

SURVIVING SUICIDE

Dixon Kinser

MAKING THE CONNECTION

(Watch video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gEzEkqO8Bw&feature=youtu.be>)

MEET THE WRITER

Dixon Kinser is a husband, father, author, speaker, musician, amateur filmmaker, and Episcopal priest. He works in youth and young-adult ministry, loves comic books, and lives with his family in Nashville, Tennessee. His first book was *Exploring Blue Like Jazz* with Donald Miller; and he contributed a chapter to the recently released book *It Happens: True Tales from the Trenches of Youth Ministry*.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED

- a laptop with speakers or a video projector
- index cards
- pens
- Bibles

PLUGGED IN

Here are a few resources about suicide and suicide prevention:

- + “My Friend Is Talking About Suicide” from TeensHealth is a great guide for teens and parents about what to do, step by step, if a friend is suicidal.
(http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/friends/talking_about_suicide.html)
- + “Suicide: What to Do When Someone Is Suicidal” is put together for adults by the staff of the Mayo Clinic and includes questions to ask to determine if someone is in danger or not.
(<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/suicide/MH00058>)
- + “When a Friend Commits Suicide,” an article on Beliefnet.com, offers insights on what survivors might be going through and how to connect with them in their grief.
(<http://www.beliefnet.com/Health/Health-Support/Grief-and-Loss/2000/08/When-A-Friend-Commits-Suicide.aspx>)

CHECKING IN

Because suicide is a heavy topic and can elicit strong emotions, introduce the topic up front. Assure group members that the purpose of this session is not simply to dwell on the sadness of suicide but to explore how life moves on afterward. Encourage the teens not to be afraid to engage this topic, admit that you may not be able to answer every question they have, and stress that the best place to talk about suicide is in the presence of Jesus.

Distribute index cards and pens. Invite everyone to write down one question he or she has about suicide. Then invite people to say their names and to read the question they wrote. Make sure every question is affirmed, and resist any impulse you or someone else has to answer them. Simply let the questions stand.

Invite discussion with questions such as these:

- What is your experience with suicide?**
- Do you know anyone who has committed suicide?**
- What were the effects of this person's choice?**

Next, choose one of the following options to help the group grapple with the issue of suicide:

Option 1

Invite the group to watch "Religion and Suicide," a video about how people struggle to survive suicide and how religious communities can be both helpful and harmful to that process. The video runs about ten minutes. (<http://video.pbs.org/video/2257452395>)

Invite discussion with questions such as these:

- What did you think of the video?**
- What seemed to make healing more difficult for suicide survivors?**
- What helped them to heal?**
- Is the conversation about whether suicide is a sin helpful? Why? Why not?**
- Is suicide a moral issue or a medical issue, as Dr. David Clark of the Center for Suicide Prevention suggests?**
- What does it mean to "just be there" for the family?**
- One of the priests says, "Suicide is not about religion or morality; it is about pain." Do you agree or disagree? Why?**
- What could you say or do to help someone who is grieving the loss of a loved one work through the pain of suicide? What would not be helpful?**

Option 2

Check out Joan Rivers' quotations (cited below) about her husband's suicide, and decide if you want to use them with your group—alone or in conjunction with the video option above. Joan Rivers says that comedy helps her to cope with difficult times in life, even something as painful as her husband's suicide; but these quotes may or may not be appropriate for your group.

1. Read from the article “Comedian Joan Rivers Is a Real ‘Piece of Work’” the final section entitled “**Her thoughts on suicide after her husband committed suicide,**” beginning with the words, “**I still am angry.**” (From an interview on *All Things Considered*, June 9, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/2010/06/09/127556307/comedian-joan-rivers-is-a-real-piece-of-work>)
2. Read from the transcript of the interview “Joan Rivers: Outrageous and Outspoken as Ever” the section beginning with Ms. Rivers saying (about an officer of the LAPD), “**And he just stared at me like, oh, this lady really is drunk . . . ,**” followed by Norris’ response, and then Ms. Rivers’ reply that ends with the words “**it ain’t your fault.**” (From an interview from *All Things Considered*, February 13, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=18948067>)

Invite discussion with questions such as these:

What role does humor play in grief?

Do you agree with Joan Rivers’ approach to grief? Is making jokes such as the ones she is making appropriate? Why? Why not?

Why are her words—“*It ain’t your fault*”—important ones for suicide survivors to hear?

Why is talking about suicide important?

EXPLORING THE WORD

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:3–4a, John 11:17–25

Distribute Bibles, and invite people to read 1 Peter 1:3–4a and John 11:17–25.

Then ask them to discuss these questions:

What does the scripture say about hope?

Where is Christian hope to be found?

In John 11:17–25, Jesus points to himself as the source of hope in life and in death.

What does Jesus mean when he says, “I am the resurrection and the life”?

What do Jesus’ words offer the people who are left behind when someone they love dies?

Does Jesus’ resurrection point to a hope that is here and now or to one that is only in the hereafter?

What do 1 Peter 1:3–4a and John 11:17–25 say to Christians who are seeking to understand suicide and trying to offer care to suicide survivors?

SHARING IN PRAYER

Close the meeting by helping group members to think of ways they can respond to friends who are or who may become suicidal. If you need guidance for leading this discussion, consult the article “My Friend Is Talking about Suicide” from TeensHealth.

(http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/friends/talking_about_suicide.html)

Having the tools to know how to respond when a friend is suicidal can indeed be the difference between life and death. These are the three most important ways to respond:

- **Ask.** If a friend is struggling, invite him or her to talk about it. If what your friend says makes you worry that he or she may be considering self-harm, ask about that too.
- **Listen.** Whatever your friend tells you, listen without judgment. Empathize. However, if your friend seems to be contemplating suicide, don't leave him or her alone.
- **Tell.** This is the most crucial component. If a friend is thinking about hurting himself or herself and then swears you to secrecy, you may feel trapped. You may feel that telling will push your friend toward suicide. That's not true. Telling is essential. Call 911 if you have to. Sharing is indeed caring!

Close with a prayer for peace and comfort for those who are suffering from grief or depression and for all who are suicide survivors, the families and friends of people who have committed suicide.

TAKING IT FURTHER

Suicide is a thorny topic. Because the stakes are so high, we often feel afraid that if we try to help we might get it wrong. However, as youth workers, we need to be able to broach the topic in ways that are helpful.

If you feel unsure of where to begin in addressing suicide or caring for those left behind, read through the links in the "Plugged In" section. You will come away feeling equipped to speak with some knowledge on the topic, and you can make a plan of your own for what to do if you are confronted with someone who is considering suicide.

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