

# Postvention: A Chaplain's Response

**DOD/VA Annual  
Suicide Prevention Conference**

**14-17 March 2011  
Boston, MA**

**All The Way Home: Preventing Suicide  
Among Service members and Veterans**

**CAPT Donald P. Troast, CHC, USN  
Force Chaplain, COMSUBLANT**

# Focus

- **Highlight importance of postvention actions in response to completed suicide and attempts.**
- **Provide some tools and resources to bring back to your commands.**

# Postvention (assumptions)

- **All involved with suicide will follow reporting procedures as outlined in appropriate service instructions.**
- **CACO/CNO functions pursued and accomplished.**

# Postvention (assumptions)

- **Postvention is not just the immediate responses to event, but long term follow through actions to mitigate further issues and problems for survivors in the future.**

# Assumptions

- **Historically we have focused on prevention and intervention in military.**
- **Postvention is directly related to prevention with:**
  - survivors of successful suicide
  - survivors of attempts

# Postvention (defined)

- **Is all interventions that attempt to reduce the negative consequences that may affect those close to the victim after a suicide has occurred.**
- **Is psychological first aid for those bereaved by suicide. It's purpose ultimately is to restore hope in a person or community devastated by a suicidal event.**

# Postvention (definition)

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

- A **postvention** is an intervention conducted after a suicide, largely taking the form of support for the bereaved (family, friends, professionals and peers). Family and friends of the suicide victim may be at increased risk of suicide themselves.
- The aim is to support and debrief those affected; and reduce the possibility of suicide contagion. Interventions recognize that those bereaved by suicide may be vulnerable to suicidal behavior themselves and may develop complicated grief reactions.
- Postvention includes procedures to alleviate the distress of suicidally bereaved individuals, reduce the risk of imitative suicidal behavior, and promote the healthy recovery of the affected community. Postvention can also take many forms depending on the situation in which the suicide takes place. Schools and colleges may include postvention strategies in overall crisis plans. Individual and group counseling may be offered for survivors (people affected by the suicide of an individual).

# Postvention (definition)

- **“Affected” Individuals may include family members, friends and coworkers.**
- **Affected individuals are often referred to as “survivors” of suicide.**

# Postvention (purposes)

- **To deliver immediate and acute psychological/spiritual support.**
- **Lessen the distress.**
- **Restore coping ability.**
- **Bring hope to a hopeless situation.**
- **Rebuild normalcy around acute loss.**

Postvention (something to consider)

What about the “other”  
survivors?

# Postvention (something to consider)

- **“Survivor of suicide”**: an individual who survives an attempt.
- **“Suicide survivors”**: those left behind by the person who completes a suicide.

# Postvention (why needed)

- **Loss from suicide is shocking and unexpected.**
- **Ensuing grief is more complex, intense and long term.**

# Postvention (why needed)

- **There are layers of grief involved.**
  - 1. Suicide avoidable**
  - 2. Suicide intentional**
  - 3. Suicide unanticipated**
  - 4. Stigma and shame come with it**

# Postvention (why needed)

- **Long term follow up needed to mitigate issues that may crop up in certain individuals after those not greatly affected by suicide return to normal.**

# Postvention (goals)

- **Ease trauma and related effects to survivors.**
- **Reduce the onset and impact of psychological / spiritual distress and disorders.**

# Postvention (goals)

- **Minimize risk of further suicidal behavior.**
- **Encourage resiliency and coping skills.**

# Postvention (special issues)

- **Postvention given in a strained environment not only because of sudden and unexpected loss, but it is an event that people don't want to talk about.**
- **Our baseline stress levels in the military already higher than civilian population.**

# Postvention (special issues)

- **Extreme emotional reactions:**

**Grief**

**Guilt**

**Anger**

**Rejection/Abandonment**

**Shame/Isolation**

**Betrayal**

# Postvention (special issues)

- **Social Stigma.**
- **Survivors may receive much less social support than with “normal” death.**

# Postvention (special issues)

- **Tendency on part of commands to move along due to nature of our military “business”.**
- **Some unit members may need more dwell time to process event.**

# Postvention (goals)

- **Take care of our people.**
- **Take care of family members.**
- **Return command to high state of mission readiness.**

# Postvention (procedures)

- **Be prepared ahead of incident.**
- **Assess the suicide's impact on the command and estimate the level of postvention response.**
- **Assess if postvention necessary.**

# Postvention (procedures)

- **CO contacts the family of the suicide victim after CACO notification.**
- **Determine time to meet with unit and what information to share about the suicide.**

# Postvention (procedures)

- **Determine how to share information about the suicide with entire unit and media.**
- **Identify service members significantly affected by the suicide and initiate a referral mechanism as needed.**

# Postvention (procedures)

- **Conduct daily review with key people.**
- **Plan and conduct appropriate Memorial service(s).**
- **Debrief the postvention response.**

# Postvention (keep in mind)

## **Immediate needs of suicide griever.**

- 1. Know what they are feeling is normal reaction to abnormal situation.**
- 2. Support: preferably from other survivors of completed suicides.**
- 3. Time to grieve: 1-3 days funeral leave not enough.**

# Postvention (keep in mind)

## ● Postvention First Aid

- Establish rapport with survivors.
- Affirm grief normalization.
- Facilitate understanding of scene processing.
- Mobilize support system.
- Educate on community services.
- Encourage follow through.

# Postvention (keep in mind)

- **What complicates suicide loss**

- not able to express grief.

- witnessing or discovering the body.

- being far away from the event.

# Postvention (keep in mind)

- **What complicates suicide loss**
  - controversial/high media interest suicide.
  - legal involvement.
  - problematic relationship leading to event.

# Postvention (keep in mind)

- It is clear to me that everyone needs to be part of the outreach effort. Everyone should know what to watch for: anger, moodiness, insomnia, nightmares, gallows humor or none at all, jumpiness, suspicion, withdrawal, loss of appetite; how to ask if someone wants to talk, and what to do if they need to but don't want to. We want people to know they are needed, and that they can get help anonymously at [www.militaryonesource.mil](http://www.militaryonesource.mil), or [www.militarymentalhealth.org](http://www.militarymentalhealth.org), [www.health.mil](http://www.health.mil).
- These are things all chaplains know and do, every day. We in medicine know that, as the old French saying puts it, our job is to “cure sometimes, relieve often, comfort always.” But we do not always succeed. We need your help.
- So thank you for counseling our wounded; thank you for bringing home our lost sheep; thank you for counseling our caregivers. One hand washes the other. The great military surgeon Ambrose Pare said, “I dress the wound, God heals it”. We are now struggling to support those who are struggling. We need your prayers. Whether the wound is of the flesh, or of the mind we only dress it. God heals it.

S.W. Casells Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs

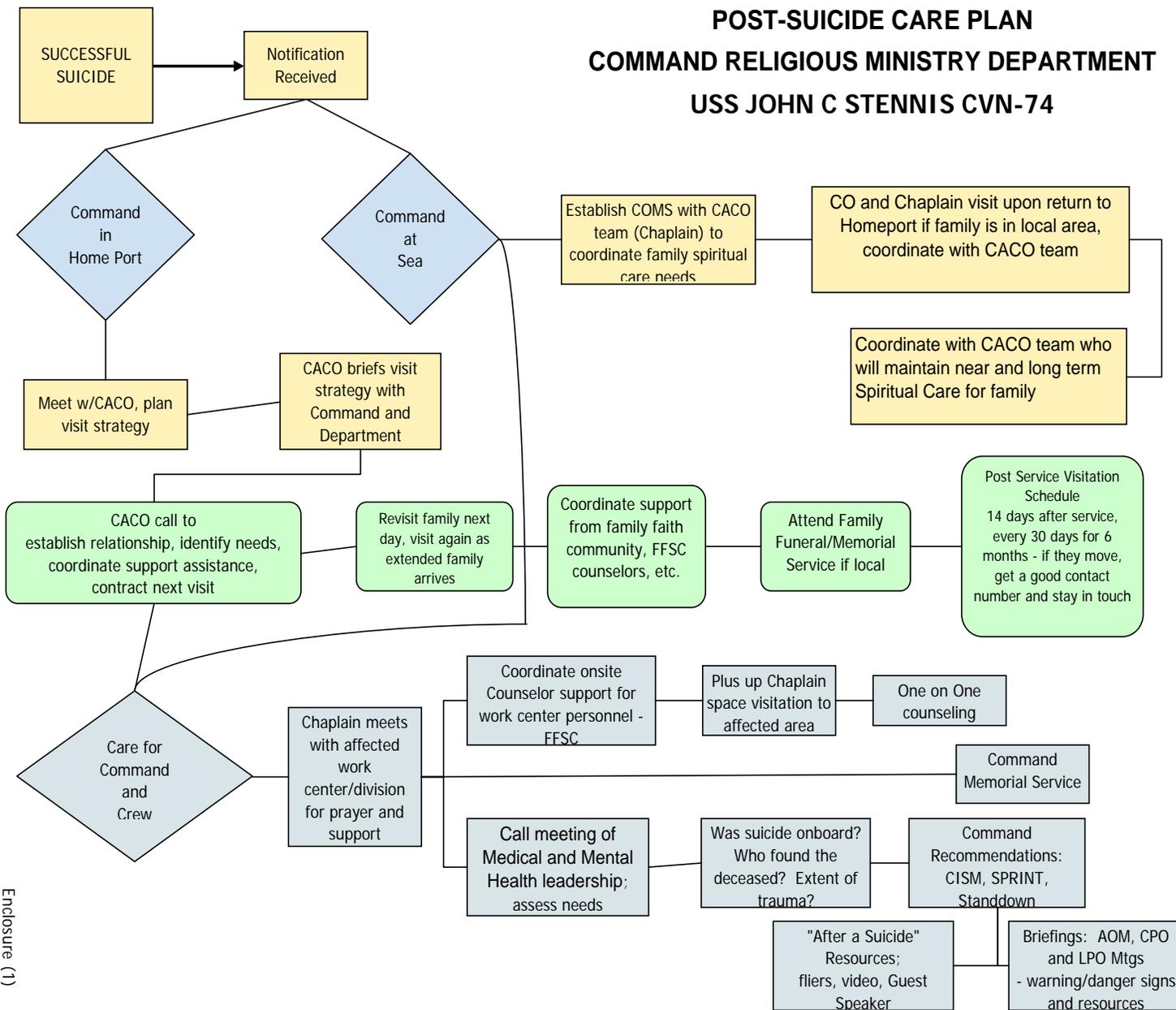
# Postvention (resources)

- <http://workingminds.org/aftermathresources.html>
- <http://www.sprc.org>
- <http://www.dcoe.health.mil/Links.aspx>

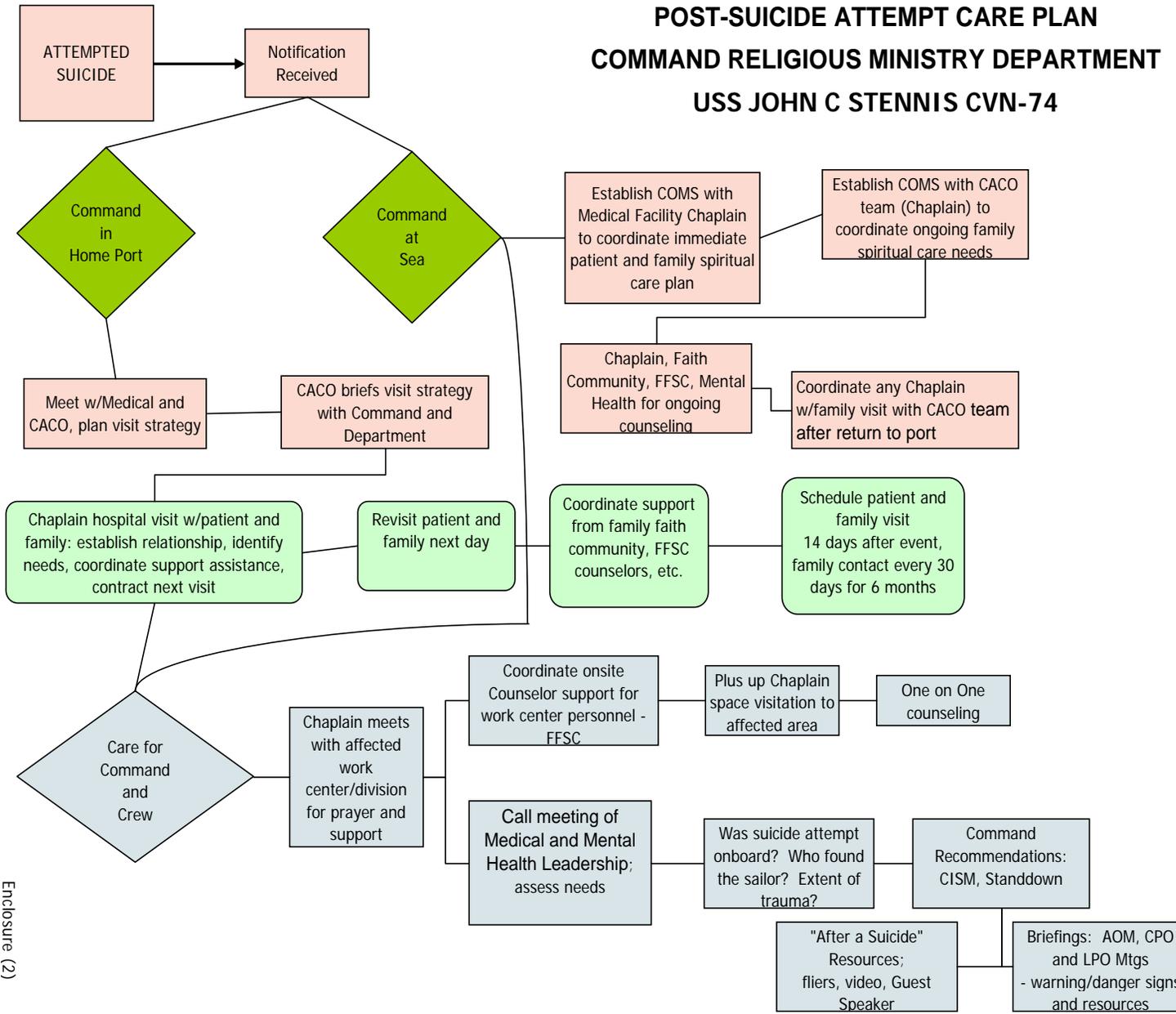
# Postvention (resources)

- <http://lifeguard.tripod.com/links.html#SURVIVORS>
- <http://www.samhsa.gov/prevention/suicide.aspx>

**POST-SUICIDE CARE PLAN  
COMMAND RELIGIOUS MINISTRY DEPARTMENT  
USS JOHN C STENNIS CVN-74**



# POST-SUICIDE ATTEMPT CARE PLAN COMMAND RELIGIOUS MINISTRY DEPARTMENT USS JOHN C STENNIS CVN-74

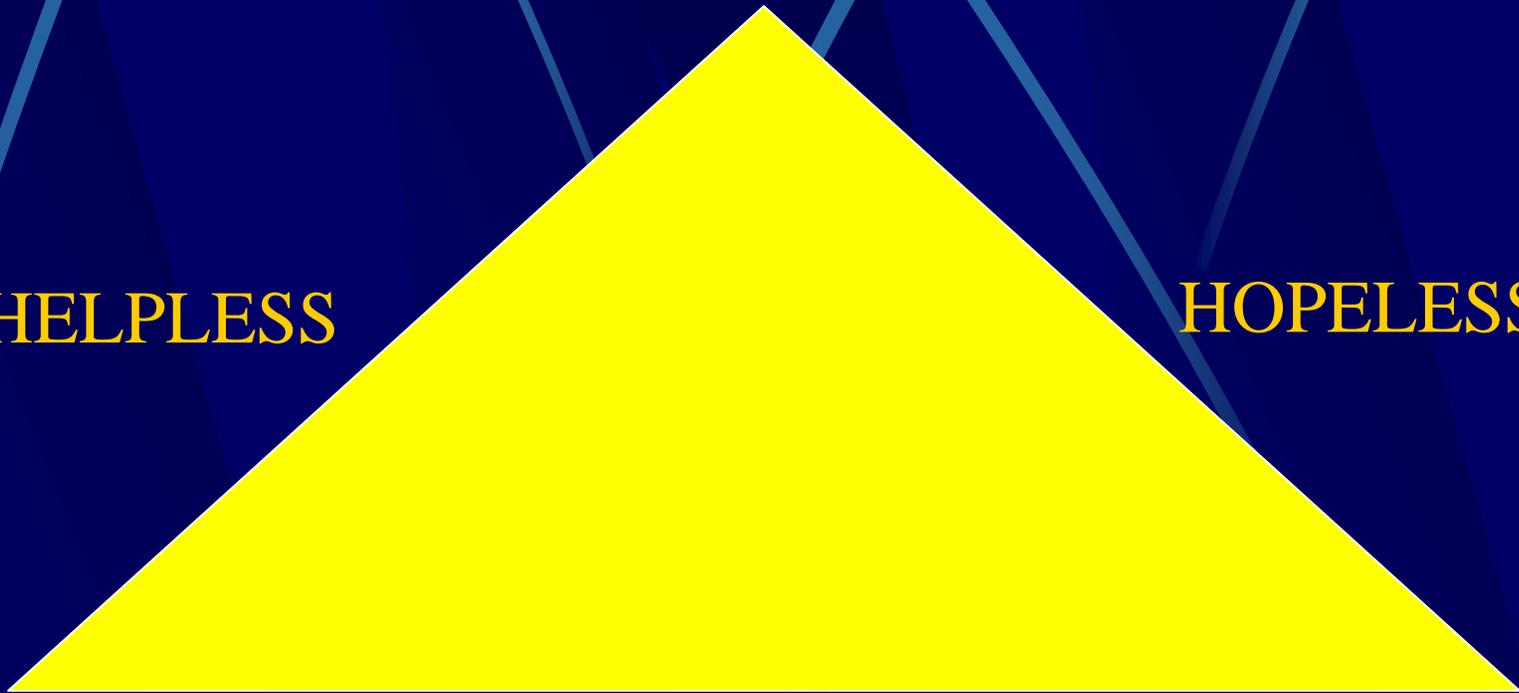


# SUICIDE TRIANGLE

HELPLESS

HOPELESS

CRISIS



# Remember

- **Human understanding is the most effective weapon against suicide. The greatest need is to deepen the awareness and sensitivity of people to their fellow human beings.**

# Remember

**ASK YOURSELF TWO QUESTIONS  
BEFORE TURNING IN FOR THE DAY.**

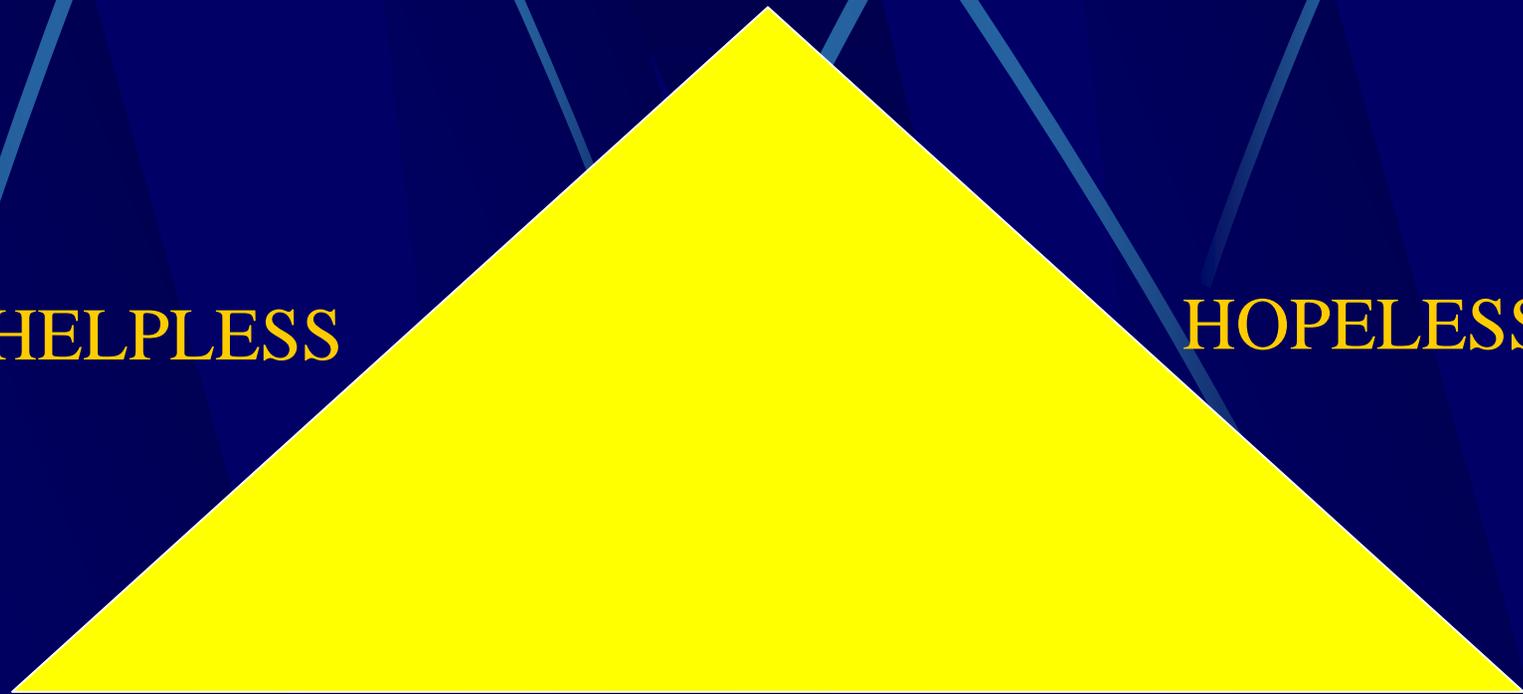
**IS THE SUICIDE TRIANGLE  
CLOSING FOR SOMEONE  
YOU KNOW?**

# SUICIDE TRIANGLE

HELPLESS

HOPELESS

CRISIS



# Remember

The second question?

**WITH THE KNOWLEDGE YOU  
HAVE CAN YOU SLEEP  
PEACEFULLY TONIGHT?**