

**MINISTERING TO A WOMAN CONTEMPLATING  
SUICIDE**

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A Paper

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By

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## MINISTERING TO A WOMAN CONTEMPLATING SUICIDE

Has life ever been so difficult or unbearable that you wished you were dead? Can you remember a time in your life that you felt there was no point going on with life? Have you ever felt so hopeless that you wished you had never been born? Have you actually wondered if you would have the courage to take your own life? For most of us, these feelings pass briefly, but for many women these feelings are a regular occurrence, and if they linger long enough, suicide seems to be the only escape.

You may be surprised to learn that May and June are the peak times for suicide attempts.<sup>1</sup> As the weather starts getting nicer – individuals, who are severely depressed often take a turn for the worse, especially when they see others enjoying the sunshine. You see they have no desire at all to go out and enjoy the sun, or even enjoy life. This change in the season is enough to trigger what they have already been contemplating – ending their own life.

### Why Should I Talk About Suicide?

Suicide is defined as “the willful act of killing oneself”.<sup>2</sup> We learned from Kay Bruce, Counselor at Western Seminary that on average, one person kills himself/herself every 16.2 minutes. Women attempt suicide twice as much as men.<sup>3</sup> It is estimated that

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce, Kay, Women of Pain I Lecture, Western Seminary, March 16, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia;<<http://en.wikipedia.org>>, April 11, 2007

<sup>3</sup> American Foundation for Suicide Prevention – 2004, <http://www.afsp.org>, April 2, 2007.

one woman attempts suicide every 78 seconds.<sup>4</sup> The higher rate in women is attributed to the elevated rate of mood disorders among females, such as season-affective disorder,<sup>5</sup> major depression, or dysthymia, (a form of the mood disorder of depression characterized by a lack of enjoyment/pleasure in life that continues for at least two years).<sup>6</sup> Suicide is more common among women who are single, recently separated, divorced, or widowed.<sup>7</sup> Although women attempt suicide more often, men complete suicide at a rate four times that of women.<sup>8</sup> This may be due in part to the fact that women will use less lethal means than men will. However, statistics reveal that firearms are now the leading method of suicide in women as well as men.<sup>9</sup> Women are more likely than men to have stronger social supports, and will seek intervention of some kind, which could also contribute to their lower rate of completed suicide.<sup>10</sup>

The age group with the highest risk rate of suicide is the elderly - 65 years of age and older, followed by the age group from 15 to 24 years old<sup>11</sup>. As women grow older, they experience loss of many kinds. A combination of loss of health, beauty, youth, and even their spouse often brings depression. Lack of parental interest has been known to be a factor in suicides of the age group from 15 to 24 years old.

After seeing the statistics that I have just shared, it quickly becomes clear why we need to talk about suicide. Education is one of the most important factors in the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> American Foundation for Suicide Prevention – 2004, <http://www.afsp.org>, April 2, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia;<<http://en.wikipedia.org>>, April 11, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce, Kay, Women of Pain I Lecture, Western Seminary, March 16, 2007.

prevention of suicide. Keep in mind that suicide, unlike most other deaths, e.g., cancer, heart disease, fatal car crash, is the single most preventable death of women.<sup>12</sup> To prevent it, the victim need only stop themselves from taking their own life. If only it were that simple.

### Causes of Suicide

Although one single factor has never been attributed as a universal cause of suicide, the common thread that I see that seems to precede suicide in women is depression. Other factors that go hand-in-hand with depression include substance abuse, physical or emotional pain, stress, crime (to escape punishment), mental illness, disability, loneliness, financial crisis, catastrophic injury, divorce, death of a family member (especially a child or a spouse), loss of purpose in life, loss of employment, legal problems, and even academic problems.

### Factors That Increase Risk

The most effective way to prevent a friend or loved one from taking their life is to recognize when someone is at risk, take the warning signs seriously and know how to respond. Factors that increase risk include, but are not limited to:

- History of mental disorder and depression
- Firearm in the home
- Incarceration
- Exposure to suicidal behavior through the media
- Victim of physical or sexual abuse

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<sup>12</sup> Bruce, Kay, Women of Pain I Lecture, Western Seminary, March 16, 2007.

- Family history of suicide
- History of substance abuse and depression
- Isolation and loneliness

### Suicide Crisis

A suicide crisis is a time-limited occurrence signaling immediate danger of suicide. These precede suicides and are – in most cases – both recognizable and treatable. The signs of crisis are:

- Precipitating Event: A recent event that is particularly distressing, such as the loss of a loved one.
- Intense Affective State in Addition to Depression: Desperation (anguish plus urgency regarding need for relief), rage, anxiety, guilt, acute sense of abandonment.
- Changes in Behavior:
  - Speech: “My family would be better off without me”, or they may act as if they are saying goodbye for the last time or going away.
  - Actions ranging from buying a gun to suddenly putting one’s affairs in order.
  - Increase use of alcohol, loss of control, rage explosion, or other self-destructive behavior.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> American Foundation for Suicide Prevention – 2004, <http://www.afsp.org>, April 2, 2007

### Primary Scriptural Text

The week before Easter, a friend from church rushed into Bible study in tears because her 72-year-old mother (Barbara) was missing. I did not need to hear all the details to know Barbara was most likely suffering from depression. She had recently lost her husband, after watching him die a painful death. She had also developed a health condition that was causing her to experience intense pain in her shoulder (reminiscent of the pain her husband had suffered with before his death).

My friend, had just returned from a short trip when she stopped off to see her mom. She noticed that her mother's car was in the garage, but she was nowhere to be found on her 6- acre piece of property. Her dog was also mysteriously missing. She found a notepad by her mom's phone with the name and number of a local car rental. Below that was the name and number of a dog kennel. As my friend shared this story, all the facts that I had heard about suicides made me frantic. She also shared one other critical piece of information about her mom, and that was that she did not have a relationship with Christ. I began to pray. The Holy Spirit brought two scriptures immediately to my mind. The first one:

**"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express". Romans 8:26.**

This scripture brought me immediate comfort, because I did not know how to pray for this woman. I didn't even know this woman. But, I later realized it wouldn't have mattered if I knew the woman, I still would be at a loss for words. It felt so right, letting the Holy Spirit pray in my weakness.

The other scripture that God brought to mind was:

**“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”. Eph 6:12**

The enemy loves nothing better than to mess with our minds, and to see us destroyed. God’s Words tells us in John 10:10 that he came to steal, and to kill and to destroy. I have seen first hand how after a loved one takes their own life, the other family members turn away from God. Kay told us that at least 6 people are deeply affected by each suicide. The family members are at greater risk now to take their own lives as well. It felt so right to pray to God right then and to ask Him to zap Satan. I prayed that God would keep Satan away from Barbara. I prayed that God would not allow Satan to rob my friend of her peace of mind and her strength in Christ.

Fortunately, this story had a happy ending. Barbara rented a car, boarded her dog, and took off to Southern Oregon to scatter her husband’s ashes. She did not think she would be missed, so she did not let anyone know of her plans. ☺

Suicide is so evil and so dark. I was reminded of this as I viewed a website of a young woman survivor of several suicide attempts. The one thing I noticed about the site is that it was all in black. This to me was a vivid reminder of the powers of this dark world. God lets us know that we are not to forget that we are up against the powers of darkness. He tells us in Daniel 3, that He knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells in Him. One more powerful reason that I am so glad I belong to the God of the Universe,

and that I know He is sovereign, and stronger than the Enemy and his demons that may try to tempt us to kill ourselves. Because I belong to God, I can run to Him to intercede and cry out on behalf of these women in pain.

### Ways to Help

The first step I would take in helping a woman that I think may be contemplating suicide is to ask her, “Are you considering killing yourself?” Since my eyes were opened when Kay Bruce spent the evening educating us about suicide, I have had the opportunity to ask 4 women this question. I have also called a friend of mine that has a son that has attempted suicide several times. I shared some of the information I had recently acquired that I felt would be of value to her in supporting her son.

Kay stressed to have a plan for safety for these women. Realize that the safety plan and recovery involves others. This is something that one person should not attempt to do alone. This plan would include family members and friends, as well as professionals (psychologist, social worker, counselor, and physician), including phone numbers. Include the local crisis line, and the hospital. Limit their access to available means, e.g., if there is a firearm in the house, get rid of it. Ask them to promise to remain clean and sober during this time. Ask them to sign a suicide prevention agreement. This is also an important step for survivors of a family member that has committed suicide. Make sure they understand what this means. Ask them to tell you what they think they are agreeing to. Determine a specific time period for this agreement and then schedule the next contact with the woman before the agreement ends. Help the person to recognize possible reasons to live. This would include family, close friends, pets, activities they enjoy or even ongoing responsibilities.

Whenever we minister to any woman in pain it is always very important to pray for them. Let them know how much you care and how concerned you are about them. Listen to them and stay with them. Ask them what it is that makes life feel so desperate.

### Do

- Hear their cry for help.
- Take them seriously (seventy-five percent of all suicides give some warning of their intentions to a friend or family member<sup>14</sup>).
- Pay attention to any recent losses they have experienced or are experiencing.
- Educate yourself about suicide.
- Ask them directly about suicide. Use the words kill and suicide.
- Ask them often. Clearly communicate your openness to talking about suicide.
- Tell them not to do it. Tell them often.
- Keep in touch with them.
- Ask them what they need you to do.
- Listen with sincere empathy. Listen for possible reasons to live.
- Tell them you care about them and mean it.
- Ask about their plan.
- Help them think about alternative ways of coping. Their ability to think and plan is likely to be distorted if they are in a deep depression.
- Encourage them to see a physician immediately or to contact a Suicide Crisis Line. Offer to accompany them if they agree to get medical help.
- Do take them to an emergency room if they are in an acute crisis.

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<sup>14</sup> American Foundation for Suicide Prevention – 2004, <http://www.afsp.org>, April 4, 2007.

- Know the number of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK.

### Don't

- Allow them to swear you to secrecy and not tell anyone else.
- Take it personally when they get angry or reject you when you're trying to do is help.
- Become solely responsible for the individual.
- Argue anyone out of suicide or engage them in philosophical and moral debates.
- Avoid the temptation to say, "You have so much to live for".
- Try to make them feel guilty by saying "Your family loves you so much, can't you see how much this would hurt them"?
- Be judgmental.
- Leave them alone if they are in an acute crisis. Take them to the nearest emergency room.

### Addressing the Suicidal Women's Problem

The recovery plan for a suicidal woman begins when we start to address the women's cries for help. It is most important to meet them where they are. It is important to make sure the suicidal woman continues to seek help. They often want to retreat to where they were before unless there is support for their continuing. So, continue to accompany them on their doctor's visits (when possible), and let them know you are interested in their recovery. Make sure they are taking their prescribed medication. Stay connected with them as well as the individuals in their support system.

Be an encourager. Encourage them to talk and share with you. Encourage them to get involved in activities such as gardening, crafts, music, etc. I read one letter from an individual who had struggled most of his life with thoughts of suicide and several suicide attempts. One thing he mentioned was, “it was good to hear some encouraging words from someone who truly cared.” Be a person who truly cares for this woman.

I mentioned earlier that it is important to pray for the woman in pain, but it may not always be appropriate to pray with her. If we are going to meet the woman where she is we need to first find out if she has a relationship with God. She may be blaming God for her present state, or she may have been seriously hurt by a church she was attending, or in some other place of anger towards God. If this is the case, then it would not be a good idea to go there. This is one of the reasons that it is so very important to meet them where they are.

If the woman seems receptive towards God, then, yes, it is okay to remind her of how much God loves her. Tell her that God wants her to know there is hope and life for her. He is the great Healer and Restorer of the life that the Enemy is trying to steal. As this woman begins the healing process, I would share some of the stories of the greatest saints and heroes of the Bible that faced overwhelming depression and sometimes wrote that they wished they had never even been born. I would tell her about Job (Job 7:15-16), King David, (Psalm 13:2-4) or Elijah (1 Kings 19:4). I would tell her how God blessed and sustained each of these men in the end.

There are many websites and resources on the web that help individuals dealing with suicide issues. There are hotlines and suicide prevention sites. There are numerous

books that also deal with suicides. It would be good in appropriate cases to recommend a book or encourage the woman to go to these resources.

Paul Quinnett, in his book, *Suicide: The Forever Decision*, says this about the crisis of suicide, “What we do know is that, as time passes, many troubled people begin to feel better and whatever symptoms they had begin to fade. It may be something the person does for himself or it may be that circumstances change for the better and those circumstances, in and of themselves, put an end to the crisis.... By its very nature, a crisis cannot go on and on and on. Something must give.”

### Conclusion

There are many women today who are hurting and contemplating suicide. We can make a difference in these women’s lives by opening our eyes and ears to their sometimes seemingly silent cries. Pay attention to the older women that you have contact with at church or at work. Have they recently experienced a loss? Do you know any single women who have recently separated or divorced? What do you know about the younger women that you come in contact?

Educate your friends and family about this serious problem. Educate your church family. It really is a matter of life and death. Help these women in pain choose life. Don’t be afraid to ask a woman today, “Are you thinking of killing yourself?”

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