

Suicide Response Protocol for Group Leaders (Adult Environments)

Purpose and Scope

This policy provides volunteer small group and care ministry leaders with clear guidelines for responding to situations involving people struggling with suicidal thoughts. The safety and wellbeing of all individuals in our church community is our highest priority.

Important Note: This protocol is designed for volunteer leaders who are not mental health professionals. When in doubt, always err on the side of caution taking immediate steps to protect the individual.

Core Principles

- **Take all mentions of suicide seriously** - Never dismiss or minimize statements about wanting to die or harm oneself
- **You are not expected to be a counselor** - Your role is to provide immediate support and connect the person with professional resources
- **Confidentiality has limits** - When someone's life is at risk, confidentiality must be broken to ensure safety
- **Act quickly but remain calm** - Urgent situations require prompt action while maintaining a supportive presence

Recognizing Warning Signs

Verbal Indicators

- Direct statements: "I want to die," "I wish I were dead," "I can't go on"
- Indirect statements: "Everyone would be better off without me," "I won't be a problem much longer"
- Talking about suicide methods or planning
- Expressing feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, or being trapped

Behavioral Indicators

- Sudden withdrawal from relationships and activities
- Giving away possessions or making final arrangements
- Dramatic mood changes or sudden calmness after period of distress

- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Reckless behavior or self-harm

Immediate Response Protocol

Step 1: Stay Calm and Listen

- Remain calm and take the person seriously
- Listen without judgment
- Acknowledge their pain: "It sounds like you're going through something really difficult"
- Ask directly: "Are you thinking about hurting yourself?" or "Are you having thoughts of suicide?"

Step 2: Assess Immediate Risk

HIGH RISK (Requires immediate emergency response):

- Has a specific plan for suicide
- Has access to means (weapons, pills, etc.)
- Has set a timeline
- History of previous attempts
- Under influence of drugs/alcohol
- Experiencing psychosis or delusions

MODERATE RISK (Requires same-day professional intervention):

- Thoughts of suicide but no specific plan
- Some protective factors present (family, faith, future plans)
- Able to contract for safety

Step 3: Take Action Based on Risk Level

For HIGH RISK Situations:

1. **DO NOT leave the person alone**
2. **Call 911 immediately** or go to nearest emergency room
3. **Remove any potential means of harm** if safely possible
4. **Contact the person's emergency contact** (spouse, family member)
5. **Notify pastoral staff immediately** using emergency contact list
6. Stay with the person until professional help arrives

For MODERATE RISK Situations:

1. **Help the person create a safety plan** (see safety planning template below)
2. **Connect with professional help within 24 hours:**
 - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988
 - Idaho Mental Health: 208-572-5066

- Encourage contacting their doctor or therapist
 - See 'Resource and Contact Information' for more options
3. **Notify pastoral staff within 2 hours**
 4. **Arrange for ongoing support** - don't leave them isolated

What NOT to Do

- **Don't promise absolute confidentiality** when safety is at risk
- **Don't leave a high-risk person alone**
- **Don't try to counsel beyond your training**
- **Don't argue with their feelings** or try to "fix" them with simple solutions
- **Don't be sworn to secrecy** - explain you may need to get help
- **Don't give up** if they refuse help initially

Safety Planning Template

Work with the person to identify:

1. **Warning signs** they recognize in themselves
2. **Internal coping strategies** (prayer, breathing exercises, calling a friend)
3. **Support people** they can contact (names and phone numbers)
4. **Professional contacts** (counselor, doctor, crisis line)
5. **Environmental safety** (removing or securing potential means of harm)
6. **Reasons for living** (family, faith, future goals)

Follow-Up Responsibilities

Within 24 Hours:

- Check in with the person personally
- Confirm they've connected with professional help
- Provide ongoing pastoral care referral information

Within One Week:

- Continue regular check-ins (daily if possible)
- Coordinate with pastoral staff on ongoing care plan
- Connect with family/support network as appropriate

Ongoing:

- Regular but non-intrusive contact
- Include in prayer and community support
- Be alert to any changes in mood or behavior

Post-Incident Documentation

For all incidents, document:

- Date, time, and location of conversation
- Summary of what was shared (threats, plans, mood)
- Risk level assessment
- Actions taken
- People contacted
- Follow-up plans

***Submit documentation to pastoral staff within 24 hours via email or hard copy**

Resources and Contact Information

Emergency Contacts

- **Emergency Services:** 911
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 988
- **Local Suicide Prevention Hotline:** 208-398-4357
- **Crisis & Suicide Hotline:** 208-258-6990
- **Idaho Mental Health:** 208-572-5066

Online Resources:

- National Alliance on Mental Illness: nami.org
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: afsp.org

ECC Contacts:

- Jim Kirby (Staff/Stephen Ministry): 208-830-5077
- LaVonne Komlos (Stephen Ministry): 920-475-0156
- Drew Deichmann (Stephen Ministry): 208-761-8399
- Minister of the Day (MOD): 208-286-0879

Self-Care for Leaders

Dealing with suicidal situations is emotionally demanding. Remember to:

- Debrief with pastoral staff after incidents
- Seek support for yourself through counseling if needed
- Recognize the limits of your role and training
- Trust that you've done your part by connecting them with appropriate help
- Remember that you cannot control another person's choices