

Reminders for Suicide Postvention in the Time of Coronavirus

Due to the pandemic, we may experience confusion and uncertainty on how to continue suicide postvention efforts. Although COVID-19 physical contact limitations can impact some postvention strategies, the good news is that there are *many* ways we can continue to support suicide loss survivors. The grief journey following suicide loss is complex regardless of when it occurs – and because of that, we must absolutely ensure that we prioritize suicide postvention during this time.

If we are unable to connect physically, how can we support suicide loss survivors?

Connect By Phone

- Reach out several times a week
- Leave messages letting the loss survivor know you are thinking about them and are here for them
- Offer your full attention; focus on listening by asking open-ended questions
- Provide an emotional presence; make room to simply sit quietly on the phone together
- Send messages of support via text

Connect “In Person”

- Determine what the loss survivor needs help with and assist with tangible, supportive tasks
 - You can drop off prepared foods, groceries, “self-care” kits, etc. without physical contact
- Send notes of support, care packages, and resources via US Mail
- Walk or jog together at a distance
- Utilize technological options (e.g., Facetime, Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts, Facebook, WhatsApp) to video connect
- Engage in a distraction together
 - Play a game simultaneously (e.g., set an appointment to log on at the same time to play a video game or a web-based game)
 - Do a hobby (e.g., knit, do the same workout) or watch a television show or movie together over the phone or virtually

Connect By Honoring

- Visit the grave; you can pay respects with physical distancing in mind
- Help the loss survivor establish a memorial place and/or a symbol to help honor the person who died
 - Having a designated place in the home (e.g., yard, patio, converted bedroom) can assist with grieving rituals and reflection

Reminders for Grief Conversations over the Phone

- Pacing: Increased rate of speech can suggest impatience, inattentiveness, or anxiety – remember to speak slowly
- Tone: Use variation in tone and expression of warmth to express empathy via your voice
- Emotion: Without visual cues, assessing emotions can be tough; offer reflection, check in, and provide validation
 - Example: “I can hear the (anger, sadness, relief, confusion, frustration) in your voice – is that accurate? That makes sense...many loss survivors feel the same.”
- Responsive: Before you provide information and knowledge, ask questions to ensure you understand what the loss survivor needs and/or how they are doing
 - Even if the loss survivor states they appreciate the call and don’t need anything, let them know that you will be calling back to check-in on them to continue being there.
 - Needs change over the grieving journey – be sure to be there regardless of whether the loss survivor asked or needed something last call.
- Awareness: Express the difficulty that comes with being “physically” separated; use the notes above to open up conversations on how to support moving forward.

Ways to Help Connect Suicide Loss Survivors with Resources

- Research suicide loss survivor websites and share the resources you find
 - Uniting for Suicide Postvention (USPV)
 - <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/postvention/>
 - Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)
 - <https://www.taps.org/>
 - American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)
 - <https://afsp.org/find-support/ive-lost-someone/>
 - American Association of Suicidology (AAS)
 - <https://suicidology.org/resources/suicide-loss-survivors/>
 - Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC)
 - <https://www.sprc.org/>
- Contact local suicide loss survivor groups to connect the loss survivor with local community resources (e.g., <https://afsp.org/find-support/ive-lost-someone/find-a-support-group/>)
- Find ways the loss survivor can connect with other loss survivors online

References: Baile, W. F., Buckman, R., Lenzi, R., Glober, G., Beale, E. A., Kudelka, A. P. (2000). SPIKES — A six-step protocol for delivering bad news: Application to the patient with cancer. *The Oncologist*, 5(4), 302-311. <https://doi.org/10.1634/theoncologist.5-4-302>; Fisher, M. Z. (2020, March 19). *Offering sympathy from a distance in the time of coronavirus*. Next Avenue. <https://www.nextavenue.org/sympathy-from-a-distance-coronavirus/>; Reisman, A. B. & Stevens, D. L. (Ed.). (2002). *Telephone medicine: A guide for the practicing physician*. American College of Physicians—American Society of Internal Medicine.; Way, D. & Haley, E. (2020). *COVID19 tips and tricks: Breaking bad news via tele-medicine* [PowerPoint Presentation].