

Approaching the Physician Assisted Suicide (PAS)-Vulnerable Individual



Those considering physician assisted suicide are dealing with sensitive situations involving serious pressure coming from many directions. In this situation, finding clarity in decision-making can be challenging. It is important for someone offering pastoral care to acknowledge the sensitivity of the situation and get to the root of what he or she is going through. It is the hope that, together, they can rediscover the reality that every life is worth living, until its final breath, and seek consolation in the fact that every moment, however difficult, is an opportunity to love and be loved.

1. **Listen.** With all the pressures an individual considering assisted suicide experiences, they will likely benefit from being able to process and articulate the challenges they are wrestling with. Allowing the individual to verbalize their current state without immediately jumping in to try and “solve” their problems will create an environment showing the individual that what they are going through matters and that they are deeply valued.

2. **Understand.** Make every effort to approach the assisted suicide-vulnerable individual with a spirit of understanding.

Through compassionate conversation, try to identify the particular reasons driving them to consider assisted suicide as a viable option. Probe for pressures they may be experiencing, including those related to familial concerns, financial concerns, physical limitations, and other particular anxieties and fears. Try to get a good sense of how the individual feels about their current circumstances, what they are thinking, and how these affect their behavior.

3. **Counsel.** Try to help the individual and their family to see that the challenges he or she is experiencing will never outweigh the value of his or her life. If the individual is paralyzed by a feeling of being “out of control,” help them to find freedom in that which is out of their hands. Speak words of love, sharing how Christ, who knows suffering, also knows and shares in the individual’s pain, and He desires to take it upon His shoulders. Because of Christ’s sacrifice, even the greatest of sufferings can be transformed by the power of the cross to yield the greatest of joys. Help the suffering individual find hope in the possibility of these joys, encouraging him or her to seek reconciliation with God

and others where needed and to receive moments of consolation and love from God and those who surround him or her.

4. **Assist.** To the best of your ability, help connect the individual with resources available that might alleviate some of the pressures he or she is experiencing (see Local Resource Guide for the Ill and Elderly). Pay careful attention to the full breadth of their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs, given their circumstances.

When ministering to an individual who is struggling to see the value in his or her life in the face of suffering, keep in mind the most common reasons cited for choosing assisted suicide, according to data from Organ, where assisted suicide has been legal since 1998²¹:

- Loss of autonomy (91.6%)
- Activities of daily life not enjoyable (89.7%)
- Loss of dignity (78.7%)
- Inadequate pain control (25.2%)