

A BIBLICAL COUNSELORS QUICK REFERENCE TO SUICIDE PREVENTION

YOUR GUIDE TO LOVE, LISTEN, LAUNCH
AND LEAN INTO A SUICIDE THREAT



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INTRODUCTION

Note: I make no claims for originality. You would find these ideas in various forms in both secular (minus reference to spiritual components) and Biblical counseling literatures. I am just hopeful to give a quick and easily accessible reference. Sometimes even the seasoned counselor or other soul care worker who had not had a suicidal threat in some time needs a ready reference to stimulate her/him to action.

Whether someone trusts you enough to reach out for help, or you pick up on something that concerns you and makes you wonder if another person is considering suicide, what do you do next? It is a great weight of responsibility and it is a heavy emotional experience. So, here is a simple plan that should be easy to remember or to quickly grasp for the person encountering this challenge for the first time. Remember these four simple words: **Love, Listen, Launch and Lean**. Put them where you see them readily and regularly think through how to do each step when confronted with the threat of suicide.

LOVE THE PERSON

The natural inclination is the withdraw and not pursue after all, potential suicide can be frightening

Biblical Counselors, that includes ordinary believers (Rom. 15:14), start out directing the hurting person to God by saying, "Let me pray for you. I know this is a tough time for you?" Seldom will a person object. Then pray in their hearing asking God for wisdom for this conversation and for the person's processing their hurt or disappointment. Express a heart of compassion to engage as you pray. Suicide is generally a decision to which people talk themselves into. It is contemplated over time as more and more they conclude there is no way out of their dilemma. In the process, they throw off warning signs. Early on they want someone to pick up on where they are (cries for help) and help them stop the spiral. Some individuals verbalize their suicidal thinking. Others (most) play it close to the vest, but none the less leak symptoms. Since we believe in a God who values every life, we honor God by loving enough to pursue the suicidal person and engage them in prayer and conversation.

We follow the heart of God who teaches our suicidal friend and us:

- We are image bearers for God. (Gen 1:27; Jas 3:9)
- We are to honor the temple of the Holy Spirit. (1Cor 6:19)
- Murder is condemned in Scripture. (sixth Commandment)
- God is sovereign over all life and can be trusted. (Job 1:21)
- Jesus is the empathic savior (Heb. 4:15)
- Suicide is selfish and the opposite of Christ's way of life (Phil. 2:3-4) See also, Gal. 5:20, James 3:13-14)

LISTEN TO THE PERSON:

Other than calling the police to restrain someone as a last resort, listening is the most important thing you can do to help the one teetering on the edge of suicide.

Listening has several dimensions. First you listen with your ears. Listen to their story. One of the reasons people become suicidal is because they feel no one has been hearing them and their pain. Second, listen with a filter. Look for disappointments, discouragements, disillusionment, and frustrations and longings (what is this person not able to achieve—mate, upgraded job, appreciation on the job, respect from family). Listen with your eyes. Show identification. We have all had these issues one way or another, but do not say “I know how you feel”. Listen with a touch (of course appropriate). Just a gentle pat on the hand says, I am connected to you and expresses love.

Listening for the warning signs is essential. They include this non-exhaustive list:

- Talk of suicide as a topic— “You seem to have an immediate interest in the topic. Is anything you want to share.
- Common phrase you may hear is-- “I wish I had never been born.”
- A focus on death and the ramifications thereof--terminal illness, graveyards, preparation like wills, where parents or family is buried— “I wonder what it is like to pass over”
- Dispossessing of important possessions—like a pet or a favorite car
- Unexpected shopping for life insurance
- Complete change of lifestyle, often radical
- If the person has been down in the dumps for some time, and suddenly seems euphoric

LAUNCH INTO AN ACTION PLAN

A. ASSESS THE RISK

With the above you do a preliminary assessment of the level of risk.

[Check online where you can find several simple instruments to help assess risk]

B. SOLICIT A PROMISE

If working in a formal counseling setting, it is a good policy to have a suicide prevention covenant that you ask the person to read and sign making a commitment to live by the covenant. This can be a critical instrument. If the person refuses to sign the covenant, it is wise to ask them to call the police and have them taken to the emergency room.

C. DEVISE A PLAN

- Contingency plan and in the form of a written covenant--help the person to plan just how they will keep the covenant say at 1 a.m. when he/she has not been able to sleep, and the thoughts are becoming intense. Who, for example, is a pre-arranged person to call? Again, this covenant should be formalized and signed.
- Routine plan—When and how with whom will they check in daily until the next appointment. Are there some significant others whom they will allow into their life daily? Family, church associates, etc.
- Have a biblical reading plan and a specific way for the person to interact with it. This writing assignment should be an important part of the next engagement with the person.
- It may be important to see this person multiple times a week along with phone/text/email contact with you or others who agree to be a part of the counselee's team.

D. ENCOURAGE ENGAGING APPROPRIATE HELP: MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL, PASTOR AND COMMUNITY

- It is always wise to consider a physical component, so refer to a medical doctor. If you are lay person, even a lay counselor, you may want to refer them to a staff counselor or talk with your supervisor.
- Ask the person's permission to reach out to a pastor, or better yet, volunteer to go with them to see the pastor.
- Coach the person how to reach out to the family. This be the beginning of healing and a source of strength. Most likely there are family issues involved in the threat.
- Connect to the church. While statistics vary, the likelihood of suicide diminishes drastically for people who attend church even only occasionally.¹

LEAN INTO THE HARD WORK OF FOLLOW-UP

The crisis may be over, but now the hard work begins.

- 1) Schedule twice weekly counseling for four to six weeks
- 2) Clarify their spiritual reality
- 3) Gain a commitment to counseling for as long as it takes to uncover and deal with issues
- 4) Ask for a compressive PDI to be completed
- 5) All along the way watch for self-recrimination as a result of the suicide threat
- 6) Guide this individual into church fellowship
- 7) Coach into some form of ministry

¹ Recent query of Google, Church attendance and suicide, yielded multiple reports all with the same report—even occasional attendance at church lowers suicide risk.

MY COVENANT FOR LIFE

Recognizing that God is the giver of life and that every life is precious in His sight. I make this covenant this _____ day of _____ in the year of our Lord _____ with God and my counselor that I will not take my own life. If I find myself entertaining thoughts of suicide, I will immediately take one or more of the following actions as necessary to preserve my life.

- I will repent before God: "Lord, I am not honoring you entertaining these thoughts. Rather than trusting you to see me through my difficulties, I am looking for an escape with no regard for you and others who love me. Help me right now to choose a pathway to life. Amen"
- Call my agreed upon support system until I reach someone who will pray with me and talk me back on to the way of life. If I am not regaining control of my thoughts, I will tell my contact and will continue talking until they can send someone to assist me (counselor, construct a list here of all contacts)

 Person _____ Phone number _____

- Get with someone face-to-face ASAP (Counselor, Pastor, Friend)
- If I cannot reach anyone, I will go to the emergency room at the hospital or call the police (911) and ask them to take me.
- 1-800-SUICIDE -- 24-hour suicide prevention line that can be called from anywhere in the U.S.

Signature _____ Date _____

Witness _____ Date _____