



Faith Leaders as *Key Community Partners* in Suicide Prevention

As trusted and respected members of various spiritual communities, faith leaders have a unique ability to inspire hope and cultivate connectedness, which evidence suggests has direct relevance to the prevention of suicide.¹ Indeed, when it comes to suicide prevention, there are many reasons that leaders of faith communities have a crucial role to play. For community members in crisis or at risk of suicide—especially those who lack access to mental health resources—their faith leader may be the first, and perhaps only, point of contact for help.

This close tie to at-risk individuals is especially relevant for military chaplains working with veterans or active-duty military personnel. A study of veteran suicide deaths in 2017 found that age- and sex-adjusted suicide rates among veterans were more than 50 % higher than among non-veteran adults.² In 2018, active-duty military populations reported a suicide rate of 24.8 per 100,000, a rate comparable to civilian rates, when adjusted for age and sex.³ Service members may have experienced physical and psychological wounds, and they may also be coping with *moral injury*, or “the emotional distress that is associated with the violation of one’s moral code as a result of war or military service,” a phenomenon that has been linked to suicidal thoughts and behaviors.⁴

Faith leaders can also proactively cultivate what are known as protective factors—personal or environmental characteristics that can help prevent suicide. Faith leaders can strengthen community ties, promote acceptance, and support help-seeking and outreach - among congregants and other community members.

After a suicide death, faith leaders may be called upon to perform funeral services or provide solace to surviving family members and friends. Additionally, they may play a significant role in supporting postvention, which is the organized response that helps to reduce risk and promote healing after a suicide death.⁵

Here are some concrete actions that faith leaders can take to help prevent suicide.

Increase Help-Seeking in the Faith Community

- **Promote education** on the topic of suicide by sharing facts, increasing hope, and providing resources.
- **Teach lay leaders** how to respond with compassion to people in crisis, and link to resources.

Cultivate Connectedness and Increase Life Skills

- **Support efforts to increase life skills**—including critical thinking, stress management, decision-making, and conflict resolution skills—which have been found to foster resilience and are a core element of a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention.⁶
- **Coordinate outreach efforts** to engage with families or individuals who may be less connected to the community.
- **Organize peer support groups** for individuals with shared experiences, such as veterans, survivors of suicide attempts or loss, or those in recovery from substance use, and provide evidence-based resources.
- **Sponsor workshops** to teach mindfulness or meditation skills.

Identify and Assist Those at Risk of Suicide

- **Attend evidence-based training** on how to recognize and respond to signs of suicide risk.
- **Become certified** in suicide intervention skills.
- **Learn more** about the community's crisis services, such as mobile crisis teams, mental health centers, and crisis lines.

Participate in Postvention Planning

- **Develop a plan and protocols** that will enable your community of faith to quickly and compassionately respond to survivors of suicide loss immediately following a suicide death.
- **Build and strengthen relationships** with a team of professionals from sectors that regularly interact with people after a crisis, such as law enforcement, emergency medical services, and social service agencies. Doing so may help to reduce the fragmentation of services.
- **Work with the news media** to encourage safe suicide reporting, including avoiding sensational coverage, keeping information about the person general, and reporting the effectiveness of coping skills and treatment for most people who have thought about suicide.⁷
- **Provide ongoing, practical, and emotional support** to family and friends who have lost someone to suicide.

Action Steps



Increase Help-Seeking in the Faith Community



Cultivate Connectedness and Increase Life Skills



Identify and Assist Those at Risk of Suicide



Participate in Postvention Planning

Access Resources

- » **National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention - Faith Communities** leads efforts in suicide prevention within many faith communities: <https://www.faith.hope.life.org>
- » **MentalHealth.gov** offers guidance on how faith leaders can foster community connection: <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/faith-community-leaders>
- » **LivingWorks** provides resources and training on suicide intervention, including training specifically for faith leaders: <https://www.livingworks.net/>
- » **Military OneSource** offers support to those in the military community, including a confidential crisis line for those in need of a trained counselor: <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/health-wellness/mental-health/suicide/>
- » **Action Alliance's Framework for Successful Messaging** is a research-based resource that outlines critical issues to consider when messaging to the public about suicide: <https://suicidepreventionmessaging.org/>.

References

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- 7 Reporting on Suicide. (n.d.). *Best practices and recommendations for reporting on suicide*. Retrieved from <https://reportingonsuicide.org/wp-content/themes/ros2015/assets/images/Recommendations-eng.pdf>