



The Association of
Catholic Mental
Health Ministers



WHEN A _____

Loved One Dies

_____ BY SUICIDE

FACILITATION GUIDE

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Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries is a Canadian charity with offices in North America and the UK. The information provided throughout this guide reflects our history, partnerships, and location as an organization, and is by no means exhaustive. If you are looking for local mental health services or information in another language, we encourage you to search online or reach out to your local health care providers and parishes for referrals and additional resources.

CRISIS INFORMATION

EMERGENCY RESOURCES

If a critical situation arises, attend your nearest hospital emergency department or call your local emergency number.

Australia:	000
Canada:	911
European Union:	112
New Zealand:	111
United Kingdom:	999
United States:	911

CRISIS LINES

If you are considering suicide or are concerned about someone who may be, crisis lines are free, anonymous, confidential, and available 24/7.

Australia:	13 11 14 (Lifeline)
Canada:	1-800-784-2433/1-800-SUICIDE (British Columbia) 1-833-456-4566 (Crisis Services Canada)
New Zealand:	1737 (National Mental Health and Addictions Helpline) 0800-543-354 (Lifeline Aotearoa)
United Kingdom:	116 123 (Samaritans)
United States:	988 (National Suicide Prevention Lifeline three-digit dialing code)



ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Thank you for your interest in sharing *When A Loved One Dies By Suicide* with your parish or faith community. In this guide, you'll find information about the resource along with recommendations for facilitation. Accompanying those who are suicide bereaved is important and holy work. Know that the Church prays for you and Christ walks with you as you seek to discern whether this resource will meet a need in your parish or community.

When A Loved One Dies By Suicide is a small group resource created in partnership with The Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers (CMHM) and Ave Maria Press. It is based on the 2020 book, *When A Loved One Dies By Suicide*, which shares the stories of Catholics who are suicide bereaved. The small group resource includes:



Eight short films featuring interviews with Catholics who have experienced suicide loss



Eight accompanying reflection guides that summarize key points from the films, offer questions for discussion, and include prayers for the journey



An additional short film (five minutes in length) with information on suicide prevention and treatment

While the films and reflection guides can be used independently of the book, groups have the option to assign reading from the book as well. The book chapters cover the same content as the films, but contain greater detail. You may want to determine how your group will work through the material in advance, or discuss the additional reading option with group members.



As this resource is designed to support Catholics who have experienced suicide loss, it is best suited for the following contexts:

- Suicide loss support groups
- Grief support and bereavement groups where one or more members have experienced suicide loss
- Mental health ministries seeking to raise awareness regarding suicide and suicide loss

Please note that *When A Loved One Dies By Suicide* is recommended for use in established groups or ministries. Newly formed groups may want to spend some time getting to know one another before incorporating this resource into their meetings. If you would like to form a new grief support or bereavement group in your parish and are looking for information and resources, we recommend the following:

- Many dioceses keep a list of recommended grief support programs available. If you contact your diocese, they may also offer training and additional resources for facilitators.
- [CMHM](#) offers recommendations for online bereavement ministry training, as well as four free session handouts for use in grief support or bereavement groups. (Under the Resources tab in the navigation bar, select “Resources by Topic” and then “Grief Support.”)
- *Seasons of Hope* is a bereavement program available from [Ave Maria Press](#). The program includes a comprehensive guidebook for facilitators, along with twenty-four sessions for participants.
- *Grieving with Great Hope* is a five-session grief support program available from [FORMED](#). A leader’s guide, participant’s workbook, and films are included.

If you have additional questions about facilitation or would like to see an example of detailed instructions for planning and running small group meetings, we recommend that you reference the Leader’s Guide that accompanies *The Sanctuary Course for Catholics*. You can also contact CMHM for more information and support.



USING THIS RESOURCE IN A GRIEF GROUP OR MENTAL HEALTH MINISTRY SETTING

In an established group or ministry, many of the planning details will be predetermined. However, you may want to consider the following:

- **Scheduling:** This resource consists of eight films and accompanying reflection guides. Think about how frequently your group meets and how many members of your group have experienced suicide loss. Depending on the needs of your group, you may want to devote eight consecutive meetings to this resource, or you may prefer to alternate with another study or series.
- **Timing:** Each film is approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. Plan on reserving between twenty and forty minutes for reflection and discussion after viewing (depending on your group size). You might also want to think about reserving additional time for things like check-ins, breaks, prayer, and other regular meeting components.
- **Communication:** Consider sharing a description of the resource with group members to help set expectations in advance. If your group decides to read the book chapters that correspond to the films, you may want to send out reminders and assign reading before each meeting. We also recommend alerting group members to sensitive content in upcoming films so that they can determine whether or not they feel comfortable participating in the discussion.
- **Technology:** If your group meets in person, make sure that you have the equipment necessary to watch the films together. If your group meets online, determine whether you will share your screen during the viewing or ask group members to view the films privately on their own devices. Regardless of how you share the films, we recommend downloading them from the website in advance to avoid any network or streaming issues during your meeting.
- **Group Guidelines:** If your group has pre-existing guidelines, you might want to spend time together reviewing them before beginning to work through this resource. If your group does not have pre-existing guidelines, you may want to discuss expectations around maintaining confidentiality, practicing active listening, and caring for one another in moments of sensitivity or emotional distress. (A sample set of group guidelines have been included in this guide for your reference.)



- **Safety and Referrals:** The introduction to the Reflection Guide contains important content and safety notes, including information on safe viewing practices and additional resources on suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention. We strongly recommend that you review this content in advance. You may also want to orient your group members to this content before you begin working through the resource together. In addition, we recommend that you check with your parish or diocese to see whether an updated referral list is available. (For more information, see the Creating a Referral List section of this guide.)



USING THIS RESOURCE IN AN ECUMENICAL SETTING

When A Loved One Dies By Suicide is a resource created by and for Catholics. As such, it reflects the teaching and doctrines of the Catholic Church. While the personal stories of suicide loss and healing will resonate with a broader Christian audience, not all content may be suitable for ecumenical settings. In particular, please note that the sixth film, “What the Catholic Church Teaches about Suicide,” contains content related to the following subjects:

- The judgment and mercy of Christ
- Suicide as addressed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church
- The doctrine of purgatory

You may want to review the sixth film in advance and determine whether the content aligns with your denomination or tradition before sharing it with your small group or ministry team members.

If you would like to present alternate content, the following books contain a variety of theological and pastoral perspectives on suicide:

- *Preventing Suicide: A Handbook for Pastors, Chaplains and Pastoral Counselors*, Karen Mason
- *What Does the Bible Say About Suicide?* James T. Clemons
- *Grieving a Suicide: A Loved One’s Search for Comfort, Answers, and Hope*, Albert Y. Hsu



TALKING ABOUT SUICIDE

The way we talk about mental health challenges and suicide matters. Often, the language that is used perpetuates negative stereotypes and contributes to the stigma surrounding these realities. But Christ calls us to be gracious and compassionate in our speech. As a facilitator, you are encouraged to invite the members of your group to join you in fulfilling this calling by loving one another in word as well as action.

Here are a few guidelines to keep in mind as you prepare to open up discussions about mental health challenges, suicide, and suicide loss:

- Instead of using the phrase “committed suicide,” we recommend using the phrase “died by suicide,” or “took his/her own life.” The word *commit* implies that suicide is a crime or a sin. While suicide is a serious matter, the Church recognizes that psychological distress and mental health challenges are mitigating factors. Church teaching emphasizes Christ’s abundant mercy, and it is best for our language to do the same. (If you would like more information on this topic, the sixth film in this resource contains a helpful discussion with Bishop John Dolan.)
- When talking about suicide attempts, we recommend avoiding descriptions like “failed attempt,” “incomplete/completed suicide,” or “unsuccessful/successful suicide attempt,” as these descriptions imply that suicide should be thought of in terms of success or achievement. Instead, try using simple and direct phrasing such as “tried to take his/her own life,” or “survived a suicide attempt.”
- If your group is working through this resource for educational purposes, you might want to invite group members to think about the effects of using the term *suicide* gratuitously or out of context. How does someone who has lost a loved one to suicide feel when they hear people referring to something as a “suicide mission” or “political suicide?” Ask the group if they can think of alternatives to these and other common expressions.
- For more information on the topic of language and suicide, we recommend the online guide, “Communicating about suicide,” available from [Mindframe](#).



In addition to these guidelines, you may want to take some time to discuss the meaning and intent behind the term *acceptance*. This word is used throughout the resource to refer to the process of learning to live with the grief of suicide loss while also making room for healing, growth, and other positive life experiences. Acceptance does not mean “being okay with” a loved one’s death. Your group members may want to talk about the language they do and don’t find helpful when it comes to healing.

Reflecting on the language that we use when speaking about suicide may seem like a small step, but it is one of the ways that we can decrease stigma and accompany one another through grief and healing. Your community will be greatly blessed by your willingness to serve as a facilitator and invite them into this reflection.



FACILITATION BEST PRACTICES

Encourage voluntary participation: This resource deals with sensitive and painful subjects, and group members may not feel comfortable engaging with all the reflection questions. Please present all questions as *invitations*, and respect individuals who choose not to share. Group members should also be given the option to leave the room or minimize their screens before the film is viewed in order to avoid emotionally triggering content. Please read the description for each film out loud and allow all members a moment to decide if they will join in the viewing.

Acknowledge reality: It can be helpful to acknowledge particular dynamics or circumstances during a meeting. For example, if there is a distracting noise outside, a technical difficulty, or a misunderstanding during a discussion, stop and name it before attempting to address the concern.

Embrace the collective wisdom in the room: As a facilitator, you do not need to be an expert. When questions are raised in the midst of discussion, you can always invite others to share their thoughts, insights, and experiences. This approach can serve as a reminder to everyone that you are all on this learning and healing journey together. Never underestimate the power of the words, “I don’t know.”

Practice grounding: It may be appropriate to use a grounding or container exercise in order to help group members place emotional boundaries around particular discussions, stories, or films that have been heavy or difficult. You can also use breathing exercises and prayer to help everyone process emotional content. For examples of grounding and container exercises, please refer to the Content and Safety Notes section of the Reflection Guide.

Maintain confidentiality: Confidentiality is essential for establishing trust and a sense of safety in your group. Personal stories should never be shared outside of the group without permission. However, it is important to communicate that if you believe a group member is a danger to themselves or others, you will contact the appropriate emergency services. Please direct group members in need of professional or medical services to a health care provider, counselor, or mental health service agency. (For information on identifying these resources in advance, see the Creating a Referral List section of this guide.)



Create a safe space and respect differences: The following tips can help create an atmosphere of safety and respect.

- Give undivided attention to each person speaking.
- Briefly share your own experiences.
- Thank group members for sharing.
- Encourage participation from everyone.
- Respect that group members may not want to share at any given time.
- Be patient when presenting the group with a question, and make time for silence and reflection.
- Refer to the group guidelines as needed.
- Encourage the group to consider and explore different opinions.
- Gently alert individuals who may be speaking longer than the time can accommodate.
- If side chats occur, remind group members to allow each person to finish speaking without interruption or distraction.
- If the person speaking goes off topic, acknowledge their contribution and then guide the group back to the main point by asking for additional thoughts.

Additional facilitation tips for this resource: Carefully review all information in the Content and Safety Notes section of the Reflection Guide prior to your first group meeting. It contains crisis information, safe viewing guidelines, prayers and grounding exercises, and recommended additional resources. Also, please note that the second film references substance use and paranoid schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is a highly stigmatized, often misunderstood diagnosis. Although popular media tends to portray the experience of hearing voices in an overwhelmingly negative light, research reveals that there is actually great diversity in voice-hearing. Not all voices are “terrible” or harmful, and hearing voices is not always a sign of mental illness. It is important that we take the time to listen to an individual’s story in order to understand their lived experience.



SAMPLE GROUP GUIDELINES

The following guidelines are designed to help create an atmosphere of safety and respect. We suggest that you read through them together during your first group meeting, and then discuss whether specific guidelines need to be amended, deleted, or added.

- 1. Don't Interrupt**
Allow each person time to finish speaking before responding.
- 2. Share the Air**
Ensure everyone has the opportunity to participate by respecting the time available. The leader has permission to redirect the discussion if it gets off track.
- 3. Choose Wonder**
If you disagree with something shared, don't immediately give voice to criticism or rejection. Instead, allow yourself to wonder what led this person to these thoughts/beliefs. Make room for others to offer opposing views and diverse experiences.
- 4. Respect Confidentiality**
What is shared in the room stays in the room.*
- 5. Do Not Give Advice**
What works for you may not work for someone else. Respect the journeys, experiences, and processes of each group member, and do not attempt to fix, correct, or save anyone.
- 6. Exhibit Sensitivity**
This resource deals with difficult and painful subjects which can affect participants emotionally. Decide in advance how you will respond to one another in these sensitive moments. Some options include giving group members permission to take a break and step outside, asking them what they need in the moment, and offering comfort items like tissues, a blanket, or a warm beverage.

You are encouraged to view the experiences, the pain, and the journeys of your fellow participants as Holy Ground—a place to walk with gentleness, reverence, and respect.

*Note: Participants' stories should not be shared outside the group. However, if a participant is a danger to themselves or others, emergency services should be contacted.



CREATING A REFERRAL LIST

When A Loved One Dies By Suicide is a reflective and pastoral resource, and should not be regarded as a substitute for medical or therapeutic advice. Additionally, Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries and CMHM are unable to recommend mental health professionals or services in your area. For this reason, we suggest that parishes and mental health ministries interested in using this resource compile a referral list in advance.

What is a referral list? It's a list of qualified mental health professionals and services in your area. If a community member is seeking counseling, therapy, or another form of mental health care, a referral list can help them in their search.

How do you create a referral list? You might want to start by checking with your parish or diocese to see whether a list already exists. If it doesn't, we suggest that you reach out to trusted mental health professionals in your faith community for their recommendations. You can also connect with other local parishes to see if they have referral lists they are willing to share. Finally, you can search online for resources in your area. (Keep in mind that medical and government websites may contain helpful information.) Once you have identified a few mental health professionals, make sure that you do the following:

- Check out their licensure/registration to ensure that they are complying with all applicable professional and government regulations.
- Ask them if they are willing to be on your list, and inquire about their availability to accept new clients.
- Update your list once or twice a year to ensure accuracy.

What kinds of mental health professionals and services should be included in a referral list? Every list will look a little different, depending on what is or isn't available in your area. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- psychologists
- individual counselors and therapists (Christian or secular)
- counseling groups/practices
- peer support groups and caregiver/family support groups
- emergency service numbers
- suicide crisis lines
- substance use resources



It's okay if you can only locate a few of these resources. Options will vary based on location, and not every resource will be available to every community. The important thing is to have a few ideas about where to send people for help if they ask. (Don't forget that many services can also be accessed through family doctors.)

[CMHM](#) has additional information on compiling a referral list, along with a template application form that can be completed by mental health professionals who wish to be included in diocesan referral lists. (Under the Resources tab in the navigation bar, select "Resources by Topic" and then "Creating a Mental Health Professionals Resource List.")





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