

FIERCE GOODBYE

LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF SUICIDE

STUDY GUIDE





FIERCE GOODBYE

LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF SUICIDE

Produced by Mennonite Media

Study Guide by Crystal Horning with Sheri Hartzler

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Session I	Stories of Suicide Survivors.	6
Session II	Aftermath of Suicide	10
Session III	Faith Communities.	13
Session IV	Survivor Support	17
Resources	20

Mennonite Media

A department of Mennonite Mission Network

1251 Virginia Avenue

Harrisonburg VA 22802-2497

800.999.3534

Produced by Mennonite Media for Faith & Values Media

© 2004 Mennonite Mission Network. Printed in the U.S.A.

Design by The Hatchery Design Company, www.thehatchery.cc

WELCOME TO

FIERCE GOODBYE:

LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF SUICIDE

Thank you for taking time to sit in the shadow of suicide. To be honest this is not a comfortable place to be. My own experience is that understanding the turmoil and grief a family goes through after a loved one dies by suicide is not easy, but is an important task for the faith community. I have lived in the shadow of suicide for many years with a sister who has attempted to take her life many times, living with the knowledge that she may likely do it again and she may likely succeed. This shadow brings many questions. Where is God? How do I pray for my sister, for myself? I think to myself, “How can you keep doing this to your family?”

Leading a study around Fierce Goodbye: Living in the Shadow of Suicide is a gift you give to your faith community and to survivors. As you will soon learn, issues around suicide are usually kept secret. You are providing the community with a chance to share the secrets and to find freedom in living in the shadow of suicide.

— Crystal Horning

STRUCTURE. *There are four sessions outlined in this study guide. Each lesson begins with a quote. You are encouraged to begin each lesson by reading the quote. After reading, invite the group to reflect silently.*

Encourage them to focus on an aspect of the quote that has meaning to them. You may want to have the quote written on paper and placed on the wall or give as a handout.

For your own preparation, we suggest you read the material found in the Background section before teaching the class. Most of this material is found on the website www.fiercegoodbye.com and can also be suggested to the group for follow-up reading.

If you only have one block of time, we encourage you to allow enough time after watching the 44-minute documentary to talk about the stories, the emotions, and the ideas that are experienced. You will probably find that many in the group will want to tell about people they have known who died by suicide. Allow enough time for this to happen, as it may be the first time an opportunity has been given.

PLEASE NOTE: *This subject is sensitive and difficult to understand. Please ask all class participants to treat conversations around the subject of suicide with care and confidence. Treat the sharing as a gift that is to be treasured for life.*

Session I

STORIES OF SUICIDE SURVIVORS



“ ... with all the knowledge and all the skills and all the prayers, sometimes we still lose people, and we have to realize that although we are there ... we are not responsible for someone else’s life, in the sense of being able to save it ...”

SHERRY DAVIS MOLOCK

BACKGROUND

Read the statistics on suicide at www.fiercegoodbye.com under Suicide Statistics.

Also read the background stories of the families interviewed on the video at www.fiercegoodbye.com/ under Family Stories or watch the *Family Stories* segment of the DVD.

INTRODUCTION

1. Begin with the question: What is your definition of suicide?
Possible answers might be:

- The act of killing oneself purposely
- The easy way out
- A coward’s way of dealing with life
- Just another form of death
- Self murder (classic)
- Death with dignity

2. Invite the group to share their experience with suicide, whether it was a friend, family, co-worker or self attempts. *Remind the group that the sharing will be confidential, and held with respect and love.*

Share this thought from Kay Jamison (psychologist from Johns Hopkins University) with the group:

“Suicide is not a nice business. Suicide is not a kind business. It doesn’t give you the kind of choices you’d like to have. You’re not thinking at your best. All you’re thinking about is there is nothing else that seems to work. You’re a nightmare to your family, you’re a nightmare to your friends, you’re a nightmare to yourself, you don’t recognize yourself and you are not who you think you used to be. It is a dreadful state ...”

Suicide is seen as a solution to a problem. Nothing else seems to work so dying by suicide is that “something” that will hopefully take the pain away.

The term “suicide survivors” refers to families and friends who are left behind after a suicide has occurred. If you aren’t a suicide survivor you may think this term means someone who has attempted suicide and survived. However, suicide survivors are indeed those who are left behind. The first video segment will introduce you to five courageous families who share their stories as suicide survivors.

WATCH VIDEO SEGMENT 00:00 – 15:50

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is your immediate reaction to the stories you are hearing? Some possible reactions might be:
 - How could someone do this to his or her family?
 - Anger
 - There is more to life
 - I understand
 - Where was their faith?
 - Confusion

2. Review the stories of the individuals and their families who are represented on the video. You may want to ask which story touched you the most and why.

Jon Borotrager was a creative, strong-willed, athletic, “winsome” child. He was a challenge to raise but also a great joy for Jonas and Barbara Borotrager, parents of three sons. Then Jon was diagnosed with Tourette Syndrome. In his teenage years he began drinking and using other drugs. Through several suicide attempts and hospitalizations, he was faithfully mentored by friends and family. But at the age of 21, Jon was found dead in his apartment of a drug overdose.

Gloria Jean Akinduro was an American who married a Nigerian; they had a son, Stephen. Because of the father’s job, the family was transferred several times and in Nigeria, Stephen’s mother became depressed, due in part to cultural adjustments. Stephen was only nine when his mother ended her life. His Aunt Brenda brings wider family insight to the documentary.

Jami Marks was an active, outspoken, fun-loving older sister to three younger brothers. She was also exploring the next stages in her dream of becoming a holistic healer. She went to a botanical school in Colorado, on a spiritual trek to Nepal, and was living by herself in a tent on an organic farm in Hawaii when she became very depressed. After being home for only a week, at the age of 21, she took her life.

Matthew Fox was an active, capable guy, full of life and himself. His twin brother, Ben, has great memories of their growing up years as inseparable friends. Interested in pursuing a career in the environment/recycling, Matt was employed at a greenhouse after stints during college working at recycling in New Mexico and organic farming in Australia. When Matt was 24 he died of suicide.

Darrel Brubaker was a busy and compassionate pastor who was greatly troubled by the sexual abuse (and cover-up by church leaders) of some young men who had told him of their abuse. His parents, Merle and Ila Brubaker and his wife, Sheri, suffered with him through a two-year battle with depression and hospitalization. He was beginning a new job as a campus pastor when he ended his life at the age of 33.

3. What is it like to hear these stories and know that there was nothing in life that could or would sustain those who took their lives?
4. How can families know when depression is serious or passing? If it is impossible to detect when someone intends to die by suicide, how do parents/family cope with the on-going worry? For more information on depression see www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/depression.cfm
5. What statistics about suicide stood out to you from the beginning of the video? Which of these statistics were surprising to you? Possible answers:
 - 90-95 percent of suicides are associated with a history of mental illness
 - Four to five times more men than women kill themselves
 - Suicide is the second leading cause of death in teens

MYTHS & FACTS

Close this session by discussing the *Myth & Fact Sheet* (separate insert) or use an overhead projector for this discussion. Cover the right hand column with a paper. Read the left column statement. Discuss whether it is a myth or a fact, and then check the right hand column for the correct response.

Session II

AFTERMATH OF SUICIDE



“Nobody gives you a guide in life to deal with tremendous tragedy. And people respond in idiosyncratic ways ... it seems to me very human to respond (to suicide) with a certain amount of relief.”

KAY REDFIELD JAMISON

“He lost his life, I lost my validity and credibility.”

E. BETSY ROSS

BACKGROUND

Check out some websites written by or about suicide survivors, such as:

www.thegiftofkeith.com

www.road2healing.com/story.html

www.afsp.org/research/articles.htm

INTRODUCTION

Have the group look at the terminology used for suicide. Read the following: *Suicide is a form of death, which often may be stigmatized by terminology. We say people commit suicide, commit crimes and are committed to institutions. We do not say they commit heart attacks or cancer. We say they died by a heart attack or cancer – why not say they died by suicide?*

— E. Betsy Ross

This session will focus on questions people have after the death of a loved one by suicide, and responses of other people.

WATCH VIDEO SEGMENT 15:50 – 20:20

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Most of the survivors found their loved one's body. What would it be like to find your loved one and know they intentionally took their own life?
2. Jonas experienced a "sigh of relief" with Jon's death. Is this O.K.? Why would this have been a relief for Jonas?
3. Jill shared about the "rainbow" that appeared when she shared the news with her husband. Was this rainbow from God? How are our responses shaped by our own attitudes, faith and outlook?
4. Surviving a death by suicide is different from those left behind from terminal illness, accidental causes, homicide, sudden illness and natural causes. What were feelings the suicide survivors expressed? Some responses might be:
 - Feelings of deep abandonment
 - Feelings of deep guilt

- Intense anger and sadness
- Self blame — what more could they have done to help the individual
- Feelings of pain, ache

E. Betsy Ross, in her book, *After Suicide: A Ray of Hope*, suggests some other possible responses:

- Shock and denial
- Searching for meaning
- Incomplete mourning
- Depression and self-destruction
- Withdrawal
- Shame, blame, guilt and relief

5. It took three years for Gwen Carr to keep from constantly thinking about the suicide. Merle Brubaker stated that “I don’t expect to ever get over it” and it has been 12 years. What is your response to these time spans?

Session III

FAITH COMMUNITIES



“The church often is very good during the acute grieving process, right during the funeral. And then right after that everyone goes back to business as usual, without realizing that for the family their life is never going to be the same again.”

SHERRY DAVIS MOLOCK

BACKGROUND

Go to www.fiercegoodbye.com under Faith Communities Respond for various topics related to responses by faith communities to suicide, including how churches have been helpful/hurtful, the role of ritual, a letter to pastors and counselors, and a vision for churches.

INTRODUCTION

Talk about suicide in the Bible. Suicide is not new to people of faith, as shown in scripture. Summarize these passages or have participants look them up and summarize for the group.

- In the Old Testament, King Saul (2 Sam. 1:1-16) falls upon his sword rather than being taken captive by the Philistines.
- Samson, (Judges 16:6-31) the blind giant, pulls down the columns of the Temple killing himself and others.
- Ahithophel, (2 Sam. 17:23) counselor to David and Absalom, hung himself after his advice was rejected.

- Zimri, (I Kings 16:18-19) king of Israel for seven days was afraid of falling into enemy hands, so he burned his palace down around him.
- Abimelech, (Judges 9:52-54) son of Gideon, commanded his aide to kill him after a woman mortally wounded him.

The only direct account of suicide in the New Testament is the story of Judas (Matthew 27:3-5). When Judas saw what happened to Jesus as a result of his betrayal he went and hanged himself. As Lloyd Carr points out in the video and his book, *Fierce Goodbye: Living in the Shadow of Suicide*, Judas is condemned in the Bible for his betrayal, but not for his act of suicide.

The act of suicide is wrong but the Christian who commits suicide is not condemned to hell because he/she is saved by grace. Christians are sinners and commit acts of sin. They overeat, overwork, cheat, exceed the speed limit, wish harm to someone, gossip, etc. But most Christians believe if a Christian died today with a sinful act having just been committed, this individual would not be condemned to hell. The Christian life is a series of steps forward and slips back. The ideal is complete and perfect deliverance from sin. The reality is “scales on the eyes and thorns in the flesh.” Only Christ’s sufficient grace sees us through. The sufficient grace is evident in John 10:27-29 which states: “My sheep listen to my voice, I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”

WATCH VIDEO SEGMENT 20:20 – 27:20

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What were the reactions by family members regarding God as a result of the suicide? Possible responses include:
 - Stephen was angry with God and saw God absent from his prayers and not helping his mother.
 - Sheri couldn't go to church for a while nor sing, "Great is Thy Faithfulness." The minister at Darrel's funeral prayed that God would forgive Darrel.
 - Joy's daughter was told her uncle was in hell.
 - Gail screamed at God and didn't want to go to church.
2. How do you think you would respond to the family of a loved one who took his/her life?
3. Do you believe suicide is a sin? Is the person with a mental illness responsible for their act? Do you believe God would accept the loved one? Is the loved one forgiven?
4. Do you believe that the family is condemned as much as the loved one?
5. How can healing occur after suicide?
6. Was suicide an answer to a survivor's prayer that their child be healed?
7. Louise Wirick says, "The stronger a survivor's faith, the harder it is to seek counsel in a Christian community (www.survivorsroad2healing.com). Are our faith communities closed to survivors? What experiences support your answer?
8. Sherry Davis Molock says, "God's grace covers a multitude of sin — even suicide." Would you agree? Why or why not?

HOW CAN FAITH COMMUNITIES RESPOND?

1. Imagine yourself in the survivor's shoes. What would you need from those around you?
2. Have the group brainstorm (and put on chalkboard or newsprint) a list of what the survivors from the video said they needed from the faith community. Some items to include:
 - Encourage them to talk openly
 - Friends become God incarnate
 - Hugs
 - Sitting in silence
 - Pastor visits, ongoing
 - Refrain from asking "Are you over this yet?"
 - Standing invitations
 - Healing rituals
 - A way to express self
 - Permission to talk
 - Openness at funerals
 - Give permission for survivors to resent God and be angry with God.

Session IV

SURVIVOR SUPPORT



“People that seem to be most resilient are the ones that reach out to help other people. They go to survivor groups, and are first helped by other people, and then try and do something to help educate the community, their churches, friends, and advocate at a national level ... I don’t think any of them would say they’ve gotten over it. But I think they would say they have used that pain to help them move on.”

KAY REDFIELD JAMISON

BACKGROUND

Read Suggestions for Helping Survivors, from www.fiercegoodbye.com under How to Help a Survivor.

INTRODUCTION

Ask the group for experiences they have had relating to suicide survivors. If no one knows a suicide survivor, have the group discuss how they think they would respond to someone in this situation. In this segment of the video we will hear how survivors have found support for themselves and how they have moved on in many cases, to help others.

WATCH VIDEO SEGMENT 27:20 – 42:30

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did the families work through their grief? Look for these responses:
 - Gave themselves permission to grieve
 - Attended support groups
 - Refrained from apologizing
 - Got counseling
 - Writing
 - Reached out to others
 - Used artwork
 - Allowed self to live life to its fullest
2. “We’re not doing enough in our faith community for long-term mourning.” Rabbi Roberts made this statement. Do you agree? Disagree? Why or why not?
3. How would you talk about God with survivors?
4. How could you make yourself available to survivors?
5. What one thing have you learned that you did not know before you began this study?
6. A congregation can respond to the issue of suicide within its walls or community. Here are some suggestions. What can you add to these? Which ones would the group like to do?
 - Locate support groups in your community such as survivors of suicide groups or mental health centers for those suffering from depression. Post in an accessible place.

- Make resources on suicide and depression available in your church library.
 - Invite a professional to your church to talk about suicide.
7. Invite an individual to share what it has been like to struggle with suicide. Invite persons to share who have lost loved ones to suicide.

CLOSING

Today we know that thought processes in a mentally ill brain can sometimes convince a person to do something they otherwise wouldn't do. If someone, while ill, determines to take his or her own life, you may not be able to stop them. But there are many things you can and should do. You can educate yourself about suicide as well as pray for and support those confronted with suicide. And if a friend or family member succeeds in committing suicide, don't own the tragedy as your own personal failure.

For more on suicide prevention, go to www.fiercegoodbye.com.

RESOURCES

WEBSITES

www.fiercegoodbye.com - Accompanying website for *Fierce Goodbye* video.

www.suicidology.org - American Association of Suicidology.
202-237-2280.

www.afsp.org - American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.
888-333-AFSP

www.thegiftofkeith.org - The Gift of Keith

www.hopeline.com - Kristin Brooks Hope Center, and home of the 800-SUICIDE hotline.

<http://suicide.mentalhelp.net> - Mental Health Net. 614-764-0143.

www.nimh.nih.gov/home.cfm - National Institute of Mental Health. 301-443-4513

www.nopcas.com - National Organization for People of Color Against Suicide. 866-899-5317

www.oassis.org - OASSIS, Organization for Attempters and Survivors of Suicide in Interfaith Services. 240-632-0335

www.save.org - Suicide Awareness Voices of Education.
612-946-7998.

www.spanusa.org - Suicide Prevention Action Network USA.
202-449-3600

www.survivingsuicide.com - Surviving Suicide.

www.survivorsofsuicide.com - Survivors of Suicide

www.road2healing.com - Survivors Road2Healing

www.yellowribbon.org - Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program. 303-429-3530

BOOKS

Available from Mennonite Media

800-999-3534 or at www.thirdway.com/resources

Fierce Goodbye: Living in the Shadow of Suicide: a personal account of the aftermath of suicide in the family. The author offers guidance for those who worry about the eternal fate of one who has taken his/her life. G. Lloyd Carr and Gwendolyn C. Carr.

A Mother Held Hostage. Barbara Borntrager. Barbara writes of her journey with her son Jon, a troubled child whose Tourette Syndrome and related problems led to his suicide at the age of 21.

Sanity and Grace: A Journey of Suicide, Survival and Strength. Judy Collins. Renowned singer-songwriter Judy Collins writes with unflinching honesty about the events leading up to and following the death of her only child, Clark, at the age of 33.

Available from other sources

After Suicide: A Ray of Hope. E. Betsy Ross.

Child Survivors of Suicide: A guidebook for Those Who Care for Them. Rebecca Parkin with Karen Dunne-Maxim

My Son ... My Son. Iris Bolton with Curtis Mitchell. Write to info@boltonpress.com.

No One Saw My Pain — Why Teens Kill Themselves. Andrew Slaby, M.D. and Lili Frank Garfinkel

No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One. Carla Fine.

Suicide: Survivors — A Guide For Those Left Behind. Adina Wrobleski

Suicide: Why? Adina Wrobleski

The Suicide of My Son — A Story of Childhood Depression. Trudy Carlson

Suicide Survivors' Handbook — a guide for the bereaved and those who wish to help them. Trudy Carlson

When Dinosaurs Die — A Guide to Understanding Death. Laurie Kransy Brown and Marc Brown

VIDEOS

Honest Talk About Suicide, a video and booklet for teens. (PDS 095305) A truthful look at the facts and challenges of serious mental illness. Call 1-800-524-2612 to order. Presbyterian Distribution Service.

A Secret Best Not Kept. A documentary film produced by Dara Berger that takes a close look at everyone touched by suicide, depression, and loss. Available from www.sayitoutloud.com.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

on the Fierce Goodbye documentary and on suicide, visit www.fiercegoodbye.com. Topics include:

- Documentary story backgrounds
- Suicide statistics
- Suggestions for survivors
- How to help a survivor
- Help for pastors and others, including sermon excerpts
- Ideas for how faith communities can respond to suicide
- Children and suicide
- Teens and suicide
- The elderly and suicide
- Stigma and silence
- Mental illness
- Suicide in minority cultures
- Suicide prevention

Mennonite Media has also released a documentary on forgiveness called *Journey Toward Forgiveness*. For information go to www.journeytowardforgiveness.com or call 800-999-3534.

Visit www.thirdway.com for a wide variety of topics about Mennonites. Additional resources are available at www.mennomedia.org/resources.



Mennonite Media

A department of Mennonite Mission Network

1251 Virginia Avenue

Harrisonburg VA 22802-2497

800.999.3534

Produced by Mennonite Media for Faith & Values Media.

© 2004 Mennonite Mission Network. Printed in the U.S.A.

ISBN# 1-877736-75-9