

Recommendations for funeral services, memorials and remembrance activities for those who have died by suicide in Aotearoa-NZ.

Prepared by Rev Greg Hughson, Ecumenical Chaplain, Otago University for Southern DHB communities

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Note: these recommendations should be read alongside the Community Postvention Response Service Resource (CPRS) “Recommendations for memorials or remembrance activities for those who have died by suspected suicide”. (Appendix One)

<http://www.casa.org.nz/resources.html>

and

“After a Suicide – recommendations for religious services and other public memorial observances” Suicide Prevention Resource Centre, USA (2004)

http://www.sprc.org/library_resources/items/after-suicide-recommendations-religious-services-and-other-public-memorial-o (Appendix Two)

To organise and lead the funeral or memorial service of someone who has died as a result of suicide is a daunting task. Celebrants who prepare and lead such services need to be able to manage their own feelings of sadness and fear, before, during and after the service. The understandable emotions felt by celebrants result from their awareness of the often tragic circumstances surrounding the death of the person, whose loved ones they are supporting and ministering to. The natural fear in the heart and mind of the celebrant needs to be managed, if we are to provide a “still point” for those who are grieving. To lead a funeral or memorial service for someone who has died as a result of suicide requires knowledge of the grief process, experience of previous deaths, and considerable emotional and spiritual maturity. No celebrant confronted with the challenge of helping prepare and lead such services can ever “get used” to such situations. The celebrant needs to show empathy and compassion, but not be overwhelmed by the tragedy they are assisting often large numbers of other people to accept, and begin to deal with. The celebrant needs to spend many hours before any funeral or memorial service alongside friends and family of the deceased, hearing their stories, showing empathy and assisting them to create an event which “rings true” for their loved one.

Funeral and memorial services for those who have died as a result of suicide, can - if not carefully led - inadvertently give permission or even encouragement, to vulnerable people present, to take their own lives. Such services therefore need to be professionally planned, organised and led, as one very important component of the wider postvention care extended to the many family and friends attending. Suicide should not be glamorised during the service.

The funeral or memorial service provides an opportunity for family and friends to celebrate the life of their loved one, regardless of how their loved one died. The funeral or memorial service also creates the context within which family and friends can continue the process of grieving deeply together. Many attending the service will still be in shock and may not remember much of what is said afterwards. It is an art (for the celebrant) to achieve the right balance between celebration of the person's life and grieving, between smiling and tears. As stories are told, and photos projected up during the service, family and friends are helped to remember the good times. Ideally there will be some smiles, and maybe even laughter.

Some practical suggestions for leading such a funeral or memorial service include

1. Have a well prepared printed order of service, agreed upon by close family and friends.
2. Sit with close family and friends before the service begins, and ask them for permission to commence the service
3. With prior agreement of family, it can be useful to have some material on access to support services, how to keep yourself and others safe, and grieving, at the back of the funeral venue for when people exit the service
4. Early on in the service, mention support services (Counselling, Mental Health, Chaplaincy etc) available to family and friends in the days, weeks, months and years following the service. Print contact details for these support services in the order of service and refer to this information again at the end of the service. If the funeral is considered to a high risk situation, consider having a counsellor on hand at the service for people who might be extremely distressed and need immediate support.
5. It is important to give careful consideration, before the service, to who will speak at the funeral or memorial service. It is generally not a good idea to provide an open platform, and to invite anyone present to speak at such services. To reduce the likelihood of people attending the service being put at greater risk of suicide themselves, the speakers delivering tributes should be agreed upon before the service, and the essence of what they are going to share should be checked by the celebrant. Speakers should be advised not share the means by which the person died, during the funeral or memorial service or to speculate on the reasons for their death
6. Near the beginning of the service the celebrant can, with the permission of close family and friends, share that the deceased has taken his or her own life and that "we have come together today to support each other in our grief."
7. The celebrant, and the speakers delivering tributes, should avoid glorifying the person for how they have died, or in any way making them appear to be a hero/heroine, but should celebrate their lives The death itself has often been dramatic/traumatic, so the last thing that those present need is a celebrant exaggerating the tragedy even more. With so much tension and pain present the celebrant needs a certain amount of objectivity. Death by suicide should not be

normalised.

8. The celebrant should avoid overemphasising the fact that the person who has died is now at peace. The celebrant should avoid “catastrophizing” the pain which family and friends are feeling. Words such as “this is such a terrible loss, we will never recover from this” should be avoided. Hope of recovery from trauma and grief needs to be sensitively offered by the celebrant in the midst of the pain, hope and reassurance that there is a way through this, together, from darkness to light. Celebrants can embody this hope by the way in which they conduct the service and by their attitude to those who are grieving.
9. If the celebrant has a religious faith, leading a funeral or memorial service for someone who has died as a result of suicide provides an opportunity for such a celebrant to incorporate appropriate scripture readings, prayers, music, photography, poems and reflections into the service. Such services are not opportunities for evangelism, or for the imposition of doctrine. Rather, they are opportunities for the compassion which is born out of the mature spirituality of the celebrant, to be expressed. If the service is held in a Church, the rich resources of the Christian faith (scripture, music, prayer) can be shared in a way which can provide comfort and reassurance, without minimising the pain which needs to be experienced before the journey of healing can commence.
10. If there is to be a homily or message, it should be brief and focus on the capacity of humans to deal with tragedy with support from a loving God. A theology of “God is grieving with us” is to be preferred to a theology of “God has taken” the person who has died.
11. Pallbearers need to be chosen with care. Those closest to the deceased may suffer even greater emotional pain by being a pallbearer. Or, on the contrary, loved ones might view this as a chance to do something tangible for the deceased. Given the documented potential for "cluster suicides" and "suicide contagion" particularly by vulnerable teens and young adults, you might suggest that close friends of a teen who died by suicide not be pallbearers. But give them a choice, and respect their wishes. (This advice comes from http://www.sprc.org/library_resources/items/help-hand-supporting-survivors-suicide-loss-guide-funeral-directors)
12. Chris Bowden¹ writes that funerals are rituals and spaces for
 - Honouring the dead
 - Showing respect

¹ Breaking the Silence: Young Men’s Experiences of Losing Close Friends to Suicide
Supporting Families in Mental Illness New Zealand **Suicide: Is it Time for Openness?** Conference 31
October, 2014 **Chris Bowden, PhD candidate: Graduate School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health.**
Lecturer: Victoria University School of Education chris.bowden@vuw.ac.nz

- Sharing stories
- Realising the finality of death

The funeral is a time to say “Goodbye”, a time when the death is experienced as being real, perhaps for the first time. Bowden obtained these instructive quotes about suicide funerals, from young men who had lost a close friend to suicide, and attended their funeral:

- “People were upset and in shock but it still wasn’t really registering in a big way with people until the funeral. I think the funeral was where it sort of became real for everyone” (Mike)
- “It’s all about celebrating that person’s life and then saying goodbyes” (Allan).
- “Seeing it go and knowing he’s in there. And you realise that once it’s in the ground, that’s for real. He’s gone...Putting him in the car was the hardest bit seeing him go, but it was the best feeling knowing I was carrying my best mate” (Cam).
- “Even when he was getting buried I couldn’t go to that, eh. Because like I was just freaking out, my mate being like in a box in the ground you know. That shit cut me up”(Heldane)

13. Bowden advises against lecturing at suicide funerals. Here, below, are some criticisms of such funerals from young men who attended and found them unhelpful due to the “lecturing” attitude of the speakers :

- “When they started bagging him and saying you shouldn’t have done it. He’s done it and the family knows that he shouldn’t have done it. But they didn’t need to bring that up at the funeral” (Cam)
- Rome: “Teachers eh. Real disrespectful!”
- Rome: Just making it worse on the kids. Like one of them going “he lived his life on the edge, and then he fell”. Like this is what happens. Talking down to us”
- Fuss: “Like gave us all a lecture. We were trying to recover”
- Rome: “It’s supposed to be about celebrating his life, not blowing up and telling us like this is what you get and shit. ...Like you want to talk about him in a good way not run him down”
- Fuss: “What they were saying was making it worse”.
- Jamie: “Especially in front of his mum”
- Funerals were also spaces where they, their friends and other survivors experienced *disrespect* from adults (teachers, whaia, kuia) who said insensitive things and lectured them.

Appendix One

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEMORIALS OR REMEMBRANCE ACTIVITIES FOR THOSE WHO HAVE DIED BY SUSPECTED SUICIDE

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<http://www.casa.org.nz/resources.html>

Memorial services and remembrance activities play an important part in the healing process and can facilitate grieving after the death of a loved one. However, in the case of a death by suicide, the issue is complicated as those impacted by the suicide (family and friends), as well as any already vulnerable individuals are at risk of imitating the suicide. This is referred to as suicide contagion or “copy-cat” suicides. Any memorials need to strike a delicate balance between creating appropriate opportunities for people to grieve but not increasing risk for vulnerable others by glorifying, romanticising or sensationalising suicide.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ANY MEMORIALS OR FUNERALS

- Present the facts
- Encourage grieving and show respect for the deceased while avoiding romanticising the suicide and its cause.
- Don't glamorise the state of “peace” the deceased may have found through death (this can influence vulnerable others who are dealing with psychological pain to also seek that peace or escape via death).
- Make a clear distinction between the positive accomplishments and qualities of the deceased and his or her final act of suicide.
- Present suicide as the worst possible outcome of mental health or behavioural health problems.
- Avoid normalising the suicide by interpreting it as a reasonable response to particularly distressful life circumstances.

- Reassure family, friends and other bereaved that they are not to blame.
- Provide information about resources for treatment and support for others who may be feeling a similar way as the deceased.
- Embed suicide prevention in the service (e.g. mention how others may feel in distress and the importance of reaching out for help).
- Endeavour to normalise seeking professional help for emotional problems the same way one would seek help for physical problems.
- Avoid the suicide being seen as “successful”. Instead, use phrases such as “died by suicide”, “took his life”, “ended her life” etc.
- Be mindful of the specific cultural needs of ethnic communities.
- Avoid permanent memorials as these have been known to facilitate the suicidal acts of others, particularly youth.
- Pay particular attention to youth - ask them to look around and notice adults they can call on for help at this and other times of crisis. Consider pointing out specific adults who are particularly caring and approachable.
- If there is a public memorial, consider personal expressions that can be given to family to keep privately (e.g., letters, poetry etc) and holding any event in the evening so that youth can attend with their parents.
- Avoid public artistic expressions of grief (including on social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook and Bebo, etc.) because they may inadvertently increase thoughts of suicide amongst vulnerable youth.
- Suggest that surviving friends and family honour the deceased by living their lives in concert with community values such as compassion, generosity, service, honour and improving quality of life for all.
- Activity focused memorials might include a day of community service, sponsoring mental health awareness programmes, supporting peer counselling programmes, or fund raising for suicide prevention.

Also see CASA’s Community Postvention Response Service Resources:

- a) ‘Recommendations for Memorials in Schools after a death by Suspected Suicide’
- b) ‘Social Media and Suicide Postvention’
- c) ‘Circles of Vulnerability’ (to identify those potentially at risk after a death by suicide)

REFERENCES

1. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Centre. 2011. *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*. Newton, MA: Education Development Centre, Inc.
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3. Dafoe, B. and Monk. L. (2005). *Suicide Postvention is prevention: A proactive planning workbook for communities affected by youth suicide*. BC Council for Families.
4. NASP (2002). *Memorials/activities/rituals following traumatic events*.
5. Suicide Prevention Resource Centre (2004). *After a suicide: recommendations for religious services and other public memorial observances*. Newton, MA: Education Development Centre, Inc.

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Appendix Two

“After a Suicide – recommendations for religious services and other public memorial observances” Suicide Prevention Resource Centre, USA 2004

http://www.sprc.org/library_resources/items/after-suicide-recommendations-religious-services-and-other-public-memorial-o

A guide for funeral directors is also available at

http://www.sprc.org/library_resources/items/help-hand-supporting-survivors-suicide-loss-guide-funeral-directors

“Death & Dying - Information from Different Asian Cultures and Religion”, (2012)
Compiled by WDHb Asian Health Support Services. A brief summary about death and dying practices of Cambodian, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Vietnamese cultures and different religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam) <http://www.ecald.com/Resources/Cross-Cultural-Resources/Toolkits-Manager/type/View/ID/1861>

Postscript

This is a ‘living’ document: feedback and recommendations for additions and amendments is invited from suicide-funeral celebrants for inclusion in an updated resource for 2017.

Please email greg.hughson@otago.ac.nz or paul.martin@southerndhb.govt.nz with your suggestions.