



The Contributions of University Chaplains to Suicide Prevention



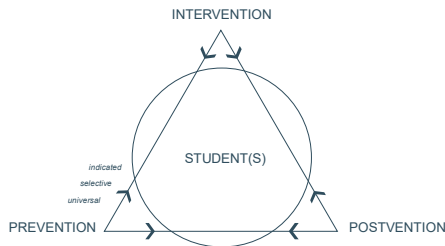
1. Introduction

Globally, around **703,000 people die by suicide each year**, with many more attempting suicide. Whilst suicide affects people of almost all ages, it ranks as the **fourth leading cause of death** for those aged **15-29**. The university context is relevant because many students fall within that age bracket, and there is a **high prevalence of suicidal thoughts and behaviours amongst university students**. It is important for universities to continue to prioritise support services to address this complex issue.

The **objective** of this research was to **document** the specific **contributions of university chaplains to suicide prevention** on the framework developed in collaboration with mental health and university chaplains.

2. Suicide Prevention Framework

The term, **suicidal thoughts and behaviours**, refers to a **spectrum** of thoughts and behaviours linked to suicide. This includes **fatal behaviours**, namely suicide, and **non-fatal thoughts and behaviours**, such as suicide attempts, self-harm, suicidal ideation, death wishes, suicide plans, preparatory suicidal behaviours, aborted suicide attempts, and interrupted suicide attempts.



In the **prevention phase**, university chaplains care for students who are **not engaging in suicidal thoughts and behaviours with the intention of maintaining this**.

- Universal measures are aimed at an entire population.
- Selective measures target subgroups that have an elevated risk of engaging in suicidal thoughts and behaviours.
- Indicated measures target individual persons who have an increased vulnerability for engagement in suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

In the **intervention phase**, university chaplains care for a student who **is engaging in suicidal thoughts and behaviours**. The hope is that they can move back down to the prevention phase. However, if a student takes their own life, those affected by the suicide are situated in the postvention phase.

In the **postvention phase**, university chaplains care for those affected by a suicide. Postvention is on the same level as prevention because it is a **form of prevention**. It is possible that a bereaved student may start to engage in suicidal behaviours, and, thus, move to the intervention phase.

4. Results

Prevention	Intervention	Postvention
Universal (everyone) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community life • Education • Support during exam periods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide alternative meeting arrangements • Ask confrontational questions • Discuss images of God • Follow-up • Provide helpline information • Referral to mental health professionals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend the funeral of the deceased student • Provide rituals: a blessing, lighting a candle • Arrange a memorial service for the deceased • Create a memorial space • Organise grief groups
Selective (subgroups) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education 		
Indicated (specific persons) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss images of God • Offer a prayer • Share Biblical stories • Referral to mental health services 		

3. Methods

Ethics approval was granted by the Social and Societal Ethics Committee of the KU Leuven on 12 August 2022: G-2022-5822-R2(MAR).

(a) Participant Recruitment

University chaplains from all European institutions affiliated with the *International Federation of Catholic Universities* were invited to participate in this research.

Participation criteria:

- identification as a university chaplain, and
- experience in providing care to students who have experienced suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

Seven university chaplains participated in this research.

(b) Practicalities

Three 90-minute online focus group sessions were held on Zoom. Each session was recorded, with the participants' consent, for transcription.

(c) Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis of the transcripts was inductively conducted using NVivo.

The resulting draft article was shared for feedback during the final session.

5. Discussion



Importance of talking about suicide



Specialists in spirituality



Unique role in postvention



Necessity of training in mental health, and suicide



Necessity of collaboration with mental health professionals

6. Further Research

Are you a university chaplain? Please complete the online questionnaire on your contributions to suicide prevention!

The results will be used to:

- increase research on the contributions of university chaplains to suicide prevention, and
- empirically determine which practices are widely used by university chaplains.

