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**THE SALVATION ARMY**  
INTERNATIONAL POSITIONAL STATEMENT

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# SUICIDE PREVENTION



## STATEMENT OF POSITION

The Salvation Army believes that life is a sacred gift from God and all people are made in the image of God and are of equal intrinsic value. Because of this, every human being must be cherished and nurtured, irrespective of age, gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, health, social status or potential for achievement and contribution to society.

Suicide is the act of intentionally causing one's own death, while attempted suicide is any attempt to end one's own life.<sup>1</sup> Suicide results from a complex interaction of biological, genetic, psychological, sociological and environmental factors, religious beliefs and loss of hope.

The Salvation Army affirms that every possible means should be taken to prevent a person from intentionally taking their own life or

seeking the assistance of someone else to do so.<sup>2</sup> Suicide prevention can and should be supported with a holistic approach. Protective and preventative factors, such as social support and connectedness, medication, counselling and spiritual support, as well as the acknowledgement of the root causes, can play a significant role in suicide prevention.

The Salvation Army extends compassion and support to those who have attempted suicide or those affected by suicide. The Salvation Army rejects the condemnation of people who attempt or complete suicide, and considers the stigma that may fall on surviving family and friends to be unjust.

Suicide prevention is a matter that should be taken seriously by everyone.

<sup>1</sup> APA Dictionary of Psychology  
<https://dictionary.apa.org/> (accessed on 17 September 2023)

<sup>2</sup> The Salvation Army: International Positional Statement: Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide  
<https://www.salvationarmy.org/isjc/ips>



## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Salvation Army was the first movement in the world to provide suicide prevention programmes. In 1907 its Founder, General William Booth, commenced The Salvation Army's work in suicide prevention with an anti-suicide bureau in London.<sup>3</sup>

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that hundreds of thousands of people die from suicide each year, with many more attempting suicide. In numerous countries, suicide predominates in males. Factors that cause someone to consider suicide may include loneliness, isolation, self-sacrifice to fulfil group obligations, and feeling overwhelmed during high levels of stress and frustration. Individuals who are placed under extreme pressure and high expectations are also at risk. Mental disorders (particularly depression, substance abuse, schizophrenia and personality disorders) are associated with more than 90% of all cases of suicide.<sup>4</sup> Effective treatments for most of these conditions have been identified.<sup>5</sup>

Certain individuals are at particular risk of suicidal behaviour. These include, but are not limited to, those with a history of attempted suicide, people experiencing alcohol and other substance dependencies, young males, the elderly, the bereaved, vulnerable groups who experience discrimination, those living in rural areas and those with debilitating physical illness.<sup>6</sup> As The Salvation Army has always cared for and journeyed with vulnerable people, its personnel remain committed to suicide prevention and to providing hope to those who struggle in this earthly life.

Suicide attempts are up to 20 times more frequent than completed suicides.<sup>7</sup> The risk of suicide is particularly high in the first year after an attempt and survivors often experience feelings of guilt or shame.<sup>8 9</sup> Many studies have shown that availability of weapons, unsafe bridges, pills packed in large numbers and access to toxic domestic gases add to the likelihood of suicide completion.<sup>10</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Anti-Suicide Bureau', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 7 January 1907, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article89592911>

<sup>4</sup> Nock, M.K. et al., 'Mental Disorders, Comorbidity and Suicidal Behavior: Results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication', *Molecular Psychiatry*, Vol. 15, No. 8 (August 2010), pp868–76, <https://doi.org/10.1038/mp.2009.29>

<sup>5</sup> *Suicide Rates*, World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/mental-health/suicide-rates> (accessed on 17 September 2023)

<sup>6</sup> *Suicide Prevention*, World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/health-topics/suicide> (accessed on 17 September 2023)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Probert-Lindström, Sara et al., 'Long-term Risk Factors for Suicide in Suicide Attempters Examined at a Medical Emergency in Patient Unit: Results from a 32-year Follow-up Study', *BMJ Open*, Vol. 10, No. 10 (31 October 2020), <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33130567/>

<sup>9</sup> Shamsaei, Farshid et al., 'Exploring the Lived Experiences of the Suicide Attempt Survivors: A Phenomenological Approach', *Int J Qual Stud Health Well-being*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (29 March 2020), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7172699/>

<sup>10</sup> Milner, A. et al., 'Access to Means of Suicide, Occupation and the Risk of Suicide: A National Study Over 12 Years of Coronial Data', *BMC Psychiatry*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (4 April 2017), p125, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-017-1288-0>

Although the media and social media can play a powerful role in educating the public about suicide prevention, there is also the risk that they can do harm. The disclosure of suicide or attempted suicide can cause others to contemplate suicide.<sup>11</sup> There are many social media sites that share details about how to commit suicide. Implementation of recommendations for media and social media coverage of suicide has been shown to decrease suicide rates.<sup>12</sup>

The training of religious leaders, community workers and teachers to recognise early warning signs of suicide and the implementation of effective intervention are proven to be effective strategies in increasing suicide prevention.<sup>13 14</sup> Emotional connectivity and hope further strengthen

resilience towards suicidal tendencies.<sup>15</sup>

Most people who attempt suicide are ambivalent and not entirely intent on dying. However, only a small number of suicides happen without warning.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, any and/or all threats of self-harm must be taken seriously.

While suicide is a global public health issue with far-reaching social, emotional and economic consequences, it remains a taboo subject in many societies. Grief and the processing of loss after a loved one has taken their own life is often more complicated, intense and prolonged than it is following a death from natural causes.



<sup>11</sup> Often called 'suicide contagion' or 'copycat' suicides. Mueller, Anna S. and Abrutyn, Seth, 'Suicidal Disclosures Among Friends: Using Social Network Data to Understand Suicide Contagion', *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (1 March 2015), pp131–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146514568793>

<sup>12</sup> Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, Media Guidelines, <https://suicideprevention.ca/media/media-guidelines/> (accessed on 6 March 2024)

<sup>13</sup> Ghoncheh, Rezvan et al., 'Efficacy of Adolescent Suicide Prevention E-Learning Modules for Gatekeepers: A Randomized Controlled Trial', *JMIR Mental Health*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (29 January 2016), <https://doi.org/10.2196/mental.4614>

<sup>14</sup> Isaac, Michael et al., 'Gatekeeper Training as a Preventative Intervention for Suicide: A Systematic Review', *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (1 April 2009), pp260–68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/070674370905400407>

<sup>15</sup> Huen, Jenny M.Y. et al., 'Hope and Hopelessness: The Role of Hope in Buffering the Impact of Hopelessness on Suicidal Ideation', *PLoS ONE*, Vol. 10, No. 6 (24 June 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0130073>

<sup>16</sup> 'Why Do People Die by Suicide?', <https://suicideprevention.ca/media/why-do-people-die-by-suicide/> (accessed on 6 March 2024)

## **GROUNDS FOR THE POSITION OF THE SALVATION ARMY**

The Bible teaches that humanity has an eternal destiny (Genesis 1:27), a special place in God's creation (Psalm 8:5), and is created for relationship and for that relationship to be expressed living in community (Acts 4:32-35).

The Salvation Army believes that nothing separates one from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39) and that God's wisdom is perfect. God alone is the judge (Psalm 9:8). Therefore, presumptions about the eternal destination of others must not be made. This is reflected through the words used in The Salvation Army's committal service for victims of suicide: 'As our

brother/sister [name] has departed this life, we now commit his/her body to the grave: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust (or: to the elements) in the certainty of the resurrection and of the eternal love and mercy of God.'<sup>17</sup>

The Salvation Army believes that experiencing the life-renewing power (1 Peter 5:10) that is found in Jesus can crucially lead to restored hope (Romans 15:13; Psalm 33:20-22), healing (Psalm 147:3) and new life (1 Peter 1:3), and that restored relationships (1 John 5:4; Psalm 91) are well-known protective factors against suicidal behaviour.



<sup>17</sup> By Authority of the General, *Salvation Army Ceremonies*, 2019, pp41–42, The Salvation Army IHQ

## PRACTICAL RESPONSES

1. Salvationists are encouraged to build kind, caring and supportive communities that foster environments to help individuals avoid isolation.
2. Salvation Army ministry units continue to provide suicide prevention support to individuals, families and communities in need where possible. These ministries endeavour to provide social support, connectedness, counselling, prayer and spiritual support to those contemplating suicide, as well as to the bereaved.
3. Salvationists will seek to understand the sense of despondence, isolation and desperation that comes with suicidal thoughts, without judgement. Salvationists will endeavour to show compassion to those who may feel shame and guilt associated with attempted suicide.
4. The Salvation Army supports measures to increase the individual, professional and public awareness of suicide prevention.
5. Individual territories are encouraged to educate their personnel and members in suicide prevention that is age- and culturally appropriate. This includes early identification and the referral of anyone who is affected by suicidal behaviours.
6. The Salvation Army promotes educational tools for communities. These include developing life skills related to understanding and managing emotions, forming healthy relationships and navigating social situations.
7. As it is of vital importance that people who are at risk have easy access to professional care, especially when they experience mental health concerns, Salvation Army ministry units are encouraged to establish collaborative partnerships with other organisations dealing with suicide prevention, assessment and treatment, to enhance support for vulnerable individuals.
8. The Salvation Army supports measures that can be taken at community and national levels to reduce access to the means of suicide. It may not be possible to eliminate the risk of suicide entirely, but it is possible to reduce the risk substantially through a variety of prevention strategies.
9. The Salvation Army offers sensitive counsel and pastoral care to the bereaved, seeking to remove the often-present stigma around suicide.
10. Salvationists are urged to exercise caution in their social media postings and recognise the potential of adverse impact on the mental well-being of others. The Salvation Army encourages the implementation of responsible media guidelines for reporting on suicide.





## RESOURCES

### **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, (n.d.)**

Retrieved from <http://www.afsp.org>

### **Coleman, Loren and O'Halloran, Susan, 'Preventing Youth Suicide Through Gatekeeper Training', 7th edition, 2004**

Retrieved from: [https://www.academia.edu/26546755/Youth\\_Suicide\\_Prevention\\_Gatekeeper\\_Training\\_Preventing\\_Youth\\_Suicide\\_through\\_Gatekeeper\\_Training](https://www.academia.edu/26546755/Youth_Suicide_Prevention_Gatekeeper_Training_Preventing_Youth_Suicide_through_Gatekeeper_Training) (accessed on 1 October 2023)

### **Griffith University, Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention, (n.d.)**

Retrieved from: <https://www.griffith.edu.au/griffith-health/australian-institute-suicide-research-prevention>

### **Hawton, Keith and van Heeringen, Kees, (eds), The International Handbook of Suicide and Attempted Suicide, 2002, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd**

### **International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP), 2000–2002**

Retrieved from [www.iasp.info](http://www.iasp.info)

### **Prevent Suicide PA Learning**

Retrieved from: <https://pspalearning.com/> (accessed on 1 October 2023)

### **Samaritans**

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### **'Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper Trainings', Marin Outreach & Prevention Team**

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### **The University of Hong Kong, Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, (n.d.)**

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### **University of Oxford, Centre for Suicide Research, 2023**

Retrieved from <https://www.psych.ox.ac.uk/research/csr>

### **World Health Organization, Suicide, (n.d.)**

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### **World Health Organization, Suicide Prevention, (n.d.)**

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### **Approved by the General, June 2024**

The views expressed in this international positional statement constitute the official position of The Salvation Army on the issue addressed, and they may not be modified or adapted in any way without the express written permission of International Headquarters.

