

A Guide for Clergy: Warning Signs and Risk Factors for Suicide

This flyer offers an overview of suicide warning signs and risk factors that you, as a member of the clergy, may see in congregants who come to you for counseling.

Suicide touches everyone—all ages and incomes; all racial, ethnic, and religious groups; people in all parts of the country.

- Suicide takes the lives of about 38,000 Americans each year.
- Each year more than 8 million adults think seriously about taking their lives, and more than 1 million adults make a suicide attempt.

People with mental health problems, including those who are suicidal, frequently turn to faith community leaders for help. You are in a unique position to help your congregants get the help they need when they are feeling suicidal.

Distressing life experiences

Distressing life experiences may predispose someone to feeling suicidal.

Distressing life experiences include:

- Loss of job, home or money
- Death or terminal illness of a loved one
- Divorce, separation, or other broken relationship – for example, family rejection of those with nonconforming gender identities and sexual orientation
- Job/school problems – for example conflict at work, or being bullied at school
- Financial problems or stress
- Health problems – for example, chronic pain, disability, loss of eyesight
- Legal issues or going to jail
- Surviving a traumatic experiences – like natural disasters, car accidents, or personal trauma like sexual assault or robbery

(This list is not exhaustive, but it gives you an idea of the types of things that predispose people to suicide.)

Just because someone is experiencing one of these distressing events, it does not mean they are suicidal. Below, we list some warning signs of suicidal thinking. If you notice one or more of these signs *in conjunction* with a distressing life experience, mental illness or past suicide attempt, you should ask the individual if he or she is thinking about suicide. We discuss ways to ask the question in a video, “How to Tell if a Person is Considering Suicide,” available at www.caringclergyproject.org/suicidepreventioninterventionresponse.html

Warning signs

Suicidal individuals rarely admit spontaneously they are thinking of harming themselves, but most suicidal individuals will give some warning of their intentions. It is important to take the signs you notice seriously, but remember that no single warning sign means a person will take his or her life.

You might notice **verbal, written or pictorial clues** (for example in children’s artwork). These clues may include:

- References to death, dying, endings, finality (assuming they are not terminally ill)
- Preoccupation with death or dying
- Expressing a feeling of burdensomeness (they may perceive they are a burden, that their death would be a relief for those who love them)

Emotional extremes or shifts can also be warning signs. You may notice:

- A dramatic change in mood
- A sense of hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness or shame
- Unrelenting sadness
- Anxiety, or feeling agitated
- Showing uncharacteristic anger or rage or seeking revenge
- Fearlessness (which may be a sign they have overcome their sense of self preservation)

In addition to emotional shifts, you may also notice **behavioral changes**, including:

- A decline in performance at work, school, or other activities
- Reckless or risky behavior like speeding or substance abuse such as overindulging in alcohol or drugs
- Withdrawal from family and friends or perhaps from their faith community. This is also called, thwarted belongingness (which is about losing connection with others)
- Giving important possessions away
- Changes in religious behavior (for example, previously ambivalent congregants suddenly attending church frequently with lots of questions about the afterlife, or formerly involved congregants who are now avoiding religious activities)

Physical changes can be another warning sign. These may include:

- Changes in sleep patterns (for example, loss of sleep or excessive sleep)
- Changes in eating (for example, loss of appetite or overeating. What you might see is weight loss or weight gain.)
- Poor hygiene – for example, you might notice a disheveled appearance in a formerly tidy person

Suicidal individuals may also go through a **spiritual crisis**. Things you might hear from someone who has come to you for help may include:

- A spiritual struggle to connect with God or feeling abandoned by God
- Shame that they are letting God down
- Loss of purpose
- Feeling rejected by the religious community

Other risk factors to keep in mind:

- A previous suicide attempt
- A recent discharge from the emergency room or hospital following a suicidal episode or depression
- Mental illness, including depression, PTSD, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia
- Substance abuse
- Social isolation

If one of your congregants is undergoing a distressing life experience combined with these other signs and risk factors, don't dismiss it. Ask the individual if he or she is thinking about suicide. We'll discuss ways to ask the question in the next video in the series, "How to Tell if a Person is Considering Suicide."

If you see **signs of immediate risks**, ask if they are thinking about suicide. Here are some signs that immediate action is required:

- Threatening to hurt or kill oneself
- Talking about feeling like they "just can't take it anymore"
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Having a plan and lethal means (for example, gun, pills, or other means)

Be sure to watch the videos in the Caring Clergy Project "Suicide Intervention and Response" series and the "Making Referrals" series at www.caringclergyproject.org/suicidepreventioninterventionresponse.html

You can be a key person in helping your congregants find hope and reassurance and help connect them to life-saving resources.

For immediate help

National Suicide Hotline:

1-800 273 TALK (1-800 273-8255)

Resources for further education

Resources for clergy and faith communities
www.inmi.us

SafeTalk (half-day training) or ASIST (2-day training)
www.livingworks.net

Short videos for clergy on making referrals
<http://www.caringclergyproject.org/makingreferrals.html>