

VERMONT SUICIDE POSTVENTION PROTOCOLS FOR EMERGENCY MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS: Emergency Medical Technicians, Paramedics, First Responders

- **CONTEXT & APPLICATION**
- **RESPONDING TO A DEATH: ON SCENE**
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I. CONTEXT & APPLICATION

As with intervention, postvention for emergency medical professionals can be very different from other professionals. EMTs are trained in responding to untimely, unexpected and suspicious deaths, and working with law enforcement in these circumstances. Emergency medical agencies all have existing protocols that dictate actions, specific steps, and the order of those steps. These are best practice suggestions to review along with existing policies.

II. RESPONDING TO A DEATH BY SUICIDE: On Scene

A “death by suicide” occurs when death results from **actions of intentional self-harm**. If intentional self-harm was not immediately witnessed by you or another, it can be hard to tell if a person has died by suicide or not. This makes it very important to not say someone has died by suicide unless that has been CONFIRMED by a medical examiner.

1. If Law Enforcement professionals are onsite, standard emergency response is to wait until Law Enforcement professionals specifically admit emergency personnel to the scene.
2. If Law Enforcement professionals are not yet onsite, follow your agency’s dictated procedures on arriving at a death scene, regarding attending to the deceased. Best practices when arriving at a possible suicide scene include:
 - a. Do not announce or “confirm” that it is a death by suicide to anyone. Only the Medical Examiner can determine cause of death.
 - b. Refer all questions from press or anyone else to your agency’s approved spokesperson.
 - c. Do not speculate about the death to anyone.
3. Support survivors on the scene.
 - a. Express empathy.
 - b. Be sensitive/respectful with the language you use – review current recommendations for sensitive language.
 - c. Allow survivors to express their thoughts and feelings, but resist making any statements yourself related to deaths by suicide, especially anything that could be construed as judging the deceased.
 - d. Help survivors identify people they can go to for immediate support – counselor, clergy, close friends, other family – and help contact these people if you can.
 - e. Give written resources – survivor support groups, mental health providers, national support organizations that offer crisis response lines for survivors.

III. RESPONDING TO A DEATH BY SUICIDE: Immediate Follow-up

Your agency will have specific policies on whether or not emergency first responders are involved in any way with additional duties following a call to a death scene and transporting of the deceased.

IV. RESPONDING TO A DEATH BY SUICIDE: Self Care

One of the hardest steps for many who work in professions devoted to helping others is to recognize and act on the need to take care of yourself.

1. Recognize that you need support to offset the short and long-term effects of handling this event on your mental health.
 - a. You have had a difficult experience, even if you are not close to the person who has attempted suicide.
 - b. Being at the scene of an attempted suicide or working with people after an attempt is difficult and can be traumatic, even for people who are trained to do it and who have done it in the past.
 - c. You may need to delay your own personal reactions to the experience, or to the topic of suicide in general, which creates psychological strain.
 - d. Even if this work is part of your job and you have done it many times in the past, if you find yourself struggling for any reason at all, ASK FOR HELP.
2. Practice self-care. Invest in yourself enough to manage the emotions you are dealing with.
3. Access your organization's or community resources: Employee Assistance Program, referrals, on-staff counselors, mental health clinicians or agencies.
4. Don't ignore your own experience in an attempt to serve others.
 - a. As you go about your job, pay attention to your own responses and emotional reactions to the attempt.
 - b. If you realize that you are not able to fill your role or continue to provide support to others because of your own responses, or if you need additional support in your duties, talk to your supervisor.