



Retrospective Fatality Analysis: Postmortem Investigation and Ethical Values

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We Want You to Be Able to:

- Describe Retrospective Fatality Analysis (RFA) and its roles in research, prevention, and supporting survivors.
- Identify the factors that contribute to increased suicide risk, such as oppression, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice.
- Enhance suicide prevention strategies by challenging these underlying issues effectively.
- Explain how RFA and talking about a suicide death helps survivors make meaning of a loss by understanding life events, relationships, and the sociocultural context of suicide.

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We Want You to Be Able to:

- Describe how RFA helps people reconstruct a loved one's life and engage other people and communities in conversation about suicide and suicide prevention.
- Determine individuals who require training in RFA and those who meet the eligibility criteria for training.

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2021 United States Suicide Data

- More than 48,000 Americans died by suicide in 2021.¹
 - 136 deaths per day
 - 1 person dies by suicide every 10.9 minutes
- Suicide is the 11th leading cause of death.
- Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for adolescents.
- Firearms are the most lethal suicide method.
- More males die by suicide than females.
- Suicides are 5 % to 25% underreported.

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Fatality Review

- Single and multiple cases
- Plays a role in:
 - Equivocal death investigation
 - Drug overdoses
 - Autoerotic asphyxia
 - Atypical gunshot wounds
 - Single car, single driver motor vehicle accidents
 - "Suicide by cop"
 - Suicide prevention
 - Expert testimony
 - Healing

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis

- A comprehensive analysis of biopsychosocial and environmental factors preceding an individual's death by suicide or other unnatural deaths
- Purposes
 - Inform suicide prevention efforts
 - Research
 - Expert witness testimony
 - Equivocal death determinations
 - Stop contagion
 - Survivor meaning-making

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis The Protocol

- The protocol was created by a multidisciplinary team of experts.
- Robust and comprehensive postmortem investigative tool comprises 25 domains. Following are examples:
 - Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration
 - Education
 - Gender Identity
 - Perpetrator Status, Engagement with Law Enforcement, Judicial, and Correctional History
 - Physical Health
 - Mental Health


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Retrospective Fatality Analysis The Protocol

- Substance Use
- Military and First Responder Experience
- Social Media Use
- Religion and Religiosity
- Connectedness and Attachment
- Coping Mechanisms, Protective Factors, and Avocational Interests
- Each domain was reviewed by a panel of experts.
- Contributing Factors
- Protective Factors


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Retrospective Fatality Analysis Contributing Factors

Previous suicide attempt(s)	Aggression or irritability
Mental and physical health history	Lack of access to care
Loss	Historical trauma or oppression
Legal problems	Stigma
Family history	Discrimination
Stress of any kind	Access to means
Impulsivity	Exposure to violence

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis Protective Factors

Reasons for living	School support
Strong and defined cultural identity	Access to care
Reduced access to means	Moral objections to suicide
Healthy coping mechanisms	Effective problem-solving skills
Community support	Social support and sense of belonging
Education	
Access to consistent, high-quality care	

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis Ethical Considerations

- Domains are research-based
- Distress scale and crisis assessment question
- Resource materials
- Not used for post-mortem diagnosis
- IRB approval required for research
- Obtain consent from interviewees
- Eligibility requirements for participation in Retrospective Fatality Analysis training include the following:
 - A minimum of a bachelor's degree in the social sciences field
 - Interviewing experience
 - Experience working with loss survivors

Value: Competence
Ethical Principle: Social workers practice within their area of competence and develop and enhance their area of expertise.

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis Ethical Considerations


- Cannot be modified without input from the creators
- Protocol use requires certification
- Participation in a mentorship program
- We pair structure, oversight, and support to ensure an ethical process

Evaluation and Research:
monitor/evaluate, promote/facilitate research, critically examine

- Understand why protocol cannot be modified
- Importance of certification
- Value of mentorship

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis The Process

- Semi-structured interviews
 - Identify interviewees
 - Consent
 - Identify resources for loss survivors
- Evidence from the site of death (e.g., police reports)
- Physical autopsy and lab reports
- Archival documents
 - Medical records
 - School records
 - Mental health records
 - Criminal records

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Retrospective Fatality Analysis

- The Interview
 - Opening questions
 - Closing questions
 - Distress scale
 - Know
 - The facts
 - What to look for
 - What to say and what not to say
 - What to do

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Exposure to Suicide

- It is estimated that 135 people are exposed to a single suicide.²
 - 6,750,000 in 2021
- Six people experience major life disruption for a single suicide death.²
 - 289,000 in 2021

1 in 58 Americans in 2021 have been exposed to suicide in their lifetime.²


Ethical Principle:

Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships

- Many of those exposed to suicide feel vulnerable and weak
- Reaching out to offer support helps those exposed to become familiar with resources

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Meaning-Making and Support for Loss Survivors

- Accept that death was a suicide
- Answer the question "Why?"
- Decrease blame, guilt, denial, anger, and other feelings resulting from a loved one's suicide
- Help survivors gain new perspectives
- Help prevent the next suicide
- Help alleviate a survivor's isolation

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Ethical Reasons to Serve Families Bereaved by Suicide


- Exposure to suicide increases vulnerability to suicide.³
- Suicidal risk is significantly higher than those unexposed.³
- Loss survivors found suicide more thinkable and more doable.⁴
- Retrospective Fatality Analysis:
 - Opens the door for families bereaved to tell their stories in a non-clinical and therapeutic manner.
 - Helps families begin to engage in recovery and find the anger felt after a suicide less heightened.
 - Facilitate(s) a sense of purpose and recognition that participation may help others.

Ethical Principle:
Social workers challenge social injustice

- Stigma

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Ethical Reasons to Serve Families Bereaved by Suicide

- Is an effective tool for suicide prevention.
- Helps families begin to engage in recovery and find the anger felt after a suicide less heightened.
- Families bereaved by suicide tell us they feel:
 - Heard.
 - Grateful for the opportunity to talk about their loved one positively.
 - Empowered by telling their story.
 - Part of a process that will create change in a system in preventing suicide.⁵
 - Helpful by contributing to research, and suicide prevention strategies.⁶

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 **Ethical Reasons to Serve Families Bereaved by Suicide**

- Many informants valued discussing the circumstances with a professional who has insight into the process around suicides. Thus, the interview facilitated emotional and cognitive grief tasks and reorientation through meaning-making.
- It is an opportunity to address complicated grief.
- The inability to reconstruct a meaningful personal reality, an outcome to which individuals with insecure working models of self and relationships are especially vulnerable.

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 **Janet's Personal Impact**

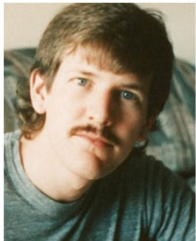
- Sharing my story helped me:
 - Tell the story of my brother's life and my loss
 - Answer the "why" questions
 - Be the voice for suicide prevention and loss survivors
 - Begin to break the stigma
- Because of my story, I:
 - Became a non-traditional USI social work student and now have an MSW, LCSW
 - Became a Retrospective Fatality Analysts Consultant
 - Am a public speaker
 - Help loss survivors and people in distress

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 **Janet's Personal Impact**

- I have gained:
 - Self-confidence
 - Passion for Awareness
 - Increased self-esteem



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