Program Description

Psychological Autopsy Certification Training Program

Developed in 1968 by AAS’s founding president, Dr. Edwin Shneidman, and refined over the years since, the psychological autopsy has become a best practice postmortem procedure to reconstruct the proximate and distal causes of an individual’s death by suicide or to ascertain the most likely manner of death where that manner of death is equivocal and left undetermined by a medical examiner or coroner. The psychological autopsy, furthermore, helps promote understandings to the often-asked “why?” question raised by survivors regarding the suicide of their loved one, is used in case-control research studies to better ascertain risk factors for suicide, and helps to answer questions of causation in both individual cases (e.g. where negligence may be alleged) of suicide and interconnections between cases (as in clusters of suicides), hence lessons learned to inform prevention efforts.

Training Course

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the course is now offered virtually.

The course is a virtual training program in the psychological autopsy leading to certification as a Certified Psychological Autopsy Investigator. The training course will teach the historical foundations to and development of the psychological autopsy; its applications in clinical, research, and forensic settings; the distinctions between the psychological autopsy and parallel procedures; common methodologies for its use in manner of death determinations, to assist survivors, in cluster analyses, in case-control research, etc.; and its methodological limitations. Participants will be trained to administer a model, semi-structured interview protocol (and view variations to this) and will learn how to analyze derived data to inform an understanding of developmental pathways to death by suicide, and will critique psychological autopsy-based reports in order to hone analytic skills. Participants will be instructed in the use of associated consent and release forms and on procedures to gather ancillary archived records regarding a decedent. (Pre-work readings will be assigned in advance of the training.)

Learning Objectives:

Upon completion of this training, participants will be able to:

- Discuss the history and purposes of the psychological autopsy as a postmortem investigatory tool.
- Identify the procedures used in the conduct of a psychological autopsy investigation.
- Utilize the psychological autopsy interview protocol and associated procedures to conduct a psychological autopsy interview.

Certification

After completing the training, those who wish to be certified are required to independently conduct and submit a psychological autopsy case report that evidences appropriate interpretation of findings from protocol-based interviews and archived records. Trainees are responsible for securing their own cases, including any clearances or permissions. Instructions for submitting a case for consideration will be given during the training.

Once certified through the AAS Psychological Autopsy Certification Program, certificants may, thereafter, list the certification from AAS as a credential that offers assurance that one has demonstrated training and expertise in the use of this procedure. AAS provides confirmation of certification to third parties upon request.

Maintenance of Certification

Initial certification is good for three years. A fee of $300 is charged to maintain certification ($100 per year).

In order to remain in good standing for the fourth through sixth years, a certified Psychological Autopsy Investigator (PAI) must submit a second case within the first three-year period of certification. Once this is approved, the certification is good for a second three-year period.

During the second three-year period, a PAI must submit a case to be renewed for five more years. Thereafter, PAIs must submit a case every five years.
Applicant Eligibility Requirements:
Registrants must possess a minimum of a Masters degree in a social sciences/behavioral health field OR alternative training in interviewing skills and a behavioral science background OR current employment/volunteer activities consistent with the opportunity to conduct psychological autopsies (a curriculum vitae (CV) or resume is required with this application), e.g. law enforcement, medical examiner system, etc. If applicants are unsure whether they meet the minimum requirement for admission to the training course, they may submit a cover letter and copy of CV to Jennifer Tinch (jtinch@suicidology.org) and a case-by-case decision regarding eligibility will be made.

Course Presenter:
- Ramya Sundararaman, MD

Criteria for Evaluation of Psychological Autopsy Case Study:
- Completeness of reporting
- Competent analysis and summarization of the case
- Key questions are addressed and answered in such a way as to create a clear understanding of why the decedent died in the way they died at the time they died.

Group Training
If your organization or group of organizations would like to arrange a training session virtually; please contact AAS to discuss potential dates and costs: info@suicidology.org.

Optional Continuing Education (CE):
CE credits may be earned for successful completion of the workshop component of the certification. Participants can earn 8.5 credits.

Certified Counselors: American Association of Suicidology has been approved by NBCC as an Approved Continuing Education Provider, ACEP No. 5607. Programs that do not qualify for NBCC credit are clearly identified. AAS is solely responsible for all aspects of the programs.

Psychologists: The American Association of Suicidology is approved by the American Psychological Association to sponsor continuing education for psychologists. AAS maintains responsibility for the program and its content.

Social worker credits: This program is Approved by the National Association of Social Workers (Approval # 886455354-9770) for 8.5 continuing education contact hours.