

## **NATIONAL ACTION ALLIANCE FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION**

### **FAITH LEADER SELF-CARE VIDEO -- text**

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### **CARING FOR YOURSELF WHILE CARING FOR OTHERS**

As faith leaders, we interact with people in a variety of ways—in the receiving line after worship, in study or fellowship groups, youth groups, or service projects. Our role also involves helping people navigate times of personal challenge, as well as issues around death and dying.

Scientific research shows that, within faith communities, persons in distress or dealing with a mental illness—and those who love and care for them— may first seek out a faith leader for support more often than a mental health provider.

Because of the nature of our work, we are often on the front-line when someone has died by suicide. Along with the police or EMT's, we may be among the first people a family member calls. And like other first-responders, we are often called to face the raw grief of loved ones and sometimes even the direct trauma of the death.

Our job as faith leaders often doesn't end there. We may be asked to continue to provide care for family members and other loved ones as their grief journey unfolds. Suicide can leave a wake of devastation and a range of complicated emotions among loss survivors, including shock, despair, and anger – at the person who has died and at God. Others in our congregations may be suffering as well and may be unsure as to how to interact with the immediate family.

A death by suicide can also raise questions of faith:

- “Is suicide a sin?”
- “Will my loved one be punished?”
- “Why did God abandon my loved one – parent, sibling, child, spouse, friend—or member of my congregation?”
- “Does God still love my loved one?”
- “Does God still love me?”

Grief after suicide can leave faithful people scared and confused about their faith.

Preparing a suicide funeral with family members and invited friends brings additional challenges. Family members may disagree over acknowledging the death as a suicide. In some cases, they may disagree about whether the word “suicide” can be mentioned during the service.

In addition to caring for others during their grief journey, we may also struggle with our own ambivalence and response to the suicide. If we knew the congregant well, we might rehash our interactions and wonder what we could have said or done before the suicide. We may have feelings of guilt and regret for missing warning signs or downplaying calls for help. We may feel a sense failure as a faith leader.

Creating a safe haven for the full range of emotions that arise after a suicide – for our congregants and for ourselves – allows survivors of loss to begin a healthy grief journey. As faith leaders, facilitating these healing conversations requires that we are deliberate about our own self-awareness and self-care. To be able to care for others, we as faith leaders must also care for ourselves.

What are some specific things that we can do?

One, know ourselves and the ways stress and grief affect us—even before we are faced with a crisis. What are our own experiences of dealing with loss and death? Do you know someone who died by suicide? Did you seek help for your feelings of grief? Are you aware of the ways that you remember and experience the loss, especially the ways you think about the suicide? Are you aware of ways you may feel retraumatized by a suicide?

Two, give ourselves permission to get the help we need to deal with our own burdens, or the burdens we carry for others. That may be with a therapist or pastoral counselor, support group, trusted friend or colleague. In the immediate aftermath of a suicide, we may not be ready to talk. It's okay to want silence and solitude. But grief can be isolating, and we who are listeners also need to have people who listen to us. Some of the greatest faith leaders—like Moses, Deborah, and Elijah--needed the help of others. We do, too. Our leadership in this area is a *gift* to those in our communities of faith.

Three, know our faith tradition's understanding of suicide and what we believe. What does your faith tradition teach regarding suicide? Do you agree with this traditional thinking? If not, what is your faith-based understanding about suicide? Read some of the newest theological perspectives on suicide. A lot has changed for many faith traditions in the last decades. Even those traditions that once regarded suicide as a sin no longer see it as a moral failure, but as the result of a crisis, mental illness, or a combination of factors.

Four, be honest with the leadership of our faith communities about our need for deep self-care in the wake of a death by suicide. They need to know the particular stresses we face in such situations, and they have a responsibility to advocate for us. It is in their best interest that we take time to care for ourselves and stay healthy.

Five, be honest with God. However we pray—in silence or aloud, sitting or kneeling, writing in a journal or going for a walk—we need to tell God what we are feeling. God is big enough, strong enough, and loving enough to deal with whatever grief, guilt, anger, or despair we may have. We need to make time and space to be held by that strength and enfolded in that love.

Finally, connect with life. Suicide brings us face to face with the depth and despair of death. Like family members, friends, and other survivors of a suicide loss, we have to make a conscious commitment to life once again. Each of us will do that in different ways— our individual or community spiritual practices, hiking, gardening, journaling, creating art, making music, cooking, being with children, taking time with friends. How we do it isn't what matters. That we do it in healthy ways is essential.

As faith leaders and colleagues, we know the burdens you carry and the challenges you face, especially in caring for others following a death by suicide. We hope this video has been helpful. For more information, please check out the *Faith.Hope.Life* website with the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention.

Most of all, please know that you and your faith communities are held in our prayers as together we share this ministry of Faith. Hope. And Life. Blessings.