

San Vicente Funeral Home: Committed to Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused loss, suffering and stress. Focusing on suicide prevention is especially important now, in order to stay connected to each other and to be aware of the signs of suicide risk and how to respond. Even in these times of increased physical distance, people can maintain social connections and take care of their mental health.

Pan American Health Organization

Rationale behind the idea

Since 50 years ago, when San Vicente Funeral Home was founded, its main institutional objectives have been oriented towards the commitment to offer dignified and high quality funeral services, regardless of race, creed or economic position. As a company aware of its social responsibility in dealing with such a sensitive issue as death, it has been willing and attentive to provide support at times when our community has required it, accompanying victims in cases of natural disasters, terrorist attacks and accidents; making donations for people without resources who cannot afford a funeral to say goodbye to their loved ones; and carrying out awareness campaigns on the preservation of life and health.

For these reasons, 23 years ago it created the Grief Counselling Center: the first institution in the country specialising in medical and psychological support for bereaved people. Free of charge and open to the entire community, this Center offers comfort to hundreds of people every month through its services. These consist of: support groups (perinatal, Covid, parents who have lost children, widows and widowers, suicide, the elderly, children and mixed groups), the institutional conference "Getting over the death of a loved one" (given on Saturdays every eight days), and individual consultation.

Of all these services, the suicide group has been of particular importance to the work of the Grief Counselling Center, not only because it offers support to the bereaved, but also because many people who have had suicidal thoughts or even attempted suicide find a safe place to talk about their feelings and their desire to die.

According to PAHO/WHO (n.d.), more than 800,000 people die each year by suicide. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15-29 year olds in the Americas (although it can occur at any age), which has a devastating impact on families, friends and communities. Furthermore, there are indications that for every adult who commits suicide, possibly more than 20 others attempt it (1). In recent studies conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization stated in a press release (17 June 2021) that 1 in every 100 deaths is caused by suicide and that it is one of the leading causes of death worldwide. Furthermore, although there has been a reduction in the suicide rate worldwide over the last 20 years, this is not the case in the Americas, which saw an increase of 17% over the same period (2). It is for this reason that San Vicente Funeral Home and its Grief Counselling Center, understanding suicide as an important public health problem serves to implement prevention strategies to reduce these figures and support the bereaved.

Detailed description of the program

Suicide bereavement support group: (family members/bereaved and people with suicidal thoughts or who have attempted suicide).

For more than 20 years, the Grief Counselling Center has been offering the bereaved and non-bereaved community a support group for people affected by suicide. In this weekly space, coordinated by the clinical psychologist of the Grief Counselling Center, Julián Cardona, attendees can talk about the feelings that the death of their loved one by suicide has generated in them, acquire tools for dealing with their grief and receive the emotional support of their peers. Suicide, being a stigmatised form of death, often generates shame in people who go through this grief and therefore avoid talking about it, fearing that they will be judged or even blamed for what happened. For this reason, the support group acts as a safe place free from criticism and prejudice to express themselves openly (see annex n°1). They also work as a group to find alternatives to the pain they experience.

Course - "Suicide: a comprehensive view."

In 2014, psychologists Diana Peláez and Diana Orozco (Q.E.P.D) offered a training course for professionals - "Suicide: a comprehensive view" - which dealt with suicide prevention and support for mourners. The course offered tools for psychological first aid and crisis intervention, as well as strategies for dealing with the death of someone by suicide. This course was developed in 11 sections with an hourly intensity of 22 hours and the topics covered were:

- Contextualisation of suicide.
- Suicide as a way of dying.
- Beliefs about suicide based on a questionnaire designed by the Grief Counselling Center (see appendix 2).
- Risk factors.
- Protection factors.
- Suicide and the family.
- Grief and suicide

World Suicide Prevention Day Campaigns

Aware of the importance of reaching the greatest number of people who could benefit from information on suicide prevention, and on the occasion of World Suicide Prevention Day celebrated in September, the Grief Counselling Center of Funeraria San Vicente carries out campaigns that include cine-forums, dissemination through newsletters and lectures via Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/unidaddeduelosanvicente/photos/1239862796349866>) and YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEq_GqIHQh0mJuo84hEQaZw/playlists)

Benefits provided to the funeral company and its staff

Suicide as a public health problem affects even funeral service employees, who can also experience suicidal thoughts, the loss of a loved one by suicide, and even attempt suicide themselves. Having a suicide support group and conducting internal and extramural prevention campaigns offers funeral home employees the opportunity to be listened to, destigmatised and accompanied through their feelings of anguish and despair which are sometimes generated by their ongoing work with death and grief. It is sometimes thought that those who work in funeral homes are immune to suffering and that their relationship with life is more "positive". However, the opposite may be true: being constantly in contact with death can generate a certain "familiarity", which trivialises the act of dying by suicide. For this reason, the suicide prevention campaigns carried out by San Vicente Funeral Home are not only for the wider community, but also for employees and their families, with their mental health and well-being in mind. In the same way, having a permanent group of care for mourners and guidance in relation to suicidal thoughts provides the employees of San Vicente Funeral Home with a tool to respond to the needs of users who require it, making their work more comprehensive and compassionate.

Benefits provided to families and/or the wider community

For San Vicente Funeral Home, thinking of the welfare of mourners with the firm intention of expanding its commitment and social and human responsibility, the implementation of the Grief Counselling Center in the portfolio of services for its affiliates and the community in general has a clear justification. This consists of a space aimed at providing care (focused, immediate and specialised), monitoring, surveillance and facilitation of the entire recovery process when a loved one has been lost.

Hence, the service of psychological accompaniment in the funeral service context arises from the need of mourners to be listened to and emotionally supported in the process of mourning the loss of a loved one. According to a PAHO article published in 2020 (1):

Despite an increase in research and knowledge about suicide and its prevention, the stigma surrounding it persists and those who need help often do not seek it, feeling alone in the face of risk. Even when people do seek help, the fact is that many health services do not provide it. The challenge is real and must be met. (n.d.).

Psychological intervention in bereavement also fosters a culture of dealing with grief and death in society, issues that have traditionally been taboo and distorted in their approach, which has prevented their understanding and acceptance even though they occur naturally in the life cycle.

In the case of suicide, the Grief Counselling Center of San Vicente Funeral Home offers a range of support services: postvention (psychological accompaniment of mourners who lose loved ones to suicide); fundamental prevention (educating in relation to death and grieving); primary prevention (encouraging the person to address their grief); secondary prevention (early detection of complicated grief); and tertiary prevention (follow-up of people in long-term mourning that lasts years and of those who suffer lifelong consequences).

The historical constant from a socio-cultural point of view has been the stigmatisation and rejection of suicide, which has prevented a better understanding and approach to addressing this phenomenon. The professional service provided by the Grief Counselling Center of San Vicente Funeral Home in terms of unconditional professional accompaniment (psychiatric and psychological) to those grieving the loss of someone to suicide, and the referral to primary care in the hospital network of people with suicidal tendencies who have received prior individual psychological care, makes it a centre for the promotion of mental health that contributes to a high degree to the mitigation of suicidal risk and to the

demystification and destigmatisation of suicide in order to better understand, evaluate, treat and address it. This, in addition to the fact that it is an accessible, specialised and free service, allows a large part of the community, regardless of their economic condition, to receive care in both instances (prevention and postvention).

Furthermore, working on suicide (bereavement and behavioural prevention) is undoubtedly a contribution to the mental health of society. Through the strategies it has implemented for professional care (support group, individual and group psychological care, psychiatric care, external conferences for all types of public, advice to groups, families and institutions) the Grief Counselling Center has contributed to addressing suicidal behaviour in the following ways:

- Offering initial psychological help in a practical and humane way to support people in situations of suicidal crisis, as a situation connected to the treatment of bereavement.
- Enabling those affected by suicide (bereavement and suicidal tendencies) not to be stigmatised and rejected, but to be integrated and welcomed in a service where there is familiarity, understanding and respect for them.
- Validating the expression of emotions (and helping to regulate them) that are specifically associated with suicide such as guilt, shame, anger, feelings of abandonment, helplessness and sadness.
- Providing a non-judgemental space to discuss all that suicide arouses in the inner world of those who have been affected either because their loved ones committed suicide or show signs of suicidal behaviour (thoughts, threats to commit suicide, and actual attempts to commit suicide).
- Educating and informing the community, when they are affected by suicide in their immediate environment (family, company, school), about how to access specific professional care according to the situation.
- Promoting support groups, solidarity, understanding and recovery of the bereaved and those who feel suicidal and are used to experiencing rejection, judgement and moral censure in their usual contexts.