

Consensus Statement on Suicide and Suicide Prevention from an Interfaith Dialogue

The following statement was developed at an Interfaith Suicide Prevention Dialogue held March 12-13, 2008 in Rockville, Maryland. The dialogue was sponsored by the Suicide Prevention Resource Center and was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The participants included representatives from the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim faith communities.

Life is a sacred gift, and suicide is a desperate act by one who views life as intolerable. Such self-destruction is never condoned, but faith communities increasingly support, rather than condemn, the *person* who contemplates or engages in suicidal behavior. They acknowledge that mental and substance use disorders, along with myriad life stressors, contribute significantly to the risk of suicide. And they reach out compassionately to the person who attempts suicide and to families and friends who have been touched by a suicide or suicide attempt. This increasingly charitable understanding finds agreement between the historic precepts of faith and a contemporary understanding of illness and health. It renders no longer appropriate the practice of harshly judging those who have attempted or died by suicide.

Life is a complex journey viewed through different lenses by different faith groups. But the varied eyes of all our traditions increasingly see the great potential of people of faith to prevent the tragedy of suicide. Spiritual leaders and faith communities, and now the research community, know that practices of faith and spirituality can promote healthy living and provide pathways through human suffering, be it mental, emotional, spiritual, or physical.

Faith communities can work to prevent suicide simply by enhancing many of the activities that are already central to their very nature. They already foster cultures and norms that are life-preserving. By providing perspective and social support to their members and the broader community, they compassionately help people navigate the great struggles of life and find a sustainable sense of hope, meaning, purpose, and even joy in life.

The time is right for the life-enhancing strengths that are the foundations of our most ancient faith traditions to find application in preventing suffering and loss from suicide. Suicide prevention will take a quantum leap forward as members of faith communities gain understanding and the necessary, culturally competent skills to minister to people and communities at heightened risk for suicide and to support the healing of those who have either struggled with suicide themselves or survived the suicide of someone they love.

This statement is included in the forthcoming document:

“The Role of Faith Communities in Preventing Suicide: A Report of an Interfaith Suicide Prevention Dialogue” which will be available on SPRC’s website at www.sprc.org