# Leader's Guide for the PowerPoint Presentation: Suicide in Our Communities

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents. As Jewish educational leaders, we have an obligation to educate those who work with our youth to recognize the signs and seek help for at-risk students. This professional development session will serve to start this vital conversation.

**The goals of this session are to:**

- Increase awareness of suicide as a growing public health crisis.
- Highlight the factors that might increase the risk of suicidal ideation and the associated warning signs.
- Contextualize Jewish professionals' responsibility to learn about suicide prevention through Jewish text and wisdom.
- Encourage teachers to pay attention and speak up.

**Parameters of materials covered in this session:**

- The material in this power point is specific to suicide. Though some of the material included is applicable to a variety of mental health concerns, it is not meant as a comprehensive guide to or overview of mental health.
- This is not a crisis training. It is meant to give educators an overview of the topic, provide tools to ask questions and raise sensitivity levels in the tragic case of a death by suicide in your community. Comprehensive crisis training may be available in your community. As a starting point, contact the Department of Children and Family Services or Jewish Child and Family Services or the agency serving this population in your community.

**Prepare in advance:**

- This PowerPoint (PPT) is dense; it contains a great deal of information. To help participants be fully present during the presentation and have critical information to take home, we have created an accompanying handout. Please copy and distribute the materials prior to the start of the session.
- Two short videos are included in the PPT. Double-check that the meeting room has internet access and that the Wi-Fi connection is working.

**Guidelines to help facilitate conversations during the program:**

- The material in this presentation is of a sensitive nature and may cause emotional responses among participants. As you progress through the slides, be mindful of the mood in the room as well as any individuals who may be experiencing strong feelings. Feel free to pause at any time to redirect conversation or to give a participant space or emotional support as you feel necessary.



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**Before beginning, you may want to set some ground rules. Suggestions include:**

- This is a judgement free zone.
- This is a confidential space; what is said here, stays here.
- Please do not share personal information. If speaking of someone in making a point, please omit names and any identifying characteristics.

**Below, please find thoughts, questions and activities for working through several the slides.**

**Slide 2: All Israel are responsible for one another.**
This phrase is often the topic of discussion with people wondering about the correct Hebrew phrase. We have used *la'zeh*, though in some places you might also see *ba'zeh.* Participant commentary about this phrase might get the conversation off track. If someone begins in this vein you might let them know:

1) Both are correct. "*zeh la'zeh*" is attributed to Rabbi Shimon, and "*zeh ba'zeh*" is attributed to Rabbi Yehudah.
2) Though one interpretation of the phrase is that one Jew is legally responsible for the sins of another, it has widely come to be understood as a call to mutual responsibility.

**Slide 3: Why Talk about this in Our Community**
You might ask the following questions:

1) What might cause people to think that suicide should not be discussed in our community?
2) What values held by our community support the need to hold the conversation here?

**Slide 4: I Jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge**
Please preview this video. Kevin Hines speaks openly and frankly about his experience attempting death by suicide. It may not be appropriate for all audiences.
If you choose to show this video, you may want to give everyone a moment to digest what they've seen before moving on.

**Slide 5: Understanding Terms.**
When reviewing the definitions, you may choose to add the following about a "suicide attempt." Literature suggests that not everyone who attempts suicide wants to die; some do so as a means of ending their overwhelming pain and hopelessness.

Vocabulary around suicide tends to be awkward as people are often uncomfortable speaking about death in general, let alone death by suicide. Yet, developing a shared, non-



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judgmental vocabulary is an important component of establishing a culture of caring and acceptance in the community. You might ask:

1) What are all the terms you know for death by suicide?
2) How might some of this language be loaded or hurtful?

**Slide 6: It's a Public Health Crisis**

Participants may ask for suicide statistics in the Jewish community. It is difficult to find data on the relative rate of suicide in the Jewish community in the United States.

Many studies suggest that religious affiliation or "religiosity" is seen as a possible protectant against suicide and suicidal ideation. The exception is in the case of people who identify as LGBTQ. In this case religiosity may exacerbate their suicidal thoughts and actions. When reviewing this slide, emphasize the numbers in the 10-14 and 15-24 age groups. Share that suicide is the second leading cause of death for adolescents.

**Slide 7: Learning the Signs …And Not that you Shall Die by Them**

This commentary on the biblical quote from Leviticus, found in the Babylonian Talmud reminds us that though our obligation to perform the commandments is of great importance, we should not risk our lives to do so. Similarly, the intense shame and guilt of feeling like you are not living up to family or community expectations can contribute to suicidal ideation. This Talmudic text introduces the material on warning signs, as it stands as a reminder that whatever someone might be feeling or experiencing, Jewish wisdom teaches that nothing is more important than life.

**Slide 8: Lean In**

Ask teachers how they learn about what might be happening in students' lives outside the classroom.

**Slide 9: Hear the Risks and Warnings**

In this 3:47 minute video from Mayo Clinic, teens describe common signs that someone might be considering suicide and provide encouragement for communicating directly and immediately for support and safety (from website).
Similar information appears on slides 10-13. Either use these slides to reinforce what is said here or skip to slide 14.

**10-13: Risk Factors and Warning Signs**

These slides contain a lot of information. Teachers may be concerned that they may not be able to take it all in. Remind them that much of this information can be found in the accompanying handout.



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There are some signs that teachers are more likely to see than others. For instance, a child is more likely to exhibit fatigue in religious school and less likely to exhibit spending all their money or giving away their possessions in this space. Ask teachers which signs they are more likely to see at school.

**Slides 14-16: Asking Questions**
Pause after slide 14 and direct participants to pages 5-6 of the handout (if you have chosen to distribute the handout at the end of the session, copy pages 5-6 to distribute at this time). Instruct them to read and discuss the material there before turning back to slide 15. Invite them to practice the questions on slide 16 in their *chevruta*.

**Slides 17-19: Where to Go for Help, Knowing Your Limits**
It is sometimes difficult for teachers to come to terms with the idea that they cannot help a student directly. Model types of challenges for which they call in outside help: some people can fix their own plumbing or tutor their children in math, others call in experts. You might ask them each to name something for which they call in an expert.

Please remind teachers that knowing one's limits is a good thing:

1) It allows them to practice self-care
2) It enables students to get the help they need.

After having this conversation, ask them to enter the crisis helpline numbers into their phones.

**Slides 20- Comforting the Living, Quote from the Shulchan Arukh**
Acknowledging that most suicides are carried out under distress, this passage provides the halachic reasoning for affording the family the comfort of Jewish mourning practices.

**Slides 21: Comforting the Living.**
It is widely—and mistakenly—thought that a funeral cannot be held for people who die by suicide and that they cannot be buried in a Jewish cemetery. While there are no halachic prohibitions against burying someone who died by suicide in a Jewish cemetery, some mourning rites may not be followed if the deceased was in a psychologically stable state of mind at the time of death.

Though customs vary among traditions, the majority of clergy of all denominations do all that they can to ensure a respectful and loving funeral and burial.

More information on approaches to this can be found at:
https://www.ou.org/torah/machshava/tzarich-iyun/tzarich_iyun_jews_with_tattoos/



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**Slide 22: Things to Say and Do**
In addition to reviewing what's listed here, you may choose to further brainstorm based on participants' own experiences.

**Slide 23-24: These Troubled Children - Poem by Alden Solovy**
Solicit a participant to read the poem aloud. Ask for reactions.

There is an idea in Judaism that there are thirty-six righteous people in the world at all times, and that one of them just might be waiting to become the messiah. We are taught that we should always show kindness, because we never know if we are sitting next to the person who has the potential to become the messiah, and our actions might encourage or discourage them. Similarly, no one knows when or if they might have the opportunity to prevent a suicide, but we must view ourselves as potential partners in saving a life…and know what to do.



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