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## The Church's Response to Suicide - A Work in Progress

Mental Health & Disabilities  
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### Suicide - Attempted or Successful

Pastors and church leaders dread to hear the word suicide. They dread that phone call in the middle of the night, that phone call from emergency or the police cruiser pulling up on the drive way.

No one, no one wants those calls and when they come we're never quite ready! We take a deep breath and say a quick prayer. Questions such as: "What do I do?" "What do I say?" "It can't be true." "Why did I say that?" "Why didn't I suspect it?" race through our minds.

Can we be more prepared? Perhaps so, depending on what we already know and have experienced. Thinking through issues around suicide in advance, talking about suicide, role playing, and becoming aware of resources around us can help.

The story of Josh

## Thinking Through Issues Around Suicidal Deaths

### Thinking through our Theology

- ☐ Scripture doesn't seem to say enough for us to develop a theology about suicide. This creates some tension for us and sometimes it causes us to look at isolated incidents in Scripture to support an opinion we already have.
- ☐ Some suicides recorded in Scripture such as Judas Iscariot's and Saul's obviously suggest desperate and unhappy people. For some people this suggests separation from God in the after life.
- ☐ Then there is Samson who killed himself and others and that after he had prayed for God to give him strength to do so. And then he is mentioned, in Hebrews 11, as a hero of the faith.
- ☐ There are other Scriptures that say that those who come to God, God will in no way be cast out, and that nothing, not principalities nor powers can separate us from God's love.
- ☐ Ultimately we need to entrust people into God's hands, both pre- and post death without having any definitive answers and this is very hard to do.

### Understanding Despair

- ☐ The teaching that faith in itself is enough, that we should be able to handle things on our own hinders openness and honesty and can make a person who is already in despair feel worse.
- ☐ Many things and situations in people's lives go wrong. For some this leads to feeling that life is not worth living or that trying any longer is too hard.
- ☐ At times people are unable or unwilling to call for help. This may be due to their own issues or to stigma, or because they are given the impression that it is their fault that they are feeling this way.

- ☐ People who have a serious mental illness may at times hear voices, voices that tell them to hurt themselves.

### **Fears of Leaders**

- ☐ Some leaders fear to ask the hard questions or to speak openly about suicide before it happens. They fear to ask, "Do you feel suicidal?"
- ☐ Some leaders promise to keep secrets and don't want to break them even if they sense danger and this becomes a very heavy load to carry alone.
- ☐ There are times, too, when a leader does not know his or her limits and does not call for help quickly enough.

## **Getting to the Practical**

### **When in Conversation with Someone Who Is Wanting To Die**

- ☐ You need to validate their feelings of despair and helplessness (don't tell them it's not that bad).
- ☐ Let them talk, cry, scream or whatever they need to do. Wait and listen rather than giving simple solutions or advise.
- ☐ Ask questions that help them to open up and talk more, questions such as, "You're feeling terrible..." "You say life is not worth living?"
- ☐ If people talk about killing themselves you need to check if they have plan; if they have a plan that can be carried out do not leave them alone; call for help.
- ☐ Mobile crisis team have trained people that can come in and assess the situation and take the needed precautions. Check your local phone book or the local hospital for numbers to call in an emergency.
- ☐ The person can be taken to emergency in a hospital or you can call the police (that would be necessary especially if you're on the phone with the person and can't get there or if there is danger of hurting him/herself or others)
- ☐ Reassure the person of your love and care; move physically closer, if they want you to, but ask first.
- ☐ Make a contract with the person asking them to call you before they make an attempt.
- ☐ Follow-up to see how they are doing.
- ☐ Don't promise not to tell. Instead tell them you will treat their confidence with respect but that if there is danger to themselves or others, you will get more help.
- ☐ Pray silently. Before you offer to pray out loud, ask if they would like that or if they'd prefer silence.
- ☐ Let them know you understand that sometimes dark times are long. Encourage counseling of issues or medication for depression.

### **When Someone Has Attempted Suicide**

- ☐ Assure the person of your love in spite of how they feel.
- ☐ Sit with them in the darkness and the despair.
- ☐ Assure them that God forgives (if that is their concern).
- ☐ Help them to find help in dealing with issues, especially stresses

that led to the attempt.

- Make a contract for future times when the person may feel suicidal.
- Let them know you realize it may be a long haul.

### **When Spending Time with Family Members When Someone Has Attempted Suicide**

- Assure them of your love.
- Don't blame or judge, listen in silence.
- Ask questions to lead them to talking more, or crying.
- Be careful not to give simplistic solutions
- Validate their feelings.
- Comments like, "This is a very difficult time..." may encourage further talking.
- Encourage self-care so they can support the person for longer periods of time.

### **When Suicide Happens**

- Assure people of your love
- Don't judge or blame
- Validate feelings of guilt, shame, anger, despair or whatever they are; let people, talk, cry, scream, pound their fists. Anger at the person who killed him or herself is very common.
- Reassure them that God loves their loved one even more that they do; that God does not desert people in their time of greatest need, and that ultimately we need to leave people in God's hands.
- Help plan the funeral in a way that celebrates the life of the person who died (while at the same time being honest about the level of despair).
- Recommend a suicide support grief group or counseling.
- Help them to see their symptoms as normal (feelings, anger, depression, ...).
- Keep going back - remember birthdays, anniversaries and the anniversary of their loved one's death.

### **Conclusion**

None of us want to hear about suicide, especially in our immediate circles. However, many of us, maybe most of us do within our lifetime. Advance preparation can make those times a little bit less difficult for us and more helpful for others.

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