



Suicide among young men: The Church as a community of carers



The Church of Scotland



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Introduction: Suicide in young men

Suicide is a leading cause of death among young men in Scotland. A young death is always one of the most devastating events for a family, and when that death results from suicide the tragedy is all the harder to bear. In Scotland, men make up the largest proportion of young people taking their own lives (The peak rate among both men and women is in the 35 - 44 age group; among men the 25 - 34 age group has the second highest rate. The overall male to female ratio is about 3:1). Many churches struggle to know how to deal with issues around suicide.

Life is a gift from God; it is not ours to give away. We are persons-in-relation, and have a responsibility for the lives of those around us. Suicide is a tragedy, but it is a tragedy which belongs to the whole community. The Christian community never accepts the argument that 'others would be better off without me.' Rather, it insists that "the community cannot be complete without you.", because we are creatures loved beyond all measure by a God who is love. While we recognise that people of faith may struggle with suicide ideation, attempt or completion, we can be assured that that love which brought us into existence will not abandon us when the storms of life make our pains unbearable.

Such a theological position enables us to see the necessary types of theological understanding and pastoral responses we will require to minister faithfully to people who are threatened by suicide or who find themselves having to deal with its aftermath.



Suicide Prevention

Doing all that is possible to prevent the tragedy of death by suicide is an important aspect of the work of the church, concerned as we are to share new life and new hope on our journey through life. For us, as Christians, it is our faith, as well as our care and compassion, which calls us to 'be there' for, and to help and support those who are contemplating taking their own life.

For the person thinking of taking their own life, someone being there with them can, literally, mean the difference between life and death. A caring presence can bring strength and hope through even the darkest of times:

- **The presence of the church**
- **The presence of God**
- **The presence of others**

By being there, with and for a person who is struggling with painful feelings, who feels no longer able to cope with circumstances and who has lost any sense of hope, we may be able to prevent him or her from acting on suicidal thoughts or feelings and listening to their cry for help.

It is possible to undertake training to become more able at supporting others who feel desperate or suicidal. Becoming aware of the range of organisations – national as well as local – that exist to support people through times of pain and distress, is a very useful tool in suicide prevention. This leaflet includes a list of useful websites, giving details of some of the organisations out there who can help. Many of these organisations offer free training in issues related to suicide.

Bereavement: Dealing with Life after a Suicide

A death from suicide arouses a range of responses in families and friends of the loved one who has gone. Professionals involved can experience many of the same emotions, particularly if they have been involved with mental health issues prior to the event. Ministers and other pastoral workers are in the highly stressful and demanding situation of having to provide love and bereavement care while they are coping with these emotions within themselves.

The church often becomes involved after a suicide and it is just as important to look at how the church, in its parishes and communities, deals with suicide and with those bereaved by suicide. Bereavement by suicide does not necessarily take longer to heal than any other bereavement. However, there can be some questions in the aftermath of a suicide which make coping with that particular bereavement difficult:

- **Why did this happen?**
- **Why could we/I not stop it?**
- **Why did we/I not know this tragedy was going to happen?**

Grief may be mingled with feelings such as:

- **Anger**
- **Helplessness**
- **Guilt**
- **Confusion**
- **Puzzlement**
- **Shame**

Added to these emotional stressors are the involvement of police, the need for a post mortem and the involvement of the Procurator Fiscals Office, and, for those in the care of the Mental Health Services there may be a medical Critical Incident Review.

Survivors of traumatic events often report that positive outcomes can follow negative experiences. For those bereaved by suicide these can be as varied as the campaigning for better health services, or an improvement to existing services after a suicide, or the donation of body parts to transplant services, or the chance to speak at a funeral or memorial service.





Conclusion

There are undoubtedly many factors which contribute to this tragic situation: drug or alcohol abuse, a sense of alienation, a perceived lack of self-worth or purpose in life, or adverse socio-economic circumstances. Added to these is the lack of opportunity or encouragement for young men to express their emotions.

Any suicide, but particularly that of a young person, has a profound effect on the community to which the church seeks to minister. To our shame, the church in Scotland, at both a local and institutional level, has not always dealt with suicide with sufficient compassion. Many clergy report that dealing with a suicide is among the most stressful pastoral situations which they face.

While much of the pastoral care carried out by the church or the work that a local church does among young people may not be seen as being explicitly aimed at “suicide prevention”, it is undoubtedly true that providing a safe and secure space for young people to interact and to express themselves can be invaluable in this regard. In addition, the church family facilitates inter-generational contact in a way that few other institutions do.

In his Gospel, John records the words of the Good Shepherd:
I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

As shepherds of the local population in which we serve as a community of carers, suicide prevention and appropriate bereavement care must be our concern. To this end, Kirk Sessions are encouraged to consider and discuss some of the issues around suicide among young men in Scotland.

List of useful websites

General Websites and Phone Numbers with support for the suicidal:

Breathing Space:

www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk

Call: 0800 83 85 87

A free and confidential helpline targeted at people experiencing low mood or depression or extreme worry and in need of someone to talk to, offers support through its telephone helpline. Target group men 15 - 40, but will help anyone who calls. Breathing Space also provides information on its website and directs people to sources of help and support.

Beating the Blues:

www.beatingtheblues.co.uk

Self help based on CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) lines, NHS sponsored.

Choose Life:

www.chooselife.net

The national strategy and action plan to prevent suicide in Scotland, offers training in suicide prevention skills. Experienced facilitators offer these courses free of charge, and are keen to provide training to groups such as Presbyteries or Elders' meetings.

Samaritans:

www.samaritans.org

Call: 08457 90 90 90

A long-established and well-known provider of telephone support 24 hours every day, also offers support via email, text or through face-to-face listening. The phone line is available for all issues, mental distress, and suicidal feelings.

Parentline Scotland:

Call: 0808 800 2233

Confidential helpline run by Children 1st.

Specifically with bereavement by suicide in mind:

Petal Support:

www.petalsupport.com

Provide practical and emotional support, advocacy, group support and counselling for the families and friends of murder and suicide victims.

Survivors of Bereavement by suicide:

www.uk-sobs.org.uk

Call: 0844 561 6855

Survivors of Bereavement by suicide.

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland:

www.crusescotland.org.uk

Call: 0845 600 2227

All bereavement counselling but in some areas has specialist help for bereavement by suicide.

Victim Support Scotland:

www.victimsupportsco.org.uk

Call: 0845 603 9213

Support for victims of crime but also take referrals from procurator fiscal of those bereaved by suicide, or for whom the death of a family member is under police investigation.

Childline:

www.childline.org.uk

Call: Helpline 0800 1111

Children and young people can access help and support by telephone or via website.

Young Minds:

www.youngminds.org.uk

Call: 0808 802 5544

Website contains information for young people, parents or carers and professionals. Parents' helpline available for all who are concerned about a child or young person.



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