, healthy and engaged workforces. This includes understanding the warning signs of mental health issues. Organisations that deal with frontline issues or experience significant market pressures or technology disruption or change are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues in the workplace.

There is much evidence to show that happy, healthy and well-supported workplaces achieve higher rates of retention, productivity and innovation. What I would like to see is more organisations valuing the importance of mental health in the workplace and the eradication of workplace suicides.

Unfortunately, workplaces often approach us after a suicide has happened, and it has had massive impact on their teams and across the whole business. We really want them to be doing something about it before instead. For businesses, in this

space, it's a better business proposition to prevent than to cure.

TALKING TO SOMEONE STRUGGLING AT WORK

An immediate Don't is ask 'R U OK?' While this is a very good awareness-creating anchor for people to remember to take action, it is a poor question.

It's a closed question and you can quickly be dismissed. What do you do after that? Most people are stuck. Seventy-five percent of people who commit suicide are men and, generally speaking, men are not necessarily into talking. It also assumes you have a problem.

If you have to ask a question, ask something that is inclusive like 'Are we OK?' People value their relationships with people, and they tend to open up more when talking about 'us' as opposed to talking about themselves. If something has been off lately, they are much more likely to respond to that question with, 'Oh no – we're fine, I've just been busy/tired/stressed lately' and that can start a deeper conversation.

A better option is to not ask a question at all. A great management practice is having a small, light chat with the person and reminding them of why they were hired. Make sure there's appreciation in your voice and your words. Then, when you have this person's attention and trust, ask if you can do something for them. It can go something like, 'Hey Steve, I've noticed lately you have been staying by yourself and not commenting at meetings as much as you used to, and I honestly miss that. I was wondering what's going on for us? What have you noticed?' This type of question, taking ownership and responsibility, can yield great results.

This contributes to an open-door policy; it is better to make sure team members are aware they can come to management before an issue escalates. Never leave talking to team members for when there are problems. Make sure they know you and you know them – this can often make a huge difference. ●

Pedro Diaz is founder and CEO of the Mental Health Recovery Institute.