

Let's be honest: life can sometimes feel overwhelming. The loss of a job or a relationship, trouble in school, a serious mental or physical illness, a divorce, or the death of a loved one can happen to anyone. Life events like these can leave us feeling unworthy, abandoned, or isolated. The last two years of living through a global pandemic has only increased such feelings for many of us.

Our faith community seeks to be a caring community focused on helping one another and loving our neighbors, especially in difficult times. Through connections within our own community, we find strength for each day. Each of us is here for a reason and has a God-given role in life, regardless of our current circumstances. Moment by moment, it is important to remember there is help, hope, and reasons to live.

Whoever you are, whatever you are facing, God loves you. God knows your struggles and failures, as well as your joys and triumphs. Even when you walk through the valleys of the shadows, God is with you. In the times when it feels like God is far away or doesn't hear our prayers, God gives us people who can help—friends, loved ones, co-workers, others in your faith community, your faith leader(s), and clinical professionals, such as counselors, therapists, and doctors. These people can be God's heart and God's listening ear when we feel most troubled or alone. If you, or someone you know has lost hope, is feeling completely alone, or that life doesn't matter, *reach out* for help. Let others help. This is especially important if someone is experiencing thoughts of suicide or wanting to die.

Our Faith Community Can Make a Difference: A Story*

Deborah had struggled with depression for much of her life, although she had managed to stay active and involved. However, after the birth of her first child, Deborah went into a depression so severe that she couldn't leave the house. Her husband Dave called their minister to say he was worried that Deborah's depression was getting worse. Based on what David shared, the minister said she was concerned that Deborah might be suicidal and urged him to take her to the emergency department. Then the minister asked to speak to Deborah. After talking with the minister for a while, Deborah finally agreed to go to the hospital, where the minister joined them.

Following an evaluation, Deborah entered into a program of intensive psychiatric care that was appropriate for a mother of a newborn. The doctors and nurses worked to regulate her medication and help her talk about her feelings and her fears. She was then able to resume her life with the help of outpatient treatment.

What happened with the church was equally important. With Deborah's permission, the minister shared with the congregation that she was in treatment and encouraged church members to help as they would have had if she was dealing with a physical illness. They helped Deborah care for her baby, brought meals for the family, and wrote notes. They included Deborah and her family in prayers and when she regained her health, she was given a warm welcome back into the community.

That was 12 years ago. While Deborah still has occasional "blue" times, she has never gone back to the severity of that time. Nor has the church gone back to its previous silence about mental and emotional illness. One could say new life came in all kinds of ways. (*From the experiences of a faith community leader)

How Can Our Faith Community Help in Suicide Prevention?

Studies show persons experiencing mental health problems or emotional distress frequently turn to faith communities and their leaders for help. You and your faith community can help in many ways:

- **Know the facts.** Suicide does not discriminate; it can touch people of all ages and classes; all racial, ethnic, and religious groups. However, suicide is also usually preventable, and your faith community can play a role. There is hope and help.
- **Talk about mental illness.** Help your faith members understand mental health problems as being real and treatable in the same way that physical health problems are. Speak and pray about mental illness just as you would about physical illnesses, such as cancer, heart disease, or diabetes.
- **Promote connectedness.** Fellowship groups, choirs, service work, worship—all are ways people connect in faith communities. Such connections let people know they are not alone and that they are cared for.
- **Share "stories of hope."** Faith communities share stories—from the Bible, the Koran, or other sacred texts—of how people have overcome adversity and experienced God's presence in times of struggle and hardship. They also share the stories of their own lives—their faith and courage—that can give hope and strength to others.

Resources for help

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (24 hours): 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Faith.Hope.Life. is an initiative of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention: <http://www.faith-hope-life.org>