

A black and white photograph of two hands reaching towards each other against a grey background. One hand is at the top right, palm facing down, and the other is at the bottom left, palm facing up. The hands are positioned as if they are about to clasp or are in a gesture of support.

# Preventing suicide

A global imperative



World Health  
Organization

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# FOREWORD



Every suicide is a tragedy. It is estimated that over 800 000 people die by suicide and that there are many suicide attempts for each death. The impact on families, friends and communities is devastating and far-reaching, even long after persons dear to them have taken their own lives.

Unfortunately, suicide all too often fails to be prioritized as a major public health problem. Despite an increase in research and knowledge about suicide and its prevention, the taboo and stigma surrounding suicide persist and often people do not seek help or are left alone. And if they do seek help, many health systems and services fail to provide timely and effective help.

Yet, suicides are preventable. This report encourages countries to continue the good work where it is already ongoing and to place suicide prevention high on the agenda, regardless of where a country stands currently in terms of suicide rate or suicide prevention activities. With timely and effective evidence-based interventions, treatment and support, both suicides and suicide attempts can be prevented. The burden of suicide does not weigh solely on the health sector; it has multiple impacts on many sectors and on society as a whole. Thus, to start a successful journey towards the prevention of suicide, countries should employ a multisectoral approach that addresses suicide in a comprehensive manner, bringing together the different sectors and stakeholders most relevant to each context.

In the WHO Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020, WHO Member States have committed themselves to work towards the global target of reducing the suicide rate in countries by 10% by 2020. WHO's Mental Health Gap Action Programme, which was launched in 2008, includes suicide as one of the priority conditions and provides evidence-based technical guidance to expand service provision in countries.

It is against this background that I am pleased to present *Preventing suicide: a global imperative*. This report builds on previous work and contributes two key elements to moving forward: a global knowledge base on suicide and suicide attempts to guide governments, policy-makers and relevant stakeholders, and actionable steps for countries based on their current resources and contexts. In addition, it represents a significant resource for developing a comprehensive multisectoral strategy that can prevent suicide effectively.

Every single life lost to suicide is one too many. The way forward is to act together, and the time to act is now. I call upon all stakeholders to make suicide prevention an imperative.

Dr Margaret Chan  
Director-General  
World Health Organization

# PREFACE

Suicides are preventable. Even so, every 40 seconds a person dies by suicide somewhere in the world and many more attempt suicide. Suicides occur in all regions of the world and throughout the lifespan. Notably, among young people 15-29 years of age, suicide is the second leading cause of death globally.

Suicide impacts on the most vulnerable of the world's populations and is highly prevalent in already marginalized and discriminated groups of society. It is not just a serious public health problem in developed countries; in fact, most suicides occur in low- and middle-income countries where resources and services, if they do exist, are often scarce and limited for early identification, treatment and support of people in need. These striking facts and the lack of implemented timely interventions make suicide a global public health problem that needs to be tackled imperatively.

This report is the first WHO publication of its kind and brings together what is known in a convenient form so that immediate actions can be taken. The report aims to increase the awareness of the public health significance of suicide and suicide attempts and to make suicide prevention a higher priority on the global public health agenda. It aims to encourage and support countries to develop or strengthen comprehensive suicide prevention strategies in a multisectoral public health approach. For a national suicide prevention strategy, it is essential that governments assume

their role of leadership, as they can bring together a multitude of stakeholders who may not otherwise collaborate. Governments are also in a unique position to develop and strengthen surveillance and to provide and disseminate data that are necessary to inform action. This report proposes practical guidance on strategic actions that governments can take on the basis of their resources and existing suicide prevention activities. In particular, there are evidence-based and low-cost interventions that are effective, even in resource-poor settings.

This publication would not have been possible without the significant contributions of experts and partners from all over the world. We would like to thank them for their important work and support.

The report is intended to be a resource that will allow policy-makers and other stakeholders to make suicide prevention an imperative. Only then can countries develop a timely and effective national response and, thus, lift the burden of suffering caused by suicide and suicide attempts from individuals, families, communities and society as a whole.

Dr Shekhar Saxena  
Director  
Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse  
World Health Organization

Dr Etienne Krug  
Director  
Department of Violence and Injury Prevention and Disability  
World Health Organization

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## CONCEPTUALIZATION AND GUIDANCE

Shekhar Saxena (WHO), Etienne Krug (WHO), Oleg Chestnov (WHO).

## PROJECT COORDINATION AND EDITING

Alexandra Fleischmann (WHO), Sutapa Howlader (Australia), Lakshmi Vijayakumar (India), Alex Butchart (WHO).

## TECHNICAL CONTRIBUTION AND REVIEW

### WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

#### Working Group 1:

##### *Epidemiology of suicide and suicide attempts*

Michael Phillips (Chair, China), Vladeta Ajdacic-Gross (Switzerland), Vladimir Carli (Sweden), Paul Corcoran (Ireland), Alex Crosby (USA), Diego De Leo (Australia), David Gunnell (United Kingdom), Thomas Simon (USA).

#### Working Group 2:

##### *Risk and protective factors, and related interventions*

Danuta Wasserman (Chair, Sweden), Alan Apter (Israel), Annette Beautrais (New Zealand), Vladimir Carli (Sweden), Gergö Hadlaczky (Sweden).

#### Working Group 3:

##### *Current situation and working towards a comprehensive national response for suicide prevention*

Alan Berman (Chair, USA), Ella Arensman (Ireland), Stephanie Burrows (South Africa), Brian Mishara (Canada), Vanda Scott (France), Morton Silverman (USA), Tadashi Takeshima (Japan).

#### Working Group 4:

##### *The way forward*

Diego De Leo (Chair, Australia), Alex Crosby (USA), Keith Hawton (United Kingdom), Merete Nordentoft (Denmark), Thomas Simon (USA).

### INTERNATIONAL CONTRIBUTORS

Guilherme Borges (Mexico), Robert Bossarte (USA), Yoshinori Cho (Japan), Pamela Collins (USA), Margreet Duetz Schmucki, (Switzerland), Tony Durkee (Sweden), Maiko Fujimori (Japan), Ulrich Hegerl (Germany), Wakako Hikiji (Japan), Sebastian Hokby (Sweden), Masatoshi Inagaki (Japan), Miriam Iosue (Italy), Elvira Keller-Guglielmetti (Switzerland), Marla Israel (Canada), Chiaki Kawanishi (Japan), Murad Khan (Pakistan), Manami Kodaka (Japan), Takafumi Kubota (Japan), Xianyun Li (China), Shih-Cheng Liao (Chinese Taipei), Richard McKeon (USA), Winnie Mitchell (USA), Anahit Mkrtchian (Sweden), Masayuki Morikawa (Japan), Mihoko Morley (Japan), Sheila Ndyabangi (Uganda), Etsuji Okamoto (Japan), Kotaro

Otsuka (Japan), Jong-Ik Park (Republic of Korea), Jane Pearson (USA), Alfredo Pemjean (Chile), Jane Pirkis (Australia), Beverly Pringle (USA), Yukio Saito (Japan), Marco Sarchiapone (Italy), Deborah Stone (USA), Yoshitomo Takahashi (Japan), Osamu Tanaka (Japan), Camilla Wasserman (USA), Barbara Weil (Switzerland), Takashi Yamauchi (Japan).

### EXPERT REVIEWERS

Paulo Alterwain (Uruguay), Karl Andriessen (Belgium), Judit Balázs (Hungary), José M. Bertolote (Brazil), Jafar Bolhari (Iran), Eric Caine (USA), Erminia Colucci (Australia), Karen Devries (United Kingdom), Michael Dudley (Australia), Jacqueline Garrick (USA), Onja Grad (Slovenia), Ricardo Gusmão (Portugal), Christina Hoven (USA), Hiroto Ito (Japan), Jack Jordan (USA), Nav Kapur (United Kingdom), Elisabeth Kohls (Germany), Frances Law (China, Hong Kong SAR), Myf Maple (Australia), Sean McCarthy (Ireland), Roberto Mezzina (Italy), James Mugisha (Uganda), Thomas Niederkrotenthaler (Austria), Rory O'Connor (United Kingdom), George Patton (Australia), John Peters (United Kingdom), Steve Platt (United Kingdom), Jerry Reed (USA), Dan Reidenberg (USA), Karen Scavacini (Brazil), Jean-Pierre Soubrier (France), Emmanuel Streel (Belgium), Kanna Sugiura (Japan), Elizabeth Theriault (Canada), Peeter Värnik (Estonia), Paul Yip (China, Hong Kong SAR).

### SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Ahmad Abdulbaghi (Iraq), Emad Abdulghani (Iraq), Francisca Trinidad Acosta (Honduras), Ahmed Al-Ansari (Bahrain), Dora Ninette Alburez de von Ahn (Guatemala), Charity Sylvia Akotia (Ghana), Atalay Alem (Ethiopia), Layachi Anser (Qatar), Alan Apter (Israel), Ella Arensman (Ireland), Tomas Baader (Chile), Hissani Abdou Bacar (Comoros), Loraine Barnaby (Jamaica), Annette Beautrais (New Zealand), Siham Benchevron (Morocco), Eleanor Bennett (Belize), Julio Bobes (Spain), José M Bertolote (Brazil), Dora Caballero (Paraguay), Mohamed Chakali (Algeria), Kin Sun Chan (China, Macao SAR), Ana-Maria Chavez-Hernandez (Mexico), Doina Cozman (Romania), Diego De Leo (Australia), Remco De Winter (Netherlands), Soukary Doumbouya (Guinea), Kari Dyregrov (Norway), Michel Dzalamou (Congo), Rabi El Chammay (Lebanon), Félix Evangelista (El Salvador), Mohamed Chakali (Algeria), Rangiau Fariu (Cook Islands), Georg Fiedler (Germany), Gonzalo Baldomero Gonzalez Henriquez (Panama), Tobi Graafsma (Suriname), Onja Grad (Slovenia), Alenka Tancic Grum (Slovenia), Kyooseob Ha (Republic of Korea), Mitra Hefazi (Iran), Hilda Ho (Brunei Darussalam), Seyed Mohammad Hosseini (Iran), Gerard Hutchinson (Trinidad), Tekie Iosefa (Tokelau), Zahidul Islam (Bangladesh), Bhoomikumar Jegannathan (Cambodia), Mark Jordans (Nepal), Nusa Konec Juricic (Slovenia), Nestor Kapusta

(Austria), Chiaki Kawanishi (Japan), Murad Khan (Pakistan), Brigitte Khoury (Lebanon), Michael Lebina (Lesotho), Filifaiésea Lilo (Tonga), Paul Links (Canada), Nasser Loza (Egypt), Daniella Malulu (Seychelles), T Maniam (Malaysia), Sabour A Mansouri (Afghanistan), Cardoso Margarida (Cape Verde), Carlos Martinez (Argentina), Lars Mehlum (Norway), Naomi Mnthali (Botswana), Alkhulaidi Mohamed (Yemen), Driss Moussaoui (Morocco), James Mugisha (Uganda), David Ndeti (Kenya), Tharcisse Niyonzigiye (Burundi), Merete Nordentoft (Denmark), Wilhelm Nordfjord (Iceland), Rory O'Connor (United Kingdom), Silvia Peláez (Uruguay), Michael Phillips (China), Alexander Pinzon (Colombia), Maurizio Pompili (Italy), Vita Postuvan (Slovenia), Toms Pulmanis (Latvia), Mbolatiana Soanirina Raharinivo (Madagascar), Lakshmi Ratnayeke (Sri Lanka), Sateesh Babu Ravulapati (India), Yury Razvodovsky (Belarus), Daniel Reidenberg (USA), Saška Roškar (Slovenia), Vsevolod Rozanov (Ukraine), Outi Ruishalme (Finland), Luis Miguel Sanchez-Loyo (Mexico), Bashir Ahmad Sarwari (Afghanistan), Lourens Schlebusch (South Africa), Armin Schmidtke (Germany), Jozef Sidlo (Slovakia), Chhit Sophal (Cambodia), Jean-Pierre Soubrier (France), Aida Sylla (Senegal), Zonda Tamás (Hungary), Alexandre Teixeira (Portugal), Prakarn Thomyangkoon (Thailand), Edgardo Juan Tolentino (Philippines), Kees Van Heeringen (Belgium), Airi Värnik (Estonia), Margda Waern (Sweden), Abdirisak Mohamed Warsame (Somalia), Barbara Weil (Switzerland), Paul Wong (China, Hong Kong SAR), Antonio Eugenio Zacarias (Mozambique), Anka Zavasnik (Slovenia).

#### WHO HEADQUARTERS

Katerina Ainali, Richard Brown, Somnath Chatterji, Dan Chisholm, Nicolas Clark, Natalie Drew, Tarun Dua, Jane Ferguson, Michelle Funk, Claudia Garcia Moreno, Anna Gruending, Evelyn Kortum, Doris Ma Fat, Wahyu Retno Mahanani, Colin Mathers, Mwansa Nkowane, Margaret Peden, Vladimir Poznyak, Geoffrey Reed, Dag Rekve,

#### INTERNS

Rhett Corker, Justin Granstein, Henrik Heitmann, Eugenie Ng, Amrita Parekh, Charlotte Phillips, Veronica Pisinger, Tahlia Rebello, Nóra Sándor.

#### ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

Adeline Loo (WHO), Grazia Motturi (WHO), Paule Pillard (WHO).

#### PRODUCTION TEAM

**Editing:** David Bramley, Switzerland

**Graphic design and layout:** Yusuke Nakazawa, Japan

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