Navigating a Mental Health Crisis at Work

A NAMI Resource Guide for Those Experiencing a Mental Health Emergency in the Workplace

NAMI
National Alliance on Mental Illness

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About NAMI

The National Alliance on Mental Illness is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness. NAMI provides advocacy, education, support, and public awareness so that all individuals and families affected by mental illness can build better lives.

nami.org

NAMI HelpLine is available Monday – Friday, 10:00 a.m. – 10:00 p.m. ET
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Acknowledgments
This guide was prepared by NAMI HelpLine staff, with the generous support of The Hartford, a long-time StigmaFree partner. This project was also made possible by the leadership from Teri Brister, Ph.D., LPC, NAMI Chief Program Officer and Darcy Gruttadaro, J.D., NAMI Chief Innovation Officer.

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Quick Start Guide:
What to Do in a Mental Health Crisis

NOTE: Always keep your safety as your top priority. Call 988 immediately to ensure both you and your colleague know how to stay safe throughout the crisis. If there is an active medical emergency or violence, calmly leave the area and call 911.

Step 1: Assess the urgency of the situation

I. **Is the person in immediate danger of hurting themselves or others?**
   a. If yes, call 911. Leave the area if you are not safe and encourage colleagues to leave with you.
   b. If no, call 988 for guidance from the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline on helping the person through their mental health crisis. If you can do so without leaving the person alone, task a trusted colleague with calling your company's crisis response team or HR.
      i. The crisis counselors at 988 will help manage the following steps.

Step 2: De-escalation

I. **De-escalation techniques**
   a. Remain calm and use an even tone of voice.
   b. Avoid continuous eye contact.
   c. Move slowly; gently announce actions before initiating them.
   d. Suggest you move to a quiet, safe space away from potential weapons (if this feels safe).
   e. Give the person space; don't make them feel trapped. Do not block the door.
   f. Let them talk. Ask guiding questions until you fully understand the situation.
      i. Use reflective listening. Example: "I hear you saying that people are following you, and you can't take it. Is that right?"
      ii. Help your colleague manage their fears and confusion by listening calmly rather than arguing with or confronting them about their beliefs or behaviors.
   g. Express concern and offer support and options instead of trying to take control.
      i. Example: "I can see how much this is affecting you. I'm here to help."
      ii. Example: "Can I close this door so we have more privacy?"
   h. If your colleague is doing something that feels threatening (i.e. clenched fists or angrily staring), tell your colleague how their behavior is making you feel.
      i. Example: "The way you're looking at me is making me feel afraid."

II. **If de-escalation is unsuccessful, contact 988 if you have not already done so. If you are on the phone with a 988 crisis counselor, they will advise on next steps.**
   a. Only leave the person alone if you are not safe.
   b. Inform HR as soon as possible so they can reach out to the employee's emergency contact.
   c. Move on to Step 3.

III. **If de-escalation is successful, inform your company's HR of the situation.**
   a. HR should contact the person's emergency contact and inform them of the situation. It is recommended if possible that the emergency contact come to the person's location and take them to a medical facility for further treatment.
   b. Stay with the person until help arrives (HR, the Crisis Response Team, or their emergency contact).

Step 3: Provide comfort and support

I. **If you have not already, call 988 and alert your company's designated crisis response team or HR. If you can't call because you are on the phone with 988, get a trusted colleague to do so.**

II. **If the colleague has talked about suicide or self-harm:**

   a. Stay with the person experiencing a crisis.

   b. Ask directly if the person is considering suicide.

      i. Example: "Are you thinking about suicide or self-harm?"

   c. Remove potential weapons or move to a space free from potential means.

   d. Listen, express concern, reassure. Focus on being understanding, caring, and nonjudgmental.

      i. Example: "You are not alone. I'm here for you."

      ii. Example: "I may not be able to understand exactly how you feel, but I care about you and want to help."

   e. Do *not*:

      i. Promise secrecy. Say instead: "I care about you too much to keep this kind of secret. You need help, and I'm here to help you get it."

      ii. Debate the value of living or argue that suicide is right or wrong.

      iii. Ask questions in a way that indicates you want "No" for an answer.

         1. Example: "You're not thinking about suicide, are you?"

      iv. Minimize or disregard what the person is going through.

         1. Example: "You don't have it that bad. Just snap out of it."

      v. Argue with or confront a colleague about their beliefs or behaviors, as their experiences feel real to them.

      vi. Whisper, joke, or laugh, which may increase agitation and/or trigger paranoia.

III. **Stay calm and be an ally.**

   a. Example: "That must be frightening. I would feel scared, too, if that was happening to me."

IV. **Communicate thoughtfully and ask one-part questions.**

   a. Example: "Would you like to sit at the table with me?"

Step 4: Waiting for help

I. **If you haven't called your company's crisis response team or HR, do so now.**

II. **Ask the individual if they would like to reach out to friends and family for support.**

III. **Your colleague may want to go home immediately following a crisis. Do what you can to make sure they leave with another person, like their emergency contact or a crisis intervention team.**

   a. If the person has talked about suicide, ensure that you have spoken to crisis services (with them, if possible) before they leave. There may be legal ramifications if no action is taken.

   b. Do not physically stop them from leaving. If they choose to leave and you are no longer on the phone with crisis services, call crisis services back and explain what happened. Have the person's home address ready to provide in this situation. HR should have this contact available and may take the lead.

Step 5: When help arrives

I. **Try to greet first responders before they interact with your colleague to ensure they understand it is a mental health crisis. Tell them if there is or isn't any danger of violence or if there are weapons nearby.**

   a. Provide a brief verbal summary to first responders. Remain as calm, measured, and objective as possible.

   b. Remember that law enforcement officers have broad discretion in deciding the next steps, including taking the person to an emergency room for evaluation, issuing a warning, or making an arrest. Law enforcement can, and often will, call mental health resources in your community.

II. **Stay with your colleague and offer comfort. Ask how you can support them, such as calling a loved one or getting their purse/bag from their workspace.**

III. **After your colleague departs, take time for yourself. Go for a walk, debrief with other colleagues who were involved, or even head home for the day. If you need additional support, reach out to your company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), a local mental health warm-line, or NAMI's HelpLine (1-800-950-NAMI).**

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INTRODUCTION

NAMI developed this guide to provide important, potentially lifesaving, information to people experiencing mental health crises in the workplace, their colleagues, managers, and corporate leadership. The guide outlines what can contribute to a crisis, warning signs that a crisis is emerging, strategies to help de-escalate a crisis, and resources that may be available for those affected. We also include information about how to manage the aftermath of a mental health crisis in the workplace.

In this guide, we use the term "mental health condition" to refer to a variety of mental illnesses, including, but not limited to, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, or schizoaffective disorder. These conditions may affect a person's thinking, feeling, behavior, or mood. They may also deeply impact day-to-day living and a person's ability to relate to others. It is important to note that people with a mental health condition can and do live healthy, productive lives.

Like any other health crisis, it's important to address a mental health emergency with urgency and compassion. Feelings like grief, guilt, anger, and confusion are normal and expected responses in crisis situations. Although mental health crises can be difficult to predict, preparing yourself, your leadership, and your staff by knowing the warning signs and learning about crisis services in your community is key to dealing well with challenging moments and moving through them in the best ways possible.

Unlike other health emergencies at work, people experiencing a mental health crisis or helping their colleagues through a crisis often don't receive instructions or materials on what to expect during or after the crisis. It is also possible that the first point of contact may be with law enforcement personnel instead of mental health professionals since behavioral disturbances and substance use can be part of the difficulties associated with mental health conditions.

NAMI believes mental health crises should be addressed with a mental health response. At NAMI, we want you to know that:

- **You are not alone.**
- **This is not your fault; you deserve help and support.**
- **There is support available for you.**

NAMI hopes this guide will help you navigate a current crisis, learn how to prevent a crisis, and provide a road map for how to navigate after a crisis occurs in your workplace.

Signs of Mental Health Distress

Regardless of the diagnosis, signs of mental health distress can be similar and overlap, especially in times of crisis.

The following are some examples of distress signs that you may notice in yourself or your colleague:

- Confused thinking or problems concentrating and learning
- Extreme mood changes, including uncontrollable "highs" or feelings of euphoria
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger
- Excessive worrying or fear
- Feeling excessively sad or low
- Avoiding socializing and social activities
- Difficulties understanding or relating to other people
- Feeling tired and exhibiting low energy
- Difficulty perceiving reality (delusions or hallucinations, in which a person experiences and senses things that don't exist in objective reality)
- Inability to perceive changes in one's own feelings, behavior, or personality
- Overuse of substances like alcohol or drugs
- Multiple physical ailments without obvious causes (such as headaches, stomach aches, vague and ongoing "aches and pains")
- Inability to carry out daily tasks or handle daily problems and stress
- Thinking about suicide

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

Definition

Mental health conditions are medical conditions that disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, mood, daily functioning, and ability to relate to others. Mental health conditions don't develop because of a person's character or intelligence. Just as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, a mental health condition impacts the brain and can make it difficult to cope with the ordinary demands of life. No one is to blame — not the person and not their family, friends, or colleagues. To learn more, visit the NAMI Mental Health Conditions webpage at nami.org/MentalHealthConditions.

If you have a mental health condition, you are not alone. One in five adults will experience a mental health condition every year, with one in every twenty adults experiencing a serious mental health condition such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression. Effective treatment plans can reduce many symptoms. Supportive relationships with family, peers, and colleagues help develop coping and recovery strategies. Community support services can also be helpful when needed, as well as company benefits that help support employee mental health. Many people overcome their challenges to succeed in their careers and develop meaningful connections at work.

Getting a Diagnosis from a Professional

People most often receive a diagnosis based on clinical observations by a trained professional of behavior and reports from those close to the person. Symptoms vary from person to person, and each person responds differently to treatment, complicating getting an accurate diagnosis. The most common mental health diagnoses include anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia, but there are many others.

It's important to remember that no one in your place of work is expected to act as a mental health professional for their colleagues. This includes diagnosing, suggesting treatment plans, providing therapeutic interventions, or engaging with a person when they do not feel safe to do so. The most beneficial step you can take is ensuring all employees are aware of the mental health benefits and resources they have access to, as well as why and how they would access those benefits and resources.

It's important to be aware that one or more of these signs are not evidence that a person has a mental health condition. These signs may be a typical reaction to stress, or they may be the result of another underlying medical condition. If a colleague begins exhibiting these signs, you are encouraged to have a conversation with them to let them know you are concerned and there to support them. Lead with empathy and compassion and remind your colleague of the resources they have access to, such as NAMI's HelpLine (1-800-950-NAMI), your Employee Assistance Program, covered physical and mental health services, and more.

Cultural Considerations

Additionally, signs of a mental health condition may appear differently based on someone's gender, culture, religious background, or developmental stage. For example, in Western cultures, anxiety is often described by worried thoughts and feelings of dread. In non-Western cultures, anxiety is more commonly described by physical experiences like headaches, backaches, and stomach aches. As you read this guide, remember that everyone will have a different background and understanding of how a mental health crisis should be handled.

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH CRISES

A mental health crisis is any situation **in which a person's behavior puts them at risk of hurting themselves or others. It may also prevent them from being able to care for themselves or function effectively in the workplace or community.**

Contributing Factors

Many things can lead to a mental health crisis at work. Some examples of situations that can contribute to a crisis include:

Home or Environmental Stressors

- Changes in relationship with others (boyfriend, girlfriend, partner, spouse)
- Losses of any kind due to death, estrangement, or relocation
- Conflicts or arguments with loved ones or friends
- Trauma or exposure to violence

Workplace Stressors

- Worrying about upcoming projects or tasks
- Feeling singled out or bullied by co-workers and peers; feeling lonely
- Lack of understanding from colleagues or supervisors
- Real or perceived discrimination
- Mass layoffs or restructuring
- Organizational changes/ uncertainty
- Chronically low morale
- Intense feelings of burnout
- Death of a colleague

Other Stressors

- Starting new medication or new dosage of current medication
- Treatment stops working
- Stopping medication or missing doses
- Using or misusing drugs or alcohol
- Pending court dates
- Being in crowds or large groups of people
- Experiencing traumas such as community violence, natural disasters, or terrorism
- Triggering sensations such as loud noises, flickering lights, etc.
- Real or perceived persecution on social media

Be aware of how long the changes in personality or daily functioning have been occurring and how much difficulty they're causing. If the person is presenting a danger to themselves or others in the workplace, address this concern immediately with the person and ask if they have a safety plan.

> "You don't have to be a therapist to support a colleague"

*__Note for HR and/or Crisis Response Team__: Ensure that when employees come to you in crisis or seeking mental health support that you help them reach out to available resources to get the conversation started if they're open to it. Additionally, schedule a check-in for the next few days. Maintain increased support while they get started with external mental health support.

Warning Signs of a Mental Health Crisis

Warning signs are not always present when a mental health crisis is developing. Many common signs that a mental health crisis is developing may happen at home.

There are signs that may be visible in the workplace that may include:

- Inability to perform daily tasks related to their work
- Rapid mood swings, increased energy level, inability to stay still, pacing; suddenly depressed, withdrawn; suddenly happy or calm after a period of depression
- Increased agitation, verbal threats, violent or out-of-control behavior, destruction of property
- Abusive behavior to self or others, including substance misuse or self-harm (cutting)
- Isolation from work and usual socialization
- Seeming out of touch with reality (psychosis) – unable to recognize colleagues, confused, has strange ideas, thinks they're someone they're not, doesn't understand what people are saying, hears voices, sees things that aren't there
- Paranoia with irrational and persistent feelings of distrust and suspicion

Warning Signs of Suicide

Any talk of suicide by a colleague should always be taken seriously. Many people who attempt suicide have given some warning — but this isn't always the case. If someone has attempted suicide before, the risk is even greater. In the workplace, the risk may be less apparent, especially if the person is a remote or hybrid worker.

Common warning signs of suicide include:

- Giving away personal possessions, clearing out their workspace
- Talking as if they're saying goodbye or going away forever
- Taking steps to tie up loose ends, like working to rapidly finalize projects while denying requests for new work
- Preoccupation with death
- Sudden cheerfulness or calm after a period of despondency
- Dramatic changes in personality, mood, and/or behavior
- Drug or alcohol use during work hours
- Saying things like "Nothing matters anymore," "You'll be better off without me," or "Life isn't worth living"
- Withdrawal from colleagues, friends, family, and normal activities
- Sense of utter hopelessness and helplessness
- History of suicide attempts or other self-harming behaviors
- History of family/friend suicide or attempts

Typically, you will see more than one of these signs occur before a suicide attempt occurs.

SUICIDE PREVENTION

If you notice any of the warning signs of suicide or if you're concerned someone is thinking about suicide, don't be afraid to talk to them about it. Do not send the person home. Instead, start a conversation. If you're concerned for their safety or yours, don't have the conversation alone. Go to your Crisis Response Team, HR Department, or Safety Officer for assistance. You can also always call or text 988 for guidance on how to manage a mental health crisis.

*__Note for HR and/or Crisis Response Team__: Ensure that when employees come to you in crisis or talking about suicide that you help them connect with crisis services. Do not send them home. Additionally, schedule a check-in for the next few days if they do not enter in-patient care. If they are not receiving in-patient care, maintain increased contact while they get started with external mental health help. If the employee goes out on FMLA, they may not be contacted during that time.

If you are concerned that a colleague may be at risk of suicide, consider opening the conversation by sharing specific signs you've noticed, like:

- "I've noticed lately that you [haven't been engaging with the team, saying that we'd be "better off without you," have been expressing a sense of hopelessness, etc.] ..."

If a person is showing clear signs of suicide risk, you should ask:

- "Are you thinking about suicide or self-harm?"
- "When was the last time you thought about suicide?"

If the answer is "Yes" or if you think they might be at risk of suicide, seek help immediately.

- Call or text 988 to reach crisis counselors at the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
- Call 911 if there is an immediate, life-threatening emergency
- Call your company's designated Safety Officer or Human Resources
- Remove potential means such as weapons and medications to reduce risk

Listen, express concern, reassure. Focus on being understanding, caring, and nonjudgmental, saying something like:

- "You are not alone. I'm here for you."
- "I may not be able to understand exactly how you feel, but I care about you and want to help."
- "I'm concerned about you, and I want you to know there is help available to get you through this."
- "You are important to me; we will get through this together."

Now that you have some ideas of how to approach an employee about their mental health, here is some advice about what not to do:

- Don't promise secrecy. Say instead: "I care about you too much to keep this kind of secret. You need help, and I'm here to help you get it."
- Don't debate the value of living or argue that suicide is right or wrong
- Don't ask in a way that indicates you want "No" for an answer
  - "You're not thinking about suicide, are you?"
  - "You haven't been throwing up to lose weight, have you?"
- Don't try to handle the situation alone
- Don't be dismissive
  - "We all go through tough times like these. You'll be fine."
  - "It's all in your head. Just snap out of it."

Please remember that a suicide threat or attempt is a medical emergency requiring urgent professional help. If the person is in a safe place, call 988 for crisis support. If you learn that someone has taken steps or is about to take steps to end their life, call 911 immediately.

WHAT TO DO IN A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

It can sometimes be hard to tell if someone is experiencing momentary stress or a full mental health crisis, but there are key differences. Stress is a common response to pressure, and while it can cause frustration, anxiety, or irritability, people are usually able to de-escalate themselves after a break or rest.

A mental health crisis, on the other hand, involves intense emotional distress, overwhelming hopelessness, or confusion, and people often struggle to de-escalate. Warning signs might include drastic behavior changes, inability to function, withdrawal, or talk of self-harm. If you're unsure, it's always okay to check in and offer support or call 988 to talk through the situation.

Tips: Assessing the Urgency

If you're worried that you or your colleague is in crisis or nearing a crisis, seek help. Make sure to assess the immediacy of the situation before deciding who to call.

- Is the person in danger of hurting themselves, others, or property right now?
- Do you need emergency assistance?
- Do you have time to start with a phone call for guidance and support from a mental health professional?

After a de-escalation or de-escalation attempt, always follow up with your Human Resources department or your company's Crisis Response Team. If the person is open to it, encourage them to talk to HR to review available resources and next steps.

If they are unable to de-escalate, call 988 and reach out to a trusted colleague/HR for assistance right away.

***Note for HR and/or Crisis Response Team:** Help facilitate by contacting the employee's emergency contact. Maintain contact with the employee in crisis and the employee who is assisting (in-person, if possible, or on video if virtual). Ensure consistent follow-up with all employees involved and share resources for support.

During a mental health crisis, it is likely your colleague is unaware of the impact of their behavior.

Your colleague may be seeing or hearing things that are not real. Don't underestimate the reality and vividness of hallucinations. To your colleague, these are very real. Don't argue with them about their experience. In extreme situations, the person may act based on what they are seeing or hearing, even if it is not real.

If you're feeling like something isn't right, talk with your colleague and voice your concern. And if necessary, talk to your supervising manager, Human Resources, or Crisis Response Team to get extra support.

For Remote/Hybrid Workers:

It may be more challenging to notice signs of a distressed colleague in a remote or hybrid work setting. Maintaining awareness of how our colleagues are feeling and performing is crucial in a virtual work setting. Therefore, it may take more intentionality through verbal 1:1 check-ins with employees to know how they are really feeling. Some additional signs to look for:

De-escalation

Always ask the person how you can support them first, before offering any suggestions. At this time, call 988 for guidance on de-escalation from a professional.

If you are alone and feel safe with the person, call a trusted colleague to come and be with you until professional help arrives.

Call 911 if the situation is actively dangerous and law enforcement or urgent medical care is needed.

Techniques that may help de-escalate a crisis:

Do:

- Remain calm and use an even tone of voice
- Keep noise and stimulation levels low; move to a quieter, safe space if possible
- Move slowly; gently announce actions before initiating them
- Be patient and predictable
- Use reflective listening: "I hear you saying that people are following you, and you can't take it. Is that right?"
- Express concern and offer support by saying, for example, "I can see how much this is affecting you. I'm here to help."

Don't:

- Maintain continuous eye contact
- Touch the person unless you ask permission
- Make them feel trapped, give them space
- Argue with or confront them about their beliefs or behaviors
- Try to take control of the person, offer options instead

If your organization has made a crisis plan, **now is the time to use it**. If you haven't already talked about the consequences of certain behaviors while they were calm, use your judgment and past experience to decide if it is best to let them know you are calling 988, or simply go ahead with the crisis plan. It may be safer for you if the person seems intensely agitated to call emergency services to manage the situation for you.

- Get help! It is okay to ask for support. Having other people there, including law enforcement, may defuse the situation.

Tips And Suggested Language For Providing Comfort And Support

Here are some examples of helpful behaviors:

- Stay calm. Respond calmly and gently; avoid arguing with or confronting a colleague about their beliefs or behaviors.
- Be an ally. The colleague's thoughts and experiences feel real to them. Help them manage their anxiety and confusion by offering empathy for their feelings.

  Example: "That must be frightening. I would feel scared, too, if that was happening to me." Other options might include: "I'm glad you could talk to me about this" or "I'm glad I could be here to listen today."
- Communicate thoughtfully. Avoid whispering, joking, or laughing, which may increase agitation and/or trigger paranoia.
- Ask one-part questions. Avoid multi-part questions because complexity will increase confusion.

  Example:

  - DON'T say – "Would you rather sit at the table with me or by the window?"
  - DO say – "Would you like to sit at the table with me?"
- Give simple, clear directions. Avoid multi-step instructions because complexity will increase confusion.

  Example:

  - DON'T say – "After we sit at the table, I'll bring you a glass of water and we'll talk about what I can do to help you right now."
  - **DO say – "We're going to sit at the table now."**
- Use teamwork. Avoid arguing with others on the scene. Discuss the situation quietly and out of the person's hearing.

- Staying off-camera for meetings when that's not the company norm
- Lower or no engagement in virtual meetings
- Increased time between responses to messages/emails
- Unreachable during typical working hours

If you are concerned about a colleague while on a video chat with them, stay on the call while you attempt to assess the urgency and de-escalate or help the person get connected to crisis services. It is always okay to call 988 for assistance. Ask the person if they are willing to share their address, as that can be critical for emergency services. If the person is not willing to share, reach out to Human Resources, Safety Officer, or Crisis Response Team to share the concern and have them manage the crisis as they have access to the employee's records. In either scenario, always contact Human Resources so they are aware of the incident and can follow up with the employee.

Who to Call for Help

Call or text 988 if your colleague needs emergency intervention but there are no weapons, serious physical injuries, or elements of violence.

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is a national network of crisis centers operating 24/7/365 and often the first point of contact for a person in crisis. Dial or text 988 to connect with a trained crisis counselor who will provide an assessment and screening, preliminary counseling, and share information on community mental health and crisis services. Crisis counselors can dispatch help.

988 is also a great resource if a person is experiencing intense levels of stress, a panic attack, or any other heightened emotion but is not necessarily in a crisis. 988 can help de-escalate.

Call 911 if the situation is actively dangerous and law enforcement or urgent medical care is needed. Tell the 911 operator that you need immediate assistance. **State that you are calling about a mental health emergency and request law enforcement officers with Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training.**

Below are examples of when to call 911 when a mental health emergency occurs:

- An immediate threat to themselves of imminent serious physical harm or death (meaning the person has already taken or is about to take a highly lethal action to end their life) that requires immediate emergency medical care or another immediate emergency intervention (e.g. police, EMS, etc.)
  - Examples include (but are not limited to) situations such as:
    - An individual who has already taken an overdose
    - An individual who is standing on a bridge or tall building preparing to jump
    - An individual who has a firearm in hand or other weapon and is preparing to use it
- An explicit threat of imminent serious physical harm or death to a clearly identified victim or victims including businesses, organizations, and/or government agency(ies)

***For employees working remotely,** ensure you have their address available when calling either 988 or 911.

Waiting With a Colleague for Help to Arrive

When supporting someone in crisis, assess the situation and determine if it is safe to stay until help arrives. If you feel safe staying, you can provide comfort and support. You should also reach out to your Safety Officer or Human Resources representative for support.

Use the tips above about how to comfort your colleague and help maintain everyone's safety.

What Happens When Help Arrives

Interacting With Law Enforcement

Police or other first responders will arrive the fastest. If possible, have a coworker greet them before they interact with your colleague.

- Tell them if there is or isn't any danger of violence or if there are weapons nearby.
- Emphasize that the person is experiencing a mental health crisis and urgently needs support and treatment.
- Remain as calm, measured, and objective as possible when communicating this request to law enforcement.

Some of the police officers may have crisis intervention training to help de-escalate the situation and provide help in a crisis. However, all police officers are trained in law enforcement and are armed. You may need to respectfully advocate for the person to receive a mental health response to the crisis at hand. Remember that law enforcement officers have broad discretion in deciding the next steps, including taking the person to an emergency room for evaluation, issuing a warning, or making an arrest. Law enforcement can, and often will, call mental health resources in your community. Local crisis services and support services may assist in making recommendations. Law enforcement officers may transport the person to the emergency department or an emergency psychiatric clinic if they deem it appropriate.

Interacting with Mobile Crisis

A Mobile Crisis Team may be available in your area, and response times vary depending on readiness and availability. They will arrive and initiate an on-site evaluation of the person in crisis to determine how best to address their needs. The team will include experienced, trained professionals, and possibly a peer support worker.

Be prepared to share anything your colleague has shared with you, such as current threats, drug use, stressors, what has helped in the past, and descriptions of any delusions, hallucinations, or loss of touch with reality.

Considerations: When a Colleague is Transported to a Hospital

If your colleague is transported to a mental health facility by law enforcement, it may be in handcuffs. This can be very distressing for the individual in crisis and those who witness the event. Once law enforcement is on the scene, next steps may be out of your hands. If it's safe to do so, it may be better to have the individual transported to emergency mental health services by family or friends if the person feels safe with friends and family. Ask the individual if they would like to reach out to friends and family for support. It is not recommended for a colleague to drive or escort the individual in crisis.

*__Note for HR and/or Crisis Response Team:__ Follow up with all the individuals who were involved to ensure they know their options for receiving support. Even indirectly, experiencing a mental health crisis can bring up challenging emotions.

Confidentiality and Follow-Up After the Crisis

During a mental health crisis, issues of workplace involvement and confidentiality may become complicated. The worry and concern of colleagues and their desire to be involved and support their teammate may be at odds with an individual's need to determine what information they are comfortable sharing and decisions about how they'd like to proceed with treatment.

Ensure that the person who has experienced the mental health crisis is consulted, if possible, before information about the crisis event is provided to appropriate staff. If the person is not available to talk, keep the details as minimal as possible when communicating to the employees who need information regarding the person's return timeline and any modifications to workload or schedule. Never disclose a diagnosis or treatment plan. People managers should ensure they keep communication open with leadership and Human Resources when following up with appropriate employees to review the crisis event.

Maintaining as much confidentiality as possible is key to helping the person feel safe returning to work. Consult with your legal counsel on appropriately navigating your communication plan. If possible, contain the event information and follow-up to only the employees involved. Ensure you communicate the need for maintaining the person's privacy. If the entire organization or an entire department or team was present for the crisis, it may be appropriate to address everyone at once in a meeting to ensure consistent messaging.

Note for Leadership

When communicating about the crisis event, be sure to consider the following:

- **Respect Confidentiality:** Protect the privacy of the individual involved. Only share information that is necessary and avoid disclosing specific details unless the employee has given consent.
- **Express Empathy and Support:** Acknowledge the situation with compassion and emphasize the importance of supporting one another. Reassure employees that the organization cares about their well-being.
- **Provide Accurate Information:** Share what you can about how the situation will affect the workplace (e.g., temporary changes in workload or team structure) while avoiding speculation or misinformation.
- **Offer Resources:** Remind employees about available mental health resources, such as Employee Assistance Programs, counseling services, or community-based services. Encourage them to seek help if they need it.
- **Normalize Mental Health Discussions:** Reinforce the message that mental health is just as important as physical health. This can help reduce stigma and create a more supportive environment.
- **Be Mindful of Language:** Use non-stigmatizing language when discussing the crisis. Avoid terms that might carry negative connotations or imply blame. Review the NAMI StigmaFree resource on Mental Health Language for guidance.
- **Be Available for Support:** Encourage employees to reach out to HR or management if they have concerns or need additional support. Open lines of communication can help employees feel more secure.
- **Follow Up:** Check in with the team periodically to see how they're coping and to provide ongoing support. This helps maintain a sense of community and ensures that employees feel supported over time.

For additional help, reference the email/communication template in the appendix.

Death of a Colleague

The death of a colleague is a deeply challenging event for any organization, impacting not only the emotional well-being of employees but also the operational aspects of the company. A compassionate, organized, and respectful response is essential in helping employees cope and ensuring the continuity of business operations.

1. Immediate Response

- **Notification:** As soon as the company is informed of the colleague's death, it is important to verify the information with the family or legal authorities. A member of the executive leadership team or HR should take responsibility for communicating this news.
- **Communication to Employees:**
  - **Sensitivity:** Deliver the news in person whenever possible, or through a company-wide meeting or team meeting. Provide as much information as is appropriate, respecting the privacy and wishes of the family. Ask the family for permission before distributing invitations to funeral or memorial services.
  - **Support:** Immediately offer counseling services, such as Employee Assistance Programs, and encourage employees to use them. Acknowledge the grief and the impact on the workplace and assure employees that their well-being is a priority.

2. Supporting the Team

- **Grief Counseling:** Arrange for on-site or virtual grief counseling sessions. Provide resources on how to cope with loss and encourage open dialogue among team members. Remind employees that they can reach out to their local NAMI for no-cost support groups.
- **Memorials and Tributes:**
  - **In-Office Memorial:** Consider setting up a space where employees can leave messages, flowers, or other tributes.
  - **Company-Wide Memorial:** Organize a memorial service or moment of silence to honor the colleague, allowing employees to share memories and support one another.
- **Flexibility:** Offer flexible working arrangements, such as time off or adjusted workloads, to allow employees time to grieve.

3. Operational Considerations

- **Role Reassignment:** Address the redistribution of the deceased colleague's duties with sensitivity. Provide support to employees who may be stepping into new roles or taking on additional responsibilities.
- **Business Continuity:** While ensuring business operations continue, do so with an understanding that employees may not be at their most productive. Adjust expectations and timelines as needed.

4. Communication With External Stakeholders

- **Clients and Partners:** Inform key clients and partners of the situation in a respectful manner. Explain any potential delays or disruptions and how they will be managed.
- **Public Announcement:** If appropriate, make a public announcement or issue a statement honoring the colleague, ensuring the privacy and wishes of the family are respected.

5. Additional Considerations If a Colleague Dies by Suicide

- **Respect for the Family:** Work closely with the family to understand their wishes regarding what information can be shared with the team. Some families may prefer to keep details private, while others may want to share the loss openly.
- **Language Matters:** When communicating with employees, use language that is sensitive and avoids stigma. Be factual but compassionate and avoid sharing details, like method of suicide, that may not be appropriate.

- **Acknowledge the Complexity:** Recognize the complex emotions that employees may be feeling, including grief, confusion, guilt, or anger. Reassure them that these feelings are normal and encourage them to seek support.
- **Suicide Prevention Resources:** Distribute resources on suicide prevention and mental health awareness from NAMI and company resources, emphasizing that the company is committed to supporting employee well-being. Reinforce the availability of Employee Assistance Programs and other mental health resources.
- **Open Dialogue:** Encourage conversations about mental health, making it clear that the company is a safe space for discussing these issues. Address any concerns or misconceptions that may arise and emphasize the importance of seeking help when needed.
- **Involve Leadership:** Leaders should model vulnerability by speaking openly about the impact of the loss and the importance of mental health. This can help reduce stigma and encourage employees to come forward with their struggles.

> "Recognize the complex emotions that employees may be feeling"

WELCOMING BACK AN EMPLOYEE WHO EXPERIENCED A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS AT WORK

Returning to work after a mental health crisis can be challenging for the employee and the team, but support in the workplace can help support the employee in maintaining their mental health. Consult your legal counsel for appropriate and necessary action. It is crucial to create a supportive environment that respects the individual's needs while fostering a smooth reintegration into the workplace. By approaching the situation with empathy, clear communication, and respect for privacy, employers can help the employee feel valued and supported during their transition back to work. The leadership team and Human Resources are responsible for creating an appropriate return and should work with the employee's manager to ensure the employee is well cared for.

1. Plan a Thoughtful Return:

- Schedule a private meeting or call with the employee, preferably before they return to work, to discuss their comfort level and any accommodations they may need.
- Offer flexible options, such as a phased return or modified duties, if needed.
- Lean on your benefits providers, such as disability insurer if the employee is returning to work after a disability claim or leave of absence.

2. Communicate With Sensitivity:

- Coordinate with the employee to determine what, if any, information will be shared with colleagues about their absence. If information was already shared, provide what was shared with the employee.
- Reinforce the importance of privacy and respect among the team.

3. Provide Ongoing Support:

- Ensure the employee is aware of available mental health resources, such as Employee Assistance Programs or community supports.
- Assign a trusted point of contact within HR or management for any ongoing needs or concerns.

4. Foster a Supportive Environment:

- Ask the employee how they want to interact with the team around the crisis. They should dictate, as much as possible, how their return is managed.
- Encourage team members to be welcoming and understanding, without pressuring the employee to discuss their experience.
- Promote an inclusive workplace culture where mental health is openly discussed and supported.

5. Monitor and Adjust:

- Regularly check in with the employee to assess how they're adjusting and whether further accommodations are needed.
- Be prepared to adjust the return-to-work plan as needed.

6. Educate and Raise Awareness:

- Provide training for managers and employees about mental health awareness and how to support colleagues effectively.
- Use this as an opportunity to reinforce the organization's commitment to mental health and well-being.

Meeting Your Needs as a Caring Colleague

To help manage workplace stress:

- **Create simple, sustainable routines.** Set and stick to a sleep schedule. Eat a well-balanced, nutritious diet. Drink plenty of water. Find some movement on most days.
- **Surround yourself with supporters.** Make time each week to see people who lift you up and lighten your load. NAMI has no-cost opportunities to learn coping strategies and connect with people who face similar challenges.
- **Ask for and accept help.** Recognize when you're spread too thin; connect with your fellow colleagues to talk through priorities and how to better delegate tasks. Say no to things that are not a priority until you feel recovered from managing the crisis.
- **Learn about mental health conditions.** Knowledge is power. By learning more about mental health, you can feel prepared to help support your colleagues.
  - ✧ **Give yourself permission to feel what you feel.** Be a "both/and thinker." Recognize that it's okay to feel two emotions side-by-side: "I feel sad about my colleague's situation and I also need to keep my team on track."
- **Consider seeing your own therapist.** Therapy can provide a safe space for talking about difficult emotions and learning new coping skills.
- **Take care of your health.** Tell your health care professional that you're experiencing more stress; talk about stressors or symptoms you have. Make and keep health appointments and get regular health screenings.
- **Learn about workplace benefits for mental health.** Review your company's policies and resources that may be available, such as a flexible work schedule or resource referrals through an Employee Assistance Program. Ask about options for unpaid leave; employees covered under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act may be able to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave a year.

CARING FOR YOURSELF AFTER A CRISIS OCCURS AT WORK

Some Expected Reactions to Crisis

Feelings, reactions, and responses to mental health emergencies vary from person to person.

It's typical to feel a range of emotions, such as:

- Confusion; difficulty thinking clearly during the chaos and uncertainty of a crisis
- Fear for the safety of the individual and the workplace
- Anger about the impact of the crisis on your colleagues
- Frustration over the lack of access to services and treatment facilities
- Concern that you may be judged or criticized by colleagues
  - ✧ Desire to escape the stress by leaving your job or misusing substances
- Outrage over a lack of support or validation from mental health professionals you rely on for help
- Guilt or a sense of responsibility for not "fixing the problem"
- Loneliness or isolation; the sense that you are in this by yourself
- Embarrassment or shame over your own response or lack of knowledge

Signs of Stress

It is not uncommon to overlook your own needs following a crisis. You may miss signs that stress is affecting your health and well-being. Signs of increasing stress include:

- Worrying all the time
- Feeling unusually sad
- Becoming easily annoyed or angry
- Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Feeling tired often
- Sleeping too much or not enough
- Having frequent health problems
- Misusing alcohol or drugs
- Neglecting your own medical care

FOR LEADERSHIP AND HR: PREPARING FOR A POSSIBLE FUTURE CRISIS

No one wants to worry about the possibility of a crisis — but in case a crisis happens, your organization will want to be prepared. The following tips may be helpful:

Prepare Yourself With Information

- Learn about mental health conditions and warning signs on NAMI's About Mental Illness page on nami.org.
- Contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline to ask about local crisis services and what to expect if you should need to contact them in a crisis.
- Add to your cell phone contacts the phone numbers for local crisis services in your area and the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.
- Learn about your local law enforcement agency's training procedures and protocols for addressing a mental health crisis. Ask if your local law enforcement provides its officers with Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training and if there are Mobile Crisis Teams available.

- ✧ Learn all you can about your company health benefits and support systems for both physical and mental health *before* there is a crisis so you can educate your employees.

- Consistently communicate with all staff in varied formats (during meetings, in email, through instant messaging, etc.) about mental health and the supports that are available to them. Breaking down stigma and communication barriers can be one of the most effective ways to prevent a crisis.

Considerations: Mental Health Crisis Services

The better prepared a person is when faced with a crisis, the better the outcome. Mental health crisis services vary depending on where an individual lives. Becoming familiar with the available services and how to access them is an important step toward being prepared for a mental health crisis. If your employees are spread out nationally or globally, research the available options that are available wherever you have the most employees, or if a colleague expresses concern about themselves or a fellow employee. This is particularly important for employees living in rural communities who may have limited access to care.

*__Note for HR and/or Crisis Response Team:__ When selecting your benefits, it is imperative to understand the various needs of your employee populations. Check in frequently throughout the year to ensure employee needs are being met.

*__For small businesses__ with limited resources, ensure you are communicating community services that are available for your employees, such as the NAMI Peer-to-Peer course and the NAMI HelpLine, if you are unable to offer mental health-specific benefits.

- **Emergency psychiatric clinics and urgent care facilities** are becoming increasingly common. These facilities provide on-site mental health assessments, psychiatric evaluations, and care recommendations for people experiencing a mental health crisis. You may encounter less wait time in an emergency psychiatric clinic than in an emergency department, but you should still come prepared with the same materials and information you would take to visit the emergency room. Trained staff will evaluate the individual in crisis to determine if they meet the criteria for immediate hospitalization.
- **Mobile Crisis Teams** intervene wherever the crisis occurs, often working closely with police, crisis hotlines, and hospital emergency personnel. Mobile teams may provide pre-screening assessments, act as gatekeepers for inpatient hospitalization, and connect individuals with community-based programs and other services.
- **Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT)** are trained police officers who have received special training to recognize and de-escalate crisis situations, including those involving a mental health crisis. They understand that people with mental health conditions sometimes need a specialized response and are familiar with community-based mental health resources that can be used during a crisis.
- **Hospital emergency departments** are another source of help for people experiencing a mental health crisis to receive appropriate recommendations and care.

A visit to the emergency department doesn't guarantee admission. Admission criteria vary and depend on medical necessity as determined by a physician and insurance coverage. Be prepared for an emergency department visit to be lengthy, likely several hours. Bring anything that may help the person in crisis stay calm, like books, music, or games. Some hospitals have separate psychiatric emergency units. They're typically quieter and staffed by mental health professionals and practitioners. Check to see if there is one in your area.

Develop a Crisis Plan

A crisis plan is a written plan developed by an organization that can help outline the steps to take when there is a crisis. The crisis plan should be developed in collaboration between the organizational leadership, Human Resources, Health & Safety Officers, and a mental health professional, if possible. If you have an Employee Assistance Program, you can reach out to them for guidance.

Developing a plan is another way to feel more prepared when emergency situations occur. This can be especially useful for small businesses that do not have a Safety Officer or internal Human Resources. **A template is available in the Appendix of this guide.**

Once developed, share the plan with all leadership levels and any employee required to step into a leadership role should a crisis occur.

Every organization's plan will be different, but common elements include:

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline information
- Addresses and contact information for nearby crisis centers or emergency rooms
  - ✧ If your organization is national or global, create a guide based on where employees are located
- How to locate emergency contacts for employees
- Details on when to contact 988, 911, or other crisis services
- The importance of confidentiality, along with details about who to share information with and why
- How to find support once the colleague in crisis has left the premises to receive care

Helpful tips to remember:

- Post the phone number of local crisis services and the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline in the workplace
- Consistently communicate to staff that they are welcome to share their concerns or needs for support

> You Are Not Alone

CONCLUSION

One of the best ways to prevent a mental health crisis is to deepen your organization's awareness of mental health and well-being. By engaging with this guide, you are already taking active steps toward prevention. You can continue these efforts by striving to have vulnerable and compassionate conversations about mental health in your workplace. Normalizing these conversations will help cultivate a workplace culture where employees feel safe to admit when they are struggling and seek help. If you are not sure where to start, NAMI can provide guidance and education for you and your staff.

Even within the healthiest workplace cultures, a mental health crisis can occur. If this happens within your organization, remember that you don't have to be perfect to be helpful, that even the most difficult times will pass, and most importantly that you are not alone.

APPENDIX

Mental Health Crisis Plan [Template]

[Your Organization] Crisis Response Team (CRT)

- **Team Members:**
  - **Team Lead:** [Name, Title, Contact Information]
  - **HR Representative:** [Name, Title, Contact Information]
  - **Operations Manager:** [Name, Title, Contact Information]
  - **Communications Officer:** [Name, Title, Contact Information]
  - **Security/Facilities Manager:** [Name, Title, Contact Information]
- **Roles & Responsibilities:** Briefly outline the responsibilities of each team member during a crisis.

  *If you are at a small business, talk with your staff about how comfortable each of them would feel assisting during a crisis. Be sure to provide them with the training and support they may need to carry out that function. Re-engage this conversation whenever you have a new team member or someone exits their CRT role.

Emergency Contacts

- **Internal:**
  - Crisis Response Team members' contact details
- **External:**
  - Local Emergency Services: [Phone Number]
  - Mental Health Hotline: 988
  - Legal Counsel: [Phone Number]
  - Insurance Provider: [Phone Number]

Immediate Response Procedures

- **Assess the Situation:** Gather information to understand the nature and scope of the crisis.
- **Activate CRT:** Notify appropriate Crisis Response Team members and assign specific tasks.
- **Ensure Safety:** Secure the safety of all employees by following lockdown procedures as necessary.
- **Communication:**
  - Inform employees about the crisis as appropriate, maintaining employee confidentiality when possible.
  - Review incident with all involved employees, ensuring they have access to support.
- **Mental Health Crisis Protocol:**
  - Approach the individual with compassion and confidentiality.
  - Contact 988, a trained mental health professional, or Employee Assistance Program provider.
  - Provide a safe space for the individual.
  - Communicate with the rest of the team as needed, respecting privacy.

Ongoing Support

- **Employee Assistance:** Provide access to counseling, mental health services, or consider bringing in a crisis counselor.
- **Recovery Plan:** Develop a plan for returning to normal operations, including temporary adjustments in work assignments or schedules.
    - **Follow-Up Communication:** Keep all necessary employees informed of the ongoing response and support efforts.

Post-Crisis Evaluation

- **Debriefing:** Conduct a meeting with the CRT to review the response and identify areas for improvement.
- **Documentation:** Record the details of the crisis, the response, and any lessons learned.
- **Review and Update Plan:** Revise the Crisis Response Plan based on feedback and experiences.

Training and Awareness

- **Employee Training:** Train all employees on crisis response procedures every [time period, suggest at least once per year depending on employee turnover rates].
    - Date of last training conducted: _____
- **CRT Drills:** Conduct a drill for the Crisis Response Team to practice their roles every [time period, suggest at least once per year depending on employee turnover rates].
    - Date of last drill conducted: _____

Plan Review

- **Frequency:** The Crisis Response Plan should be reviewed and updated annually or after any crisis event.
    - Date of last update to Crisis Response Plan: _____
- **Responsibility:** The CRT Lead is responsible for ensuring the plan is current and effective.
    - Signature of CRT Lead: _____

Email: After a Mental Health Crisis [Template]

Important note: As referenced above, discuss with your legal counsel on best practices for communication after a crisis event. If appropriate, use this email draft to communicate only to those employees who were directly affected by a crisis situation.

Dear Team,

I hope this message finds you well. I want to take a moment to acknowledge the recent event that has affected our team. As you know, [Employee's Name] experienced a mental health crisis at work [insert time frame, e.g., last week]. This has been a challenging time for them and for all of us who care about them here at [organization].

First and foremost, our thoughts are with [Employee's Name] as they focus on their well-being. We want to ensure that [Employee's Name] receives the privacy and support they need during this time. We ask that everyone respects their privacy and refrains from discussing the details of the situation unless they choose to share their story with you.

We understand that this event may have impacted you as well. It's normal to have a range of emotions in response to such situations, and it's important to take care of your own mental health too. I want to remind you of the resources available to support you:

1. **Employee Assistance Program (EAP):** Our EAP offers confidential counseling services, available 24/7, for any staff member who might need to talk to a professional. You can reach out to them at [EAP contact information].
2. **Mental Health Resources:** We have partnered with [Local Counseling Center/Other Resource] to provide additional support. You can access these services by contacting [Contact Information].
3. **Time Off and Flexibility:** If you feel you need time to process recent events or to focus on your own well-being, please speak with your manager or HR about flexible working arrangements or taking time off.
4. **Community Support:** There are community resources, like NAMI, that offer peer support and a free HelpLine that can help you get connected to resources. Their phone number is 1-800-950-NAMI, and they're available Monday-Friday 10:00 a.m. – 10:00 p.m. ET.

This is a time for us to come together as a community, offering compassion and support to one another. We are committed to fostering a workplace where everyone feels safe, valued, and supported, especially in challenging times like this.

If you have any concerns or need additional support, please do not hesitate to reach out to HR or your manager. We are here to help and ensure that everyone's well-being is prioritized.

Thank you for your understanding and for the care you show to each other.

Take care,
[Your Name]
[Contact Information]

The **NAMI HelpLine** is a free peer support service that is available nationwide. Help seekers can receive information, resource referrals, and support from experienced and well-trained staff and volunteers. **Call 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)**, **text "HelpLine" to 62640, or chat at** nami.org/help, Monday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. – 10:00 p.m. ET.

The **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** is available if you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide or experiencing a mental health crisis. **Call or text 988** to connect with a trained crisis counselor 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, or you can chat online at chat.988lifeline.org.