Tips for Religious Services after a Suicide

The pastoral care you provide individuals and the message you convey in a service can be comforting and healing.

Comfort the grieving

- Coach the grieving individuals for comfort and spiritual care. Encourage their engagement in faith practices when alone and with others.
- Assure survivors that each person’s timeline for grieving is different and acceptable.
- Recognize grief from a suicide loss is more complex than other deaths. It is natural to struggle with a range of emotions and questions about self-killing.
- Help survivors reduce feelings of guilt. Help them find solutions within their faith traditions that move them towards closure and understanding.
- Help survivors understand that anger is another natural emotion after a suicide. They may feel anger at themselves, a higher power, or at the deceased. Anger towards the deceased doesn’t mean the survivor loved the person any less, nor should the final act of the deceased define the nature of the survivor’s relationship with the person overall.
- Encourage them to seek specialized support in their grieving process, either through support groups for survivors of suicide or by seeking professional grief counseling with a therapist experienced with suicide survivors.
- Remember you, too, are grieving and practice self-care.

Reduce the risk of additional suicides

- Understand that those who lose someone to suicide are at increased risk of suicide.
- Use language that is sensitive to the survivors of the deceased. Do not call a death by suicide a “successful suicide attempt,” for example. Do not give details about the method or location. Do not state a specific or singular reason for the suicide behavior. In most cases, many reasons build and layer over a period of time, including but not limited to the occurrence of a mental illness.
- Help demystify mental illness and suicide. Dispel the myths by letting your faith community know mental illness is not a character flaw or a weakness, and suicide is not cowardly or a criminal act, but behavior stemming from deep emotional pain.
- Do not glamorize suicide by describing a state of peace the deceased gained from death. Focus on the positive accomplishments and qualities of the deceased but not the final act. Vulnerable people may find suicide attractive if they believe they will gain peace.
- Make sure you address the special needs of youth during this time. Make sure they know which adults are prepared to provide support or link the youth to community resources.
- Contact the Office of Prevention Services at your local Community Services Board to learn which suicide prevention trainings are available in your community. Find your CSB contact, training descriptions, and calendar on www.lockandtalk.org.