

# Suicide Prevention Competencies for Faith Leaders: Supporting Life Before, During, and After a Suicidal Crisis



National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention Faith Community Task Force, 2019

Suicide Prevention Competencies are the recommended attitudes, approaches, and skills for supporting life before, during, and after a suicidal crisis. The competencies are intended to equip faith leaders and ensure that all faith leaders have the education and training they need to support their members' mental health needs and save lives.

- 1** Pastoral Prevention includes your theological reflection about suicide; the attitudes that may help or hinder help giving or help seeking and your efforts to support suicide prevention efforts and reduce help-seeking stigma; and share a vision of hope and connection.
- 2** Pastoral Intervention includes knowing your role; respecting culture; listening empathically; recognizing warning signs; asking the question; applying pastoral counseling skills and collaborating with other caregivers.
- 3** Pastoral Postvention includes knowing how to care for survivors of suicide loss (SOSL), including the congregation, applying faith traditions for the funeral or memorial service to avoid contagion; and being mindful of your own self-care.
- 4** Pastoral Communication includes serving as a liaison among SOSL, faith community members, police, funeral directors, and others.
- 5** Pastoral Leadership includes helping other faith leaders develop suicide prevention skills and offering mentoring support to those who provide care to persons affected by suicide and becoming an advocate.
- 6** Pastoral Unique Organizational Ministry Settings Include providing input for organizational suicide prevention and postvention programs in your own faith community and other settings. Examples of Unique Organizational Ministry Settings (e.g., teaching, chaplaincy, educational and corporate surroundings, and community volunteer roles).

## The role of the pulpit in suicide prevention

The pulpit is one of the most effective means of religious instruction, pastoral care, and advocacy. The preached word can bring great hope to those who contemplate suicide and to those whose lives have been affected by it. We encourage you to address suicide and its prevention in your sermons and communications.

- Offer education to congregants about suicide, warning signs, and how to help.
- Preach biblically based hope to those who may be thinking about suicide and to those whose lives have been affected by it.
- Teach people to choose life. Preach faith and what the Bible says about suffering to help congregants manage the suffering that is an inevitable part of life.
- Engage people in intercessory prayer for those suffering from depression, suicidal ideation, and the loss of loved ones.

## How do we begin to preach about suicide?

- Examine our own beliefs and theological views about suffering and death.
- Then preach the Gospel—The Gospel is good and hopeful news.
- Help the congregation remember who they are in Christ and as Christ's followers, what Christ has done for us.
- Cultivate the power of worship.
- Encourage your members to create a suicide-safe environment.

Related resource: Scott M. Gibson and Karen Mason, *Preaching Hope in the Darkness*, Lexham Press, 2020

# Your Role: Quick View

Warning signs for suicide—remember you can always call 988.

Talking about wanting to die by suicide.  
Talking about being a burden to others.  
Putting personal business in order.  
Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain.

Looking for a way to die by suicide, such as searching online or obtaining lethal means.

Acting anxious or agitated, behaving recklessly.  
Withdrawing and/or depressed.

Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs.  
Sleeping too little or too much.  
Displaying extreme mood swings.

Faith Leader role in suicide intervention.

You are not expected to be an expert. Your role is to know and teach the warning signs.

Identify a person who may be at risk for suicide.  
Assess the situation.

Ask the question, “Are you thinking of suicide?” Use direct language.  
Offer hope and reassurance.  
Never leave the person alone, keep the person safe.  
Connect with help.

Engage the faith community in suicide prevention.  
Maintain a current referral list.

Faith Leader role in postvention.

Calm yourself. Go immediately to the survivors of suicide loss. Listen without judgment; show care; extend help; allow plenty of time and stay close.

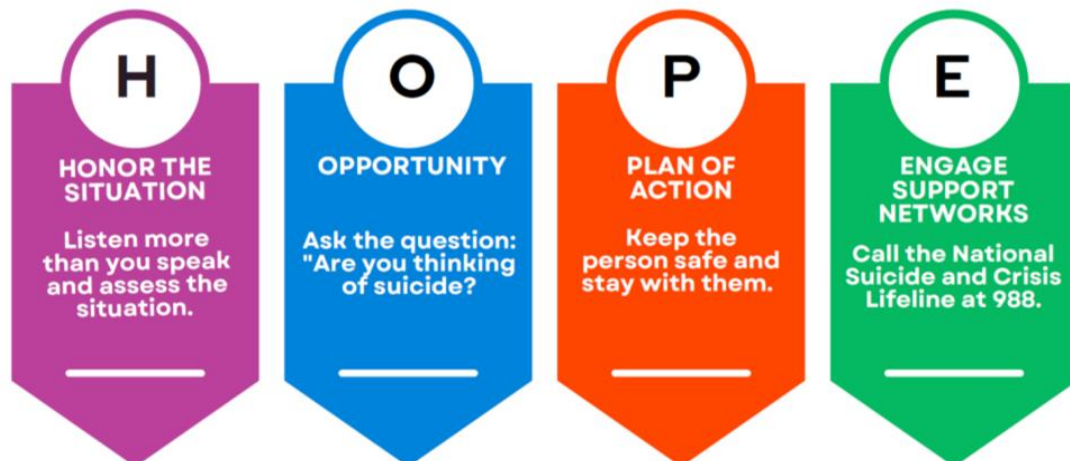
Offer practical assistance.  
Be mindful of suicide contagion.  
Allow the family to express their feelings (including anger) and let them set the conversational pace.

Offer spiritual support and a compassionate presence. If requested, assist in planning the funeral/memorial service. Engage the faith community in intercessory prayer and postvention care.

Be there for the long haul to encourage comfort and healing.  
Implement communication best practices.  
Take good care of yourself.



## Hope Saves Lives



HOPE Saves Lives is an evidence-informed faith model for equipping faith leaders and faith communities with effective mental health awareness and suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention skills.

To make a difference in people’s lives, we must invest in and equip faith leaders with the necessary competencies for comprehensive suicide care. Our subject matter experts are experienced in equipping faith leaders in suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention techniques and best practices rooted in a scriptural context.

The Way Consulting Int’l. knows how to intervene with intention and precision to achieve life-saving results. Various training options are available for faith leaders and your faith community.

**Call us to talk about available training venues that work best for your group.**

*The Way*

**CONSULTING, INT’L.**

Saving Lives. Restoring Hope. Strengthening Community

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