

Anne Moss Rogers *and*

Kimberly H. McManama O'Brien, PhD, LICSW

emotionally naked



**A Teacher's Guide to
Preventing Suicide and
Recognizing Students at Risk**

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Teachers play a central role in educating our youth but also serve as mentors and supporters. They are uniquely positioned to recognize children who are struggling emotionally. This excellent book provides a priceless resource in helping them to do this effectively and successfully. Every teacher needs to read and study this book.

—Victor Schwartz, MD, Former CMO of The JED Foundation,
Founder of MindStrategies Advisors, Clinical Assoc. Professor,
Dept. of Psychiatry, NYU School of Medicine

Rogers and O'Brien have created a book that brings out the heart and soul of suicide prevention. Reading *Emotionally Naked* is like having a conversation with the smartest person you know. Policy makers, administrators, educators, and parents will walk away hopeful, inspired, and better equipped to address suicide in schools

—Jonathan B. Singer, PhD, LCSW, President, American Association of
Suicidology, Associate Professor, Loyola University Chicago,
School of Social Work

Students of teachers who read this book are fortunate. It is filled with creative and feasible ways teachers can nurture the mental wellness of students and provides concrete and doable suggestions for asking directly about suicide, responding meaningfully, and shepherding classes compassionately after the death of a peer. It is an amazingly practical, accessible, and thoughtful resource.

—Julie Goldstein Grumet, PhD, Director, Zero Suicide Institute,
Education Development Center

As suicide is the second leading cause of death for our young people, *Emotionally Naked* is a must-read for all who care for the well-being of our children. Sound information, practical advice, superb collection of resources, and written with compassion. We all have a role in suicide prevention and this book focusing on our youth is as informative as it gets.

—Jerry Reed, PhD, MSW, Senior Vice President for Practice Leadership,
Education Development Center

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to Preventing Suicide and
Recognizing Students at Risk*

ANNE MOSS ROGERS
AND KIMBERLY H. MCMANAMA
O'BRIEN PhD, LICSW

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Anne Moss Rogers: To Randy, Richard, and my Emotionally Naked tribe, whose love and support helped keep that pilot light of hope burning after my youngest son Charles's suicide.

Kim O'Brien: To the loves of my life—Kevin, Taylor, Mac, Kelly, and Doug. You are the reason my life is full of purpose, love, and happiness.

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Trigger Warning

This book tackles a tough topic and contains some emotional content. Most chapters that mention suicide method have a “trigger warning.” Teachers and other educators suffer from mental illness and have thoughts of suicide, too. So if you are struggling with mental illness and/or thoughts of suicide and if this is triggering, please stop or take breaks. There are a few instances where method is mentioned briefly in a story but there are no graphic details.

Your life is important. If you do experience thoughts of suicide, reach out to the prevention lifeline, a crisis text line, a trusted adult friend, a counselor, or find a support group.

There is only one you. If you left us, we’d be robbed of your potential, all your gifts, and what you could contribute to suicide prevention.

Crisis Hotlines

If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide, please reach out.

US National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255 (By July 26, 2022, it will be simplified to the 3-digit crisis number 988.)

US and Canada Crisis Text Line: Text “help” to 741-741

US Trevor Project Crisis line for LGBTQ Youth: 1-866-488-7386

US Trevor Project Crisis text line for LGBTQ Youth 678-678

US Trans Lifeline 1-877-565-8860

Canada 1-833-456-4566

United Kingdom 116 123

Australia 13 11 14

For other countries: Search “suicide crisis lines”

UK: text 85258 | **Ireland:** text 50808

About the Authors

Anne Moss Rogers is an emotionally naked® TEDx storyteller, the 2019 YWCA Pat Asch Fellow for social justice, NAMI Virginia board member, and author of the award-winning book *Diary of a Broken Mind*. Despite her family's best efforts, Anne Moss's 20-year-old son, Charles, died by suicide June 5, 2015, after many years of struggle with anxiety, depression, and ultimately addiction. She chronicled her family's tragedy in a newspaper article that went viral and her blog, Emotionally Naked, has had millions of visitors. After receiving a message from a young lady who wrote that one of her articles saved her life, she sold her digital marketing business and followed her purpose of motivational speaking on the subjects of suicide, substance misuse, coping strategies, and grief. Originally from Fayetteville, North Carolina, and a graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill with a BA in journalism, she currently lives in Richmond, Virginia, with her husband, Randy. Her surviving son, Richard, works in Los Angeles as a screenwriter and filmmaker.

Kimberly O'Brien, PhD, LICSW, is a clinical social worker in the Sports Medicine Division and Female Athlete Program at Boston Children's Hospital, as well as a research scientist and assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. She received her BA from Harvard University, MSW and PhD from Boston College, and completed her postdoctoral fellowship at Brown University. Her research focuses on the development and testing of brief interventions for suicidal adolescents with and without substance use and their families, with an additional specialization on interventions that utilize technology. She has co-authored over 50 articles and book chapters related to adolescent suicide, substance use, and mental health, and was awarded the Young Investigator Research Award from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention in 2019. She is also the founder and director of Unlimited Resilience, LLC, a private mental health practice for athletes by athletes.

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- James Biela, LCSW (He/Him/His), Itinerant School Social Worker, Lower Kuskokwim School District, Bethel, Alaska
- Sam Brinton (They/Them/Theirs), Vice President of Advocacy and Government Affairs at The Trevor Project, Rockville, Maryland, TheTrevorProject.org
- Doris (She/Her/Hers), Science Teacher, Colorado Public School
- Dawn Gallagher (She/Her/Hers), Mother of Kiernan Gallagher who approved Kiernan's written excerpt about her father's suicide
- Kiernan Gallagher, 14, middle school student, suicide loss survivor, Ocean, New Jersey
- Jessica Chock-Goldman, LCSW (She/Her/Hers), Doctoral Candidate, School Social Worker, Stuyvesant High School, Manhattan, New York, JessicaChockGoldman.com
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- Leigh Rysko (They/Them/Theirs), Spanish Teacher and World Languages Department Chair, Kansas Public High School
- Jonathan B. Singer, PhD, LCSW (He/Him/His), President, American Association of Suicidology, author of *Suicide in Schools: A Practitioner's Guide to Multi-level Prevention, Assessment, Intervention, and Postvention*

- Sean Reilly (He/Him/His), retired teacher, Kansas Attorney General Suicide Coalition Task Force, The One Heart Project
- Shelby Rowe (She/Her/Hers), Co-Chair, Indigenous Peoples Committee, American Association of Suicidology (AAS)
- Victor Schwartz, MD (He/Him/His), Former CMO of The JED Foundation, Founder of MindStrategies Advisors, Clinical Associate Professor, Dept. of Psychiatry, NYU School of Medicine, MindStrategies.com
- Laura Stack, MBA (She/Her/Hers), Suicide loss survivor and Founder of Johnny's Ambassadors and Leadership USA, Inc., JohnnysAmbassadors.org
- Dese'Rae L. Stage (She/Her/Hers), Suicide Attempt Survivor, Suicide Loss Survivor, Queer, livethroughthis.org
- Aurora Wulff (She/Her/Hers), Young Adult, Founder of *Active Minds* Student Mental Wellness Club, Graduate of Ithaca High School, student at Binghamton University

Interviewees who asked to remain anonymous

- Beauregard, Young Adult, Graduate of all-boys school in eastern US (agreed name change to protect privacy)
- Anonymous High School PE Teacher, Virginia
- Anonymous High School Counselor, all-boys school in eastern US
- Quotes from those underage whose names have been withheld for privacy
- Many contributions from principals, teachers, school counselors, and students who asked that their names be withheld

Survivors of Suicide Loss Interviewees (adolescent child)

- Kelly Sprecht (She/Her/Hers), Founder of Carl's Cause, Kansas City
- Elaine Alpert (She/Her/Hers), CEO of Mindpeace Miracles, Atlanta
- Ricky Rash (He/Him/His), Mechanicsville, Virginia

Companion Website

Since web links change, we've created a web page with links to resources mentioned in this book, with downloadable guides and resources for your school and classrooms.

wiley.com/go/emotionallynaked

Password is: 988preventsuicide

Preface

ANNE MOSS ROGERS'S STORY

Trigger Warning: Suicide method mentioned briefly

It was June 5, 2015, in Virginia—a warm day, but I was cold and shivering as I sat in the back of a police car in a parking lot. My husband was in the front passenger seat. The officer, dressed in a nicely tailored gray suit and yellow tie, made a quarter turn in the driver's seat so he could see both of us. On some other day, I would have thought him handsome.

"I have some sad news to share. Your son Charles has been found dead this morning. . . ." An electric shock surged through my body and air was siphoned out of my lungs. When my breathing recovered and my lungs remembered what to do, soul-crushing wails of agony and loss erupted. My chest burned, my ears filled with noise, and my mind was watery and unhinged as the unspeakable tragedy that forever changed our lives was delivered in a single sentence.

Moments later, my husband, Randy, paused and asked, "How did he die?" For some reason, this question stunned me. I thought, *How do you think he died? He was addicted to heroin, for God's sake.* I was prepared to hear "overdose." But instead the officer said, "He hanged himself," and my husband banged his fists on his lap and the glove box, wailing in inexplicable emotional pain as I stared at his explosion in shock, unable to move. The statement by the officer dangled in the air outside of my consciousness, trying to get in while confusion and denial obstructed its path. My first instinct was to find the escape route from the agony and slide into another life that was shiny and happy. Rocking back and forth and wailing guttural, inhuman sounds, I had the primal urge to grab the edges of yesterday and bring it back so we could do the day over and achieve a better outcome. *We love him. How could he kill himself?* I didn't understand *why suicide* and it would be a long time before I would.

There was an immediate and desperate longing in my soul for one more hug. My irrational disbelief that this couldn't be true curled around the edges of my trauma and the raw, naked pain of losing my son was forever imprinted on my soul. Bits and pieces of information floated about, screaming their importance

with no place to land, only to be retrieved later when my mind had the ability to absorb them and put the pieces together.

I am the mother of a child who killed himself.

Struggling to make Charles's life count, I spent five months after his death writing a newspaper article about my family's tragedy that went viral, creating an audience for my newly minted blog, Emotionally Naked®. This is where I wrote in my public journal to work through my grief. Eighteen months later, my business partner and I sold our successful digital marketing company and I became an author and an emotionally naked speaker on subjects few want to talk about.

Charles was complex, adorable, frustrating, hilarious, effervescent, electric, charming, eccentric, and a creative genius. From the time he came into the world to the time he left, his presence was all-consuming. He pushed boundaries past comfortable, questioned everything, and was relentless and persistent when he wanted something. When Charles waltzed in, the fun had arrived. Faces brightened, bodies turned toward him like he brought the sunshine in his pocket and he was there to hand it out. He was one of those bigger-than-life personalities who exceeded his allotment of space on earth despite his six-foot-two, 130-pound frame. Charles was the younger of my two sons, the funniest, most popular kid in school. Yet this funniest, most popular kid suffered from depression in middle school, and by high school was misusing drugs and alcohol to numb feelings of suicide we never knew about. His substance misuse led to deeper depression and an addiction to heroin, and he took his life while going through withdrawal.

Connection was Charles's gift and he demonstrated it over and over. No child ever entered his school and sat alone at lunch or felt friendless. He was the first to make new kids feel welcome. And given his popularity, that attention was like a social promotion.

It was a teacher who first suggested my child might be suffering from depression. It was a teacher who stars in one of my favorite photos of Charles (Figure P.1). And it was a teacher who wrote me the kindest, most heartfelt note after he died by suicide. My son's education shaped his writing and encouraged daily journal entries—a habit that evolved into his writing hundreds of hip-hop-style rhyme schemes that offered me a window into his tortured, artistic soul after his death. It was those notebooks he left behind that helped me understand the why behind his suicide. Some of these lyrics were included in my first book, *Diary of a Broken Mind: A Mother's Story, a Son's Suicide, and the Haunting Lyrics He Left Behind*.



Figure P.1 Charles on Homecoming Court, escorted by his favorite teacher, Kerry Fretwell.

While there are precious memories from his school days, there were horror stories, too. Zero-tolerance policies and rigid school administrators who defaulted to punitive measures perpetuated my youngest son's feelings of worthlessness, and unnecessary suspensions caused frustrating setbacks to his fragile progress with depression. Misunderstanding shaped their authoritarian responses when what was needed was empathy and compassion.

After students leave school, they rarely remember their test scores. They remember their interaction and experiences with peers, teachers, administrators, teammates, band leaders, school counselors, principals, drama teachers, janitors, bus drivers, cafeteria staff, librarians, school nurses, and coaches. Schools have something few other environments have, and that's opportunity for genuine human connection, which has gotten lost in the digital age. This is the most valuable currency in our universe today and a foundation for emotional wellness.

After Charles died, a young woman who suffered from depression reached out and told me a story that happened in high school. On one particular day, the dark fog of depression moved in and took her motivation hostage, but she made a Herculean effort to get out of bed and go to school. Later that day, she and her friends stood chatting in the hallway between classes. She was struggling to hold onto her mask of a clown, looked up, and was stunned to see Charles staring right at her. She said she knew Charles, since everyone did. But they had never met and she didn't know he knew her. As soon as eye contact was returned, my son walked towards her, stopped about two feet away, and broke out into a rap song he created on the spot, just for her (also known as freestyling). She and her friends were shocked at first but soon burst out laughing.

When he finished his song, he bent over, hugged her, and said, "Pretty girls shouldn't look so sad," and then made his way down the hall. She told me she had never experienced such kindness and it was a moment she tucked away in her mental library of precious memories.

While I will always miss my son's beautiful curly hair and his sense of humor, his tall, skinny hugs and the way he altered his voice when he greeted his dog, what I miss most was his capacity for love. In a world where no one has time to listen, he did. In a disconnected world where no one has time to connect, he made time. As talented and funny as he was, this was his greatest gift—letting other people know they mattered. That is the legacy I carry forward in my son's name. And that is why today, educators invite me into their classrooms and auditoriums to share our family's story, the coping strategies that helped me find emotional healing, and the workshop that helps kids become aware of what defines healthy and unhealthy coping skills.

Many people ask me how I can work with suicide prevention and loss every day after losing a child to this cause of death. My answer is that the universe pushed me towards it. And even after the most devastating loss of my life, I have hope. Because more people survive thoughts of suicide than act on them. And your help and mentorship can prevent tragedy by integrating innovative strategies and small culture shifts in your classes that facilitate connection and healthy coping strategies. You have the relationships. And the goal of this book is to nurture those relationships, empower you with the tools and education to spot students at risk, listen, and introduce them to the next level of care.

There are days when I do want to give up this cause because it's like pushing a spiked ball uphill in a driving snowstorm. But then I get letters from students after a presentation and it reinforces my resolve and rekindles my passion to keep doing what I'm doing.

I want to thank you very dearly ~~and~~^{for} sharing how you changed one of the worst events in your life, to a turning point in your life. The story of your son, Charles' drug addictions and anxiety and depression, has inspired me to speak up if I do need any help and has encouraged me to reach out to anyone who has been experiencing anything similar.

but every single word that you said in that classroom that day touched my life. You helped me to wanna keep pushing and strive to even be half as strong as you are. So thank you Mrs. Rogers, thank you so much for sharing your story, and helping me in ways I can't even begin to truly explain.

Thank you so much for sharing your story with me. It touched me and it helped me come to some peace with my own grief. I think the way you have turned this situation into such a wonderful lesson to people everywhere is amazing. When I get older I hope to help people like you helped me and my classmates. I have gone through my whole life thinking my father's death was in some way my fault or I did something even though I was so little. You helped me realize that sometimes our loved ones don't mean to hurt us, they make a decision in a place of bad mind. Again, thank you so much.

KIM O'BRIEN'S STORY

My passion for helping suicidal youth runs deep. People wonder how I could do something so dark, so depressing, and often ask me why I got into this field. But I see my work differently. When working with suicidal youth, I see hope and resilience. I see that in that place of darkness that seems never ending, there is a way out other than suicide. I know this because I've been there.

My kindergarten teacher told my parents I needed to see a psychologist. She said I always looked so sad and just stared out the window instead of playing with friends. And so began my journey with depression. Mental health was a foreign concept to my parents, for no fault of their own, so I endured this constant emotional struggle alone. Growing up, I never felt understood by others and never quite understood my sadness. I had two parents and three younger siblings who loved me and I always had a safe, beautiful home to live in. So why was I always so sad?

My childhood turned into an adolescence filled with anxiety and perfectionism, and my depression evolved into a secret source of shame and self-hatred. I would lie in bed at night wishing I could die. I endured some low moments, like when my college roommate died by suicide, when I seriously questioned why I was still living. Life was becoming increasingly too much to bear and I relied on the high moments—accomplishments, excitement, love, and laughter that continued to pull me through.

Shortly after I graduated college, I hit rock bottom. I became angry and sad, closed myself off to others, and drank more alcohol. I cried daily, sometimes all day. I didn't want to wake up in the morning yet I couldn't fall asleep at night. This continued for over a year and I remember going to the doctor one day for a well visit and I couldn't stop crying. She told me I needed antidepressant medication and I agreed. I figured, why not? At that point I didn't care about living any longer but I also thought I had nothing to lose. I was already lost and it was as if my soul had died and I was just going through the motions in a lifeless body.

With the little blue pills, I found myself crying a little bit less and the days became slightly more manageable. I started picking myself up, bit by bit, and began finding more reasons to go on living. There was no magical "aha" moment for me, just continuous introspection with professional support to guide me through. And now, decades later, I can say I live a life full of purpose, love, and even happiness. I still struggle emotionally every day, but I have the skills I need and the love and support around me to get through the difficult times that are a part of every human experience.

That kindergarten teacher spotted something in me that no one else noticed, not even my family. How did she know I was so sad, so tortured inside? And as my emotional state kept getting worse as the years went on, why was no one aware of it? None of my middle or high school teachers ever noticed it. I wonder why but as I look back and ponder, I'm actually not sure I showed