

# Suicide Prevention is a Human Right

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There is one human right that will not likely receive much attention on World Human Rights Day this week – the right to suicide prevention.

More specifically, is “the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health” which is Article 12 in the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, but the Human Rights Committee General Comment No 36 in 2019 upheld the right of individuals to be free from acts or omissions that may be expected to cause unnatural or premature death.

The Human Rights Committee explicitly mentioned suicide prevention: “... *States should take adequate measures, without violating their other Covenant obligations, to prevent suicides, especially among individuals in particularly vulnerable situations.*”

So, the right to suicide prevention could be expressed as the right to be protected from the factors in one’s life and that affect one’s mental health and wellbeing, which, could foster suicidal thoughts and lead to a persons’ premature (and preventable) death by suicide.

There are plenty of other causes of death for which the human right to the highest attainable standard of health is easy to support. People expect to be protected from preventable disease and environmental harms that could lead to their death. Nation states are expected to keep their populations safe from known health risks, as the COVID-19 pandemic reminded us.

Yet, suicide perhaps does not come immediately to most people’s understanding of the right to health. This is despite suicide being declared a public health priority in the WHO Report on Suicide 2014, ten years ago, and its reduction being a Sustainable Development Goal target.

It is timely to bring the human right to be free from suicide to everyone’s attention. Globally, the 720,000 deaths by suicide a year is greater than deaths from HIV, malaria and war. For every death by suicide an estimated 30 people attempt suicide, meaning a global figure of 21 million who have experienced unbearable distress and despair and may have injured themselves seriously through self-harm. A similar figure exists for those who are impacted by those deaths. This means around 50 million people are impacted by suicide one way or another, every year. The cumulative effect is even more concerning, as suicide bereavement can last for years.

The timeliness of attention to advancing the human right for suicide prevention is further reinforced by the recent update to WHO statistics that report suicide as the third leading cause of death for younger persons, those aged under 25 years. Youth suicide is increasing in many countries, to some extent associated with the decline in youth mental health globally. The current and potential impact of the loss of younger lives in lower resource countries which have younger populations, notably African countries, commands greater recognition and action.

How can the right to prevent suicide be addressed? How does this translate into countries, and what actions might be suited to a human rights approach, so people are protected from suicide? One country that has set an example is Japan, sadly because of the large numbers of people who have died by suicide in the past two decades, prompting national attention. National legislation has created the priority and policy mandate for resources and programs known as 'counter measures' to suicide which are required to be enacted at local levels. The suicide rate in Japan has reduced from 20 to 17.6 per 100,000 in the space of a decade.

An example of a lower resource country embracing the human right to prevent suicide is Indonesia. Last year, Indonesia passed national laws for the prevention of suicide. These laws will require government, public officials and society at large to act to prevent suicide. A national suicide prevention strategy is being adopted to inform this action.

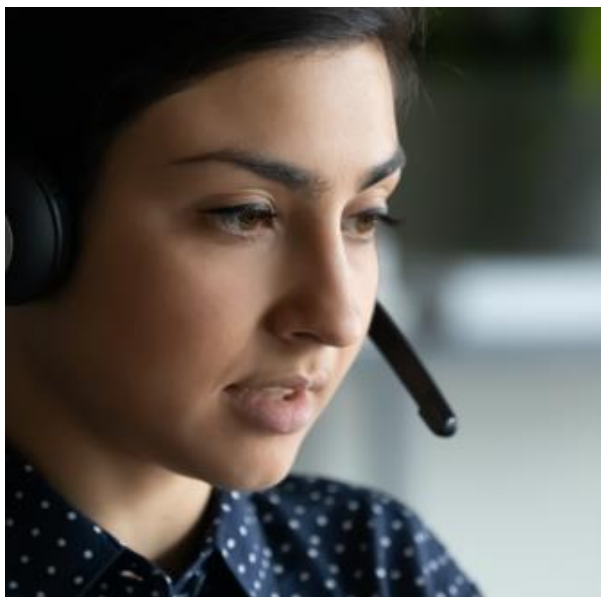
The law and human rights are always closely interrelated. One key change that will uphold the human right to protection from suicide is the decriminalisation of suicide and suicide attempts. In a study LifeLine International and the International Bar Association conducted last year, 25 countries were found to have laws to this effect in place, and a further 27 countries were found to have ambiguous or confusing legal frameworks on suicide.

International studies covering more than 100 countries and over 20 years of statistical data have established that suicide rates are generally higher in those countries where suicide is criminalised, and that when reductions in suicide occur, they occur less in those countries. In other words, whatever the intentions, laws that criminalize suicide do not prevent suicide. They are laws that frustrate the achievement of a human right to be free of suicide.

There is a humanitarian level of action required as well on the prevention of suicide. This is because human suffering is the foundation of a person's despair and distress to such a degree that they find more reasons for dying than they can find for living. Mental health conditions may feature, creating symptoms that are unbearable. Socio-economic factors including financial struggles, family relationship difficulties, experiences of personal violence and discrimination also surround suicidal behaviour. The prevention of suicide must alleviate a person's suffering.

It seems reasonable then for every country to have in place a service response that is easy to reach and widely recognized in local communities, so a person experiencing a suicidal crisis is not left alone but is able to find human connection and support when they need it most. The design of national health systems should include such a service, as an essential service, just as national health systems include ambulance and emergency services.

For over 70 years, these services for suicide prevention have been developing in most countries. They are known as helplines, hotlines, crisis lines, or more recently as crisis chat, crisis text. They are crisis support services, an immediate form of psychosocial support, with a befriending interaction based on values of acceptance, compassion and empathy. They have names like Lifeline, Samaritans, Befrienders, Telephone Emergency Services, Emotional Support Services. In the USA, recent changes have seen the national crisis support service tagged 988, reinforcing a three-digit contact number or online term through which to access the service, just like 911 is the national emergency service for safety and rescue. There is even a global crisis support service for people on ships traversing the oceans, operated through Befrienders Worldwide.



Crisis support services already form a basic, primary health service response for suicide prevention throughout the world. They are operating in 145 countries; the countries that lack these services are in lower resource settings and to some extent related to laws that criminalize suicide. Some services are well resourced and can respond to people quickly; other services are under-resourced and cannot meet the demand.

Ensuring that everyone has access to the support, care, and resources they need to address mental health challenges and prevent suicide is necessarily linked to suicide prevention being a human right.

Access to quality suicide prevention and crisis support services is critical in protecting individuals from harm and preserving their dignity and right to suicide prevention. Crisis support services are one practical and effective way of upholding the human right to suicide prevention.

Earlier this year, the five organisations representing most of the world's crisis support services issued a joint statement calling for these services to be regarded as 'essential' in every country's health system. On world Human Rights Day, this call is repeated for the imperative of upholding every person's right to be protected from death by suicide.

Governments, organisations, and communities have a responsibility to promote and safeguard mental health, offer resources such as counselling, helplines, and emergency services, and work to reduce the stigma surrounding suicide prevention, which includes decriminalising suicide. Ensuring that suicide prevention is part of the broader conversation about human rights helps reinforce the need for compassion, support, and understanding for those struggling with suicidal thoughts.

To find a crisis support service: <https://findahelpline.com/>