



# UNDERSTANDING Suicide

## WARNING SIGNS AND PREVENTION

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**W**hen Kevin was 16 years old, his parents went through a divorce. Around the same time, he discontinued the use of his epilepsy medication, which had helped stabilize his mood. Without knowing that he had a bipolar disorder, he began experiencing paranoia, debilitating mania, and severe depression. Medications did not seem to help. It reached a point that he felt so tired of everything, he decided to end his life without letting others know of his intentions.

Kevin recounts the day he attempted to take his life: “I was crying. I was just so tired, so emotionally drained. I was just looking at people, wanting someone, anyone, to say, ‘Are you OK?’ As much as I wanted that, I was hearing these voices [in my head] saying, ‘You have to die.’ . . . The whole time begging myself not to [go through with it], but the voices were too strong, I just couldn’t fight them.”<sup>1</sup>

Tragically, no one noticed his distress. Convinced that no one cared for him, he made the attempt—but miraculously survived.

Can we feel at least some of his overwhelming distress and desperate, silent cry for help?

Suicide is one of the most difficult trials in mortality, both for those suffering with suicidal thoughts and for surviving family members. Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles stated: “In my judgment, there is no more difficult time for a family than when a loved one takes his or her own life. Suicide is a devastating family experience.”<sup>2</sup> Considering the serious nature of this trial,

let us discuss (1) what we know about suicide, including its warning signs and things we can do to help prevent it; (2) what surviving family members and communities can do; and (3) what we all need to do to strengthen our hope and faith in Christ so that we do not despair.

### Understanding Suicide

Over 800,000 people end their lives by suicide each year worldwide.<sup>3</sup> That means someone in the world is ending his or her life every 40 seconds. The actual number is likely even higher because suicide is a sensitive matter and illegal in some countries and therefore underreported. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among people between 15 and 29 years of age. In most countries, suicide rates are the highest among people over 70 years of age. Directly or indirectly, suicide affects a large segment of our society.

### Warning Signs

When life's challenges feel beyond our capacity to cope, we can experience extreme stress. When emotional distress feels unbearable, a person's thinking can become clouded and can lead them to feel as if death is the only

option. They may feel that no one can help, which can lead to social isolation and further aggravate the distress and feeling of being stuck and hopeless, eventually leading to thinking that suicide is the only option.

When someone shows *any* of the following serious warning signs,<sup>4</sup> we should immediately get help from a mental health provider or emergency services such as police:

- Making threats to hurt or kill themselves
- Seeking for ways or means to kill themselves
- Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide

The following signs may present a less urgent situation, but we should not hesitate to reach out and get help for the person showing any of these:

- Expressing hopelessness and loss of purpose in living
- Showing rage or anger or seeking revenge
- Behaving recklessly
- Feeling trapped
- Increasing their alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from friends, family, or society
- Feeling anxiety or agitation or having dramatic mood changes
- Struggling to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Feeling that they are a burden to others

Not everyone who tries to commit suicide lets others know of their intentions, but a majority show warning signs such as these. So take these signs seriously!

Even if professional help is not readily available, the power of truly caring friends and family cannot be overstated.

### Prevention

When someone is suicidal, family and friends play a vital role. As Alma taught, we must “bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light; . . . mourn with those who mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:8, 9).

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Here are some helpful things family and friends can do:

*Reach out and listen with love.* As Elder Ballard counseled, “There is nothing more powerful than the arm of love that can be put around those who are struggling.”<sup>5</sup> “We must see them . . . through Heavenly Father’s eyes,” taught Elder Dale G. Renlund of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. “Only then can we sense the Savior’s caring concern for them. . . . This expanded perspective will open our hearts to the disappointments, fears, and heartaches of others.”<sup>6</sup>

*Help with concrete things.* If the person is going through a crisis affecting his or her safety and basic needs, offer to provide tangible help, but let the person choose to accept it or not. For instance, if someone becomes suicidal due to losing a job, helping them find job openings gives them options to

choose from and helps free them from feeling stuck.

*Ask if they are considering suicide.* When you are worried that someone is distressed and showing warning signs of suicide, ask if they are considering suicide. Doing so may feel uncomfortable, but it’s best to find out by directly asking if they are considering suicide. It may open the door for the person to talk about their troubles and concerns.

Examples of such questions may be “That sounds like a lot for anyone to handle. Are you thinking of suicide?” or “With all those pains you are experiencing, I’m wondering if you are considering suicide.” If they are not suicidal, they will likely let you know.

If you sense they are not open with you about suicidal thoughts, stay close to the promptings of the Spirit to know what to do. You may be prompted to simply stay with



them until they can open up to you.

*Stay with the person and get help.* If someone lets you know that they are suicidal, stay with the person and have them talk to you about what is troubling them. If they talk about specific methods and timing for suicide, help the person contact a crisis hotline or local psychiatric emergency department.

### **Reactions to a Suicide**

Whether they showed warning signs or not, some people do take their lives. When faced with the devastating experience of a loved one's suicide, surviving family members and friends often experience profound, intense, and complex grief. Some of those reactions may include the following:

- Shame and a sense of stigma
- Shock and disbelief

- Anger, relief, or guilt
- Hiding the cause of death
- Social isolation and disruption in family relationships
- Active and even obsessive involvement with suicide-prevention efforts
- A consuming desire to understand why
- Feeling abandoned and rejected
- Blaming the deceased, self, others, and God
- Increased thoughts of suicide or feelings of self-destructiveness
- Increased stress during holiday seasons and the anniversary of the death<sup>7</sup>

### **What Surviving Families and Communities Can Do**

*Refrain from judging.* While suicide is a serious matter, Elder Ballard also reminds us: "Obviously, we do not know the full

circumstances surrounding every suicide. Only the Lord knows all the details, and he it is who will judge our actions here on earth. When [the Lord] does judge us, I feel he will take all things into consideration: our genetic and chemical makeup, our mental state, our intellectual capacity, the teachings we have received, the traditions of our fathers, our health, and so forth.”<sup>8</sup>

*Allow and respect each person’s unique grieving process.* People will grieve in different ways, as their relationship with the deceased person is different than everyone else’s. So validate and honor each person’s way of experiencing grief.

When loved ones part from us, strong and even overwhelming emotions can overcome us. Experiencing grief does not mean a lack of faith, however. The Savior said, “Thou shalt live together in love, insomuch that thou shalt weep for the loss of them that die” (D&C 42:45). Grief is a token of our love for our deceased loved ones and what the relationship meant to us.

*Ask for help.* As you grieve, things can feel overwhelming. Reaching out for help can provide sacred opportunities for others to love and serve you. Allowing them to help can be healing and strengthening not only for you but also for them.

*Stay connected.* Some people mourn privately and can sometimes become isolated, so stay connected with your families and friends. Reach out periodically to your grieving family members, relatives, and friends, and offer help because they may not come to you.

*Rely on the Savior.* Ultimately, the Savior is the source of healing and peace. “His Atonement . . . provides the opportunity to call upon Him who has experienced all of our mortal infirmities to give us the strength to bear the burdens of mortality. He knows of our anguish, and He is there for us. Like the good Samaritan, when He finds us wounded at the wayside, He will bind up our wounds and care for us (see Luke 10:34).”<sup>9</sup>

Let us realize that we all need to rely completely on the Lord Jesus Christ and His Atonement as we seek to do our

part. In that humble recognition, let us seek to understand our families and neighbors in distress, reach out to them in love, and cultivate together greater faith and trust in the Savior, who will return and “wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain” (Revelation 21:4). ■

#### NOTES

1. Kevin Hines, in Amanda Bower, “A Survivor Talks About His Leap,” *Time*, May 24, 2006, Time.com.
2. M. Russell Ballard, in Jason Swenson, “Elder Ballard Offers Comfort and Counsel to Those Affected by Suicide,” *Church News*, Dec. 19, 2014, news.lds.org.
3. See World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative* (2014), 2.
4. See M. David Rudd and others, “Warning Signs for Suicide: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications,” *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2006), 255–62.
5. M. Russell Ballard, in “Sitting on the Bench: Thoughts on Suicide Prevention” (video), lds.org/media-library.
6. Dale G. Renlund, “Through God’s Eyes,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2015, 94.
7. See John R. Jordan, “Is Suicide Bereavement Different? A Reassessment of the Literature,” *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2001), 91–102.
8. M. Russell Ballard, “Suicide: Some Things We Know, and Some We Do Not,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1987, 8.
9. Dallin H. Oaks, “Strengthened by the Atonement of Jesus Christ,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2015, 64.

#### RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Jeffrey R. Holland, “Like a Broken Vessel,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2013, 40–42.
- Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Hope of God’s Light,” *Ensign or Liahona*, May 2013, 70–77.
- Shayne M. Bowen, “Because I Live, Ye Shall Live Also,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2012, 15–17.
- M. Russell Ballard, “Suicide: Some Things We Know, and Some We Do Not,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1987, 6–9.
- Royden G. Derrick, “When Men’s Hearts Fail,” *New Era*, July 1987, 4–7.
- Steven Eastmond, “The Healing Power of Grief,” *Ensign*, Jan. 2014, 62–65.