

• Death in the context of Scripture, God's compassion in understanding the struggles of our human nature and the message of hope that this communicates to us. How our Faith gives us the message of Hope in eternal life, and the Love that God has for each of us.

• Acknowledge the magnitude of the loss of the person who has died & the devastation that is left afterwards.

• Talk about how those affected by the death may experience a very wide range of feelings, including; helplessness, sadness, guilt, blame and anger and that these feelings may change frequently even from hour to hour.

• Suicide is not the solution to any of life's problems. Sensitively try to emphasise the gift and goodness of life.

• Encourage people to talk with each other over the coming period. Direct those who are in distress, at any time in their lives, to sources of support in their local area.

## 8. GENERAL

"Suicide Prevention in the Community, A Practical Guide" Health Service Executive (2011). This guide is available on the National Office for Suicide Prevention website: [www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie). Where possible a priest might be able to influence some of these issues by being aware of what is taken to be best practice.

This leaflet is part of two documents written on this topic with the other document addressing some of the issues in more detail.

## Prayer for the bereaved

Lord,

**In this darkness**

**be my sight**

**In this wounded fear**

**My strength and healing**

**Be, in this confusion**

**All my understanding**

**See and take my steps for me**

**Suffer all my loss for me**

**Smile and heal my friends for me**

**Strength without deserting me**

**Kindness without ending**

*These guidelines have been developed by  
The Working Group for Pastoral Care and Response  
to Families bereaved by Suicide with membership  
from The Council of Priests of the Archdiocese of Tuam,  
The Family Centre, Castlebar and Families  
bereaved by suicide.*



## Guidelines for Priests on Pastoral Response to Suicide

*Faith  
Hope  
Love*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This leaflet is intended as a quick reference for priests who are providing services to a family where a suicide has occurred. **Consider your own self-care.** While your options for support may be very limited in some instances, you should be open to asking yourself whether you are able to cope with a suicide at this time - perhaps after a bereavement of your own, illness or other significant challenges in life. Nonetheless, priests should consider whether dealing with a suicide at a particular time may unduly affect their own wellbeing and be prepared to look for support or help where at all possible

## 2. OVERARCHING CONSIDERATIONS:

It is thought that many priests may have a belief that they should be able to cope with "just about any situation" that arises in their parishes. For a priest to declare that he may not be able to cope with a suicide at a particular time might be viewed somehow as a sign of weakness.

• In relation to the priests role the most important single principle in dealing with suicide is to be generally guided by **what the family want**. So consider asking open questions such as "What would be helpful? Have you any preferences? Would it be ok if I...? Would you like me to call?"

### • **Is the family accepting that the death is suicide?**

If so, then the conversations can be more open and direct, if not then this must be respected. Some challenges arise when some of the family are accepting that it is suicide while others do not accept this.

## 3. ATTENDING THE SCENE OF A SUICIDE:

The scene of a suicide can be anywhere. Depending on the location of the scene your presence may be requested by a family member or the Gardaí. The request is usually based on many families desire that the deceased is given whatever Catholic rite as may be appropriate and at least that prayers are said. At the end of this leaflet there is a suggested prayer for the bereaved.

If family members, or those close to the deceased, are present when you are there then your role can also include comforting the bereaved.

• From a self-care perspective if you are attending the scene of a suicide then perhaps consider bringing somebody to travel along with you. This can also ensure you have somebody to speak with after you leave the scene. **Only a fellow priest, however, should attend the actual scene.** Please don't underestimate the effect that a scene of a suicide may have on you.

• The main principle here is that there is no "right thing" to say and that you're respectful, often silent, presence is usually found to be the most helpful.

• Ask if there is anything they may like you to do. Judge how long is sensible for you to remain in the home and be guided by asking the family directly. Before you leave give your contact details to the family and invite them to contact you if they want to for any reason.

## 4. WHAT IF THE PERSON WHO HAS DIED OR THEIR FAMILY ARE NOT "PRACTICING CATHOLICS"?

Most families who are not regular attendees at church services still want and value contact with the priest and have a Catholic funeral liturgy for their loved one. An overarching principle of contact with any family following a suicide is to be open to discuss their wishes.

## 5. ARRANGING THE FUNERAL:

A suicide death can be more traumatic than many other forms of death. Family members and others can show many different emotions e.g. anger, guilt, a sense of hopelessness. When anger is present it may be directed at the deceased, other family members, doctors, mental health services or God, and you as God's representative. Try not to personalise any critical emotions that might be directed at you.

• Try to make contact with the funeral director as soon as appropriate. Having such preliminary

discussions can be useful so that funerals fit in with other parish arrangements.

• Keep in touch with the family often. Be guided by what they want.

• Ideally inviting all the family to meet with you at a later suitable time to discuss the funeral details is desirable so that all family members are consulted.

## 6. FUNERAL DETAILS:

Consider discussing the following with the family:

• Ask whether they would be accepting of you using the word "suicide" at some stage during the liturgy. Generally when it is an obvious suicide the wider community know this anyhow and avoiding using the word suicide may, in itself, be interpreted as it carrying a high stigma.

• Outline also, especially when it is the death of a younger person, that we all have a responsibility to try to prevent such deaths in the future and what you say at a funeral service must bear this in mind. Ideally tell them that you will need sight of any prayers or eulogies that might be used in advance. A priest has a responsibility to the wider community and congregation as well as to the family.

• Families who experience suicide are generally very positively focused on preventing other suicides. Outline the broad content of your Homily to them and especially your message to people who need support and your encouraging them to access such and where to get it.

## 7. KEY HOMILY MESSAGES:

The public words used by a priest during the funeral liturgy of somebody who died by suicide is likely to set the tone for the entire congregation and community. This is part of the unique role that the priest has during all funeral liturgies. It is recommended that you write the homily in advance or at least you are very clear about specific phrases and messages you want to communicate, such as;