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Caring for Our Colleagues: A Guide for Compassionate Action

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Caring for Our Colleagues: A Guide for Compassionate Action

KAREN FOSTER, DDS



I want to first say thank you for making the 2024 Rocky Mountain Dental Convention (RMDC) a success. Thank you to our professional team who year after year work to make the RMDC the best it can be. Thank you to our volunteers who spend hours planning and executing one of the best regional dental conventions in the nation. Especially, our 2024 Convention Co-Chairs, Dr. J.R. Franco and

Dr. Amisha Singh. I also want to acknowledge and congratulate this year's recipient of the Honus Maximus Award which was presented during RMDC to Dr. Brett Kessler. His contributions to MDDS, organized dentistry and the well-being of our colleagues are unparalleled.

As a profession, we continue to focus on mental health. I lost my associate to suicide seven years ago and have become an avid advocate for suicide prevention and champion for mental health in honor of his memory. I am proud to be an ADA Wellness Ambassador, a program born from a resolution adopted by the ADA House of Delegates, "prioritizing mental health for dentists." I consistently field calls about once a month from a friend concerned about the well-being of one of their friends/employees/colleagues. I sympathize with the helpless feeling my colleagues face when concerned about someone. So, this article lays out options for what to do when you are worried.

First, trust your gut! Dental professionals are experiencing stress, burnout, and depression at an alarming rate. If you are concerned about someone it is crucial to act on that fear. Most times we spend more time with our co-workers than with our own families and we may be the first to recognize when things are off. Addressing these apprehensions can be intimidating, but learning more will help to reduce your reluctance to act.

What are the warning signs? According to, "7 Do's and Don'ts When an Employee is at Risk of Self-harm" the warning signs are outlined below:¹

1. Increased alcohol use
2. Lack of motivation
3. Lack of communication
4. Attendance issues
5. Increased aggression or agitation
6. Changes in performance
7. A disheveled appearance
8. Inability to concentrate

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Per the Mayo Clinic, additional warning signs include: "the person may talk about suicide; gather supplies-buy a gun or pills; withdraw; exhibit mood swings; talk or write about death, dying, violence; feel trapped or hopeless about a situation; increase drug or alcohol use; change routines-especially eating and sleeping patterns; do risky or self-destructive things; give away belongings and get affairs in order; say final goodbyes; and develop personality changes."²

"Ok, but now what? I feel like I need to check in with my friend, but how do I do that and what should I avoid?" There is a long-held myth that asking about suicide could plant the seed and cause the person to act. Again, this is a myth. "It's better to take the risk and be vulnerable than to have someone suffer because you didn't try."³ To quote the Mayo Clinic again: "Asking about thoughts or feelings about suicide will not push a person into suicide. In fact, giving someone a chance to talk about feelings may reduce the person's risk of acting on those feelings."² Do not be afraid to ask questions. *"I'm Really Worried About You"* — *How to Have a Conversation with a Colleague About Suicide*,³ has great suggestions for how to approach the conversation.³ The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention website also has helpful information about honest conversations and what to do if you feel someone is at risk.⁴ Overall, coming from a place of honesty and genuine concern is the best start. Do not be turned off if the conversation is not received well. Realize the person may be ashamed, guilty or embarrassed.² Be supportive and understanding, do not place blame, listen closely and don't interrupt.² Your concern will shine through and let the person know there is someone in their corner who can be leaned on for support.

If you check in and find the person is in danger, reach out for professional help: 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline) or 911. Do not leave them alone. Tell a family member or friend right away. From Cigna, a prudent reminder to put safety first, "As much as you want to keep the individual safe, never put yourself or others in danger. If it is possible to do so safely, try to remove any item that could be used for self-harm. Use a calm voice and manner to keep the situation as controlled as possible."⁵

PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES

If you find yourself in a position to support someone going through a rough time or in crisis, you are not on your own—numerous terrific resources are available.

- 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline) or 911
- Colorado Concerned Dentists: 303-321-4445
- CDA Member Assistance Program:
cdaonline.org/dentalprofessionals/wellness/

Do follow up! Make a plan. If the person is not in imminent danger, have a plan for continuous check-ins so they know you are a source of continued support. Urge them to seek treatment. Reassure them they can seek treatment and not jeopardize their professional license. Mayo Clinic resources state, “Someone who is thinking about suicide or is very depressed may not have the energy or motivation to find help. If the person does not want to see a doctor or mental health professional, you can suggest other sources for help. Support groups, crisis centers, and faith communities are good options. You can offer support and advice too—but remember that it is not your job to take the place of a mental health professional.”²

As MDDS/CDA members we have an incredible member benefit with the CDA Member Assistance Program. These resources can be accessed at cdaonline.org/dentalprofessionals/wellness/ and include no-cost counseling sessions as well as financial and legal assistance. In addition, Colorado Concerned Dentists can also be reached at 303-321-4445 day or night.

If the person does not have the energy to take the next steps you can offer to help research treatment options, make phone calls, go with them to appointments, help cover their practice or find coverage—whatever you are comfortable with. The to-do list to take care of ourselves can be very overwhelming. Helping with the burden of stepping away to concentrate on healing the healer is often the most beneficial support you can offer.

Finally, do not forget to get support for yourself. “If you talk with someone about their suicidal thinking, it is important for you to talk to someone else. Ideally, that person should have some experience dealing with challenging topics, so they can be supportive of you,”⁶

If you find yourself in a position to support someone going through a rough time or in crisis, you are not on your own—numerous terrific resources are available. I am personally available at any time if you need help. Thank you for trusting me as your MDDS President 2023-2024. Wishing you nothing but success and health in 2024.



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