Preventing Suicide: A Handbook for Pastors, Chaplains, and Pastoral Counselors.

Among Karen Mason’s academic credentials are a M.A. in Old Testament from Denver Seminary and PhD from the University of Denver in Counseling Psychology. She managed the Office of Suicide Prevention for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment prior to joining the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary as an associate professor of counseling and psychology. Mason is a member of the American Psychological Association and the author of When the Pieces Don’t Fit: Making Sense of Life’s Puzzle.

In the current work, Dr. Mason’s stated objective is to provide a resource for faith professionals to use when dealing with suicide situations. The situations discussed include suicide prevention, crisis counseling, and post suicide care. The author introduces the book with a quotation from Kay Redfield Jamison, “Most suicides, although by no means all, can be prevented.” It is with this understanding that the author proceeds to address her objective. In nine chapters, the author discusses questions of who is subject to suicide, shattering myths concerning suicide, relating appropriate Christian theology to suicide, theories of suicide, and five chapters of helping people during the various stages of suicidal processes.

In the chapters devoted to who dies from suicide and myth shattering, the author presents demographic studies which help understand that most probable potential victims of suicide. The author draws from several studies from the 18th century to date to complete the demographic picture. Mason also presents a thorough survey on the causes of suicide. In the summary, however, the author points out that everyone, regardless of demographic profile, social-economic, or faith affiliation is subject to suicidal thoughts and actions. In this manner, the author removes the stereotypes and the mindsets of denial.
Mason presents a brief study of suicide-related theological topics. The topic is divided by the church’s general views of suicide, suicide is not a sin and suicide is a sin, suicide is a forgivable sin, and suicide is an unforgivable sin. Mason provides the historic basis of these views and the brief statement of its theological and sociological impacts. Mason challenges the counselor to reflect carefully on the “panoply of theological and historical views on suicide, sin, forgiveness and eternal security” (133) Understanding of the church’s and individual’s position on these views will profoundly impact the care that is provided.

The remaining chapters address the counselor’s responsibility to provide care. The five audiences addressed are someone in a suicide crisis, the survivor of attempted suicide, the helpers, suicide survivors (family/friends), and the faith community. The book presents a six-step process from detailing warning signs to pastoral care after the crisis is past. The final step, “Providing Pastoral Care,” outlines protocol designed to restore stability in the counselee and her relationships with family and friends.

The seven-step process outlined for helping a survivor of an attempted suicide begins with a counselor self-evaluation. Mason stresses the need for the counselor to deal with his own thoughts and ideas concerning suicide and this particular counselee’s suicide attempt. Once the counselor has prepared himself, he can begin to counsel. The author outlines the feelings that the counselee may have at this point. Mason points out one the most crucial objectives is to determine whether an actual suicide attempt occurred. Did the counselee have a viable plan and means to terminate her life or was her action an attempt to garner attention? In either case, the counselee needs help. If the counselee did intend to commit suicide, the author recommends hospitalization. In the final step, Mason outlines an ongoing plan for clinically centered pastoral care.
In the next chapter, Mason alerts and encourages the counselor to provide active care for the family and friends. The author recommends education to aid the helpers understand the actions of the counselee. Mason designs this chapter to help families and friends “negotiate the challenges of life with suicidality” (133). She concludes with a warning to the counselor to insure that she is dealing with the stress of counseling in difficult situations. Mason suggests several potential activities to help the counselor remain healthy.

Mason outlines many of the emotions that a suicide survivor will face. The author provides guidance for surviving, including clear communication to children, dealing with stages of grief, and how to recognize and avoid “toxic helpers” (148). She advises counselors to avoid platitudes. Instead, practice a nonjudgmental ministry of presence. Share your faith gently, provide practical help such as organizing meals, childcare, and, if needed, shopping and house cleaning.

In caring for the faith community, Mason encourages the pastor to address the community with the facts to avoid rumors. She cautions the counselor to be alert for potential suicide clusters. The counselor should educate the community concerning warning signs and suicide protocols, and harmful attitudes within the community. Mason concludes by recommending that the pastor form partnerships in the community to help restore the community’s health.

The biblical counselor will find both valuable theological and practical information in suicide prevention and care for the counselee, helpers, and faith community. The chapters devoted to the practical help of each impacted party are particularly valuable to the pastoral counselor. These chapters serve as ministry checklist for those who are fortunate enough not to have to counsel in suicide situations of a regular basis. The resources cited throughout the book
also enable the pastor to be better equipped when the time comes. Dr. Mason meets her objective to provide a resource for pastoral counselors.

Although Mason wrote the book from a secular viewpoint, she is a person of faith and writes from a faith perspective throughout the book. The book provides a practical non-psychological discussion of suicide and its related pastoral care concerns. The major caution for biblical counselors is the author’s frequent recommendation to refer the counselee to professional counselors. With this caution in mind, I recommend this book as a must read for pastoral counselors.

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