



## Guidance On Memorials for Suicide Deaths

The time period after a suicide death and the efforts to facilitate the healing of individuals, families, and units from the grief and distress of a suicide loss, as well as to mitigate the negative effects of exposure to suicide, is referred to as Postvention. The postvention efforts to provide everyone who is exposed to suicide loss with compassionate, immediate, and long-term support is vital to comprehensive suicide prevention efforts. Postvention includes opportunities for healthy individual and collective grieving, and includes memorial services.

Experts agree that healthy public opportunities for groups of people that have established relationships and interact closely with one another, such as military units, are an important aspect of postvention. Opportunities to grieve together, such as memorial services, are important to foster resilience by helping loss survivors grieve, heal, and move forward in a healthy manner. In the past, well-meaning leaders intending to mitigate negative impacts of a suicide death may have interfered with plans to memorialize an Airman who died by suicide. This “shut-down” approach may produce other negative effects within the unit and for surviving family members. It is important to note that concerns about suicide contagion or “copy-cats” is legitimate, especially in regards to media and public messaging related to suicide. It is important to balance and distinguish between honoring the Airman’s life without glorifying or conveying judgment regarding their manner of death. Please see the Air Force Suicide Prevention Public Affairs Guideline for safe messaging strategies.

Below are considerations to help leaders facilitate public grieving for the Airman they lost to suicide in a safe manner:

1. Plan memorial services in consultation with the family, supervisor, unit leaders, close colleagues, chaplains, mental health providers, other professionals, and public affairs.
2. Seek guidance, support, and “lessons learned” from other leaders who have lost Airmen to suicide. Other leaders may have also experienced the loss of an Airman to suicide and can provide guidance. There is no need to walk alone. Learn from them and lean on them.
3. During the memorial, strive to honor the life and service of the Airman and the accomplishments and contributions of the Airman. Comfort the bereaved and share the ways you, as a leader, will help those who are affected. Share information about the helping resources on your base.
4. Avoid inadvertently sensationalizing the Airman’s death by sharing details of the manner of the Airman’s death (e.g. the way the Airman killed him/herself, if they left a suicide note, details of the difficulties the Airman was dealing with that may have contributed to their death).
5. Avoid language that assigns fault or guilt. Even though literature suggests that all suicides are preventable, that message during the immediate aftermath of a suicide may communicate fault to family members, supervisors, and friends. Balance sensitivity for the needs of the bereaved with the urgency of suicide prevention efforts/messages.
6. Military burials are conducted under the purview of the Department of Defense Instruction 1300.15 (<https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/130015p.pdf>). There is no reference within this instruction which precludes individuals from receiving a military



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funeral with full honors if the individual died as a result of suicide. No matter how the Airman died, a determination will be made regarding whether the decedent can be buried with full military honors. Full military honors are appropriate in most cases as long as the member has not committed a federal or state capital criminal offense or their behavior has not brought discredit to the Service (DoDI 1300.15).

7. If an Airman's service warrants recommendation for medals/awards, then the applicable award guidance should be followed without respect to the manner of death. Ask the family how they want the medal presented to them. If incorporated into the memorial service, ensure it is clear that the medal is for how the Airman served and does not glorify a death by suicide.
8. Permanent public memorials such as trees, plaques, buildings, or streets with the decedent's names are not recommended as they may inadvertently glorify the manner of death. If unit or family members wish to memorialize their Airman, encourage thoughtful ways they can contribute to suicide prevention efforts, such as a donation to a non-profit or sponsorship of a suicide prevention activity held after an appropriate amount of time after the Airman's death.

The actions of leaders are important during postvention and can greatly aid their unit's healing after a suicide loss. Please see the AF Leader's Postvention Checklist (<https://www.resilience.af.mil>) for help leading throughout this critical time period. Most importantly, remember to take care of yourself and your own grief, and to role model help-seeking. Your examples of self-care have widespread impact throughout your unit.

### **References:**

Air Force Post Suicide Checklist on <https://www.resilience.af.mil>

Air Force Suicide Prevention Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) found on <https://www.resilience.af.mil>

DoD Instruction 1300.15, "Military Funeral Support," December 27, 2017

US National Guidelines for Response after a Suicide Death: <http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/responding-grief-trauma-and-distress-after-suicide-us-national-guidelines>