Bob: When a friend or a loved one chooses suicide, we can’t help but ask, “Why did this happen?” Albert Hsu experienced that when his father took his own life.

Al: The search for answers to the “Why?” questions is really a search for comfort. We’re wondering, “Are we alone in the universe now?” We feel abandoned by our loved one—our child, our parent, our spouse—that has left in this way. It feels like this tremendous rejection, because they chose to leave. They didn’t just get hit by a truck; they weren’t taken by cancer—they chose to abandon us or leave us in this way, so it feels like this tremendous rejection.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Thursday, October 4th. Our host is Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. So, what do we do with those questions that continue to plague us when a friend or a loved one takes his own life? We’re going to explore that today with Albert Hsu. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. As you were just praying about today’s program, you talked about, “This is a delicate subject.” That’s what it is; isn’t it?

Dennis: It really is. I don’t think we realize how prevalent this is, in both the community of faith but also in the culture. I think Christians really need to grapple with this and have an answer to know how to best connect with both—people of faith, who’ve been impacted by suicide, or by those who are outside—

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: —the faith.

I want to read this quote, Bob. Dr. Jean Twenge of San Diego State University suggested that screen and social media time may have caused a jump in depression and suicide among American young people. “I think the reality is screens have caused us to be even lonelier—

Bob: Yes.
**Dennis:** —“than we were before they came.”

**Bob:** And loneliness and disconnectedness from other people is one of those factors that may go into somebody deciding that it’s not worth continuing to live.

**Dennis:** That’s right. And isolation is not a good state to be in; I mean, you need relationships.

**Bob:** Yes.

**Dennis:** You need to be connected to people. Well, we have a guest with us today on the broadcast. Al Hsu joins us all the way from Chicago. Al, welcome to—to *FamilyLife Today*.

**Al:** Thanks for having me.

**Dennis:** Al is married to Ellen since 1997—has two sons, lives in Chicago, and is the senior editor of InterVarsity Press. Bob and I are grateful for your work with IVP, because of your editing skills. [Laughter] Any author needs an editor; no doubt about it. He has written a book—and I’ve got to ask you: “What’s it like to write your own book and have somebody else edit it?” or “Did you let anybody edit it?”

**Al:** Oh, yes; every editor needs an editor as well.

**Dennis:** Okay; glad you confessed that, here, on the radio—probably some of your colleagues are listening in and will remind you about that.

Al has written a book called *Grieving a Suicide: A Loved One’s Search for Comfort, Answers & Hope*. Your life changed because of a phone call.

**Al:** That’s right. When I was about in my mid-20s, I got a phone call one Thursday morning. My wife and I had just gotten married nine months prior. We were young newlyweds. We were living in Chicago. My parents were in Minnesota, and we were about to visit them the following weekend. We were going to be visiting friends in Minnesota for a wedding, and we were going to stop in and see my folks; but then, Thursday morning, before work, the phone rang.

I couldn’t guess: “Why somebody would be calling that early in the morning?” I got the phone, and I heard wailing on the other side. I didn’t know what this was—it was somebody crying/wailing. She said: “Daddy killed himself! Daddy killed himself!” It was my mother, and I—I just didn’t register. I didn’t understand what she was saying. “Daddy? Daddy? Daddy who? My dad?”

To back up, my dad was 58 years old. He was an electrical engineer, PhD, brilliant man, always very self-sufficient, self-made kind of a guy; but three months prior to this, he
had had a stroke. While he survived the stroke—he was doing some rehab and making some recovery—he fell into a clinical depression. Over those three months since the stroke, he didn’t see any purpose for life. He lost all sense of hope. My mom had gotten him to the hospital for observation; but even so, one night, he went into his room, asked not to be disturbed, and took his own life.

Dennis: Were you—were you in shock at that point?

Al: Yes; all the textbook definitions of shock—I went numb; I couldn’t process things. When people hear this kind of news—it’s what counselors call complicated grief or complicated bereavement, because we are actually dealing with two different things at once. We are both experiencing the grief of the loss, but we’re also experiencing trauma. A loss by suicide is traumatic and causes trauma—almost in the extent of a war experience—think of soldiers with PTSD. It’s that kind of violent experience that just completely shakes your world.

Dennis: I was thinking, as you were telling your story, I received a phone call in 1976—the year we started FamilyLife®—and it was not my mother on the phone; it was my brother. He called me and, almost as bluntly as you described it, said, “Dad’s dead.” He had just been at our home. We had a great time together, working around the house; and I was growing up, as a young man. I was 28 years old, and I was appreciating him more and more.

It was interesting how—because I thought how much different it would be and the grief I felt if my dad had committed suicide—which he didn’t—but I can imagine it really does complicate the emotional picture for a son like that.

Al: That’s right. Complicated grief—you’re dealing with two realities at once. It’s both the normal grief of the loss that we would be feeling, no matter how our loved one died; but then there is also the additional shock and trauma. One is bad enough as it is, but combined—it’s like a one-two punch.

Bob: And it had to be disorienting. I mean, you’re wanting answers to what you may never get answers for in that moment; right?

Al: Right; right. There is kind of a questioning that goes on. First of all, survivors are always saying: “Why didn’t I see this coming? I should have done something to prevent this. I should have seen the signs.” Then we are also asking, “How could this happen?” We’re asking survivor’s guilt questions—we feel like we’re responsible.

My mom was a nurse, and she was acting as my dad’s caregiver during the months after his stroke; so she did caregiver type things. She did the right things—watching out for him. She saw him slipping into depression. She got weapons out of the house. Even though she did all the right things, she wasn’t able to prevent the suicide; so she felt tremendous survivor’s guilt.
Dennis: Had you ever had any conversations with your dad about his depression, and how deep it was, and how dark that valley was for him?

Al: Not prior to his death—no; I had not realized the extent of his actual depression. I knew he had been feeling low. We had had some phone calls and conversations in those months; but no, I had not realized.

Dennis: You decided to go back home then.

Al: Right.

Dennis: On your way, you stopped by your office; but you didn’t want to go inside.

Al: I couldn’t face people. Suicide is the kind of thing that divides your life into a before and after. Prior to it, life is normal and fine; and everything—you just go through life. After suicide, you question everything; and you don’t understand: “How can people go through this life? How can we make sense of a world that is so broken/so painful that somebody would want to end their own life?”

Bob: I think part of what we’re struggling with in these moments is we’ve all had days or periods, where we’ve thought, “Life isn’t going the way I want it to go, and I’m not happy with what’s going on in my life right now”; but we’ve never gotten ourselves to a point—or at least, if we have, it’s been, maybe, momentary, where we’ve thought, “I’d just like to end it all.”

You had a moment in your life, even prior to this, where you thought about suicide?

Al: I had some teenage times of depression. Depression and feeling down are very common. We shouldn’t—we should validate that and say, “Many, many people experience depression.”

I was almost comforted to realize how common suicide is. Once, after my dad’s death, I realized—I learned that, at the time, there were something like 30,000 suicides in the U.S. every year; now, it’s over 40,000. That number is probably under-reported, because there are a lot of suicides that are disguised as accidents.

Each one of those suicides leaves behind six to ten immediate survivors—parents, children, loved ones, spouses—that are immediately affected by that suicide. That’s hundreds of thousands of people every year that are going through this kind of grief. It was an odd kind of comfort to know I was not alone in this particular kind of loss—there were others that had experienced this kind of loss as well.

Bob: And you wonder how much suicide ideation there is that never ends in suicide. I mean, how many people contemplate or consider suicide?
**Al:** Well, there are hundreds of thousands suicide attempts every year.

**Bob:** Wow.

**Al:** So, it is fairly common.

**Dennis:** You're talking about 100 people a day that are successful, though; I mean, that is a big number. Again, there are people of faith that end up doing this.

Tell us about your father's spiritual journey. Did he have a relationship with God—with Christ?

**Al:** Well, I should back up and say that it is true that suicide and depression affect Christians just as much as the general population; so there is very little difference. Christians get depressed just as much as everybody else—just like Christians get cancer and diabetes like everybody else—so, yes, we are not immune.

One of the problems I think—particularly in the church—is that we are in a bit of a state of denial or, at least, Christians often try to over-spiritualize—we want to say: “Well, if you are having trouble. You just need to pray more, believe more, [and] hope more.”

We don't always acknowledge that there may be biomedical challenges going on in the brain. There are sometimes biological reasons that people get depressed. I think the church is a little bit more aware in the past few years—that we’ve had a little more awareness of mental health and the realities of mental health issues.

**Dennis:** I have attended a number of funerals in my lifetime. Among the most memorable were those where it was a young person, who committed suicide—very, very sober; very troubling to attend. It just raises all kinds of questions among those who are attending.

I think, for a pastor, it has to be one of the more challenging services to ever lead in your lifetime. It’s back to what you are talking about earlier. I don’t think the Christian community knows how to handle this. I think it’s a lot like when somebody dies—period—people don’t know what to say / how to comfort another person, who has lost their husband/lost a child; but when it becomes this double hurt of suicide, they really don’t know how to comfort.

**Al:** And pastors often wonder, “What do I say at the funeral of suicide?” One image that has been helpful for some pastors is the image of a soldier, who falls in battle, in fighting their own civil war—that people who die by suicide are often caught between the desire to live and the desire to die. When the desire to die outweighs the desire to live, in that moment/in that season, that’s when a suicide might happen. We can grieve our loved ones as they fell on their own battlefield.
There’s a quote from a book by Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*—there is a prayer during a funeral—and the prayer that is prayed is: “Oh, Great and Just God, no man among us knows but the sleeper knows, nor is it for us to judge what lies between him and Thee.” In some ways, that’s often where we need to leave things—in the hands of God.

**Bob:** That’s hard to do; isn’t it?—to leave things there when the perplexing question of: “Why?” of “What could I have done?” “How?”—all of that continues to plague you for months, on end, after a funeral is over; doesn’t it?

**Al:** Oh, yes; yes. The “Why?” questions happen at two different levels, I think. At one level, there is sort of the: “What were the causes? What were the factors? What triggered this? Did I do something? Did I miss something?”

At a deeper level, the search for answers to the “Why?” questions is really a search for comfort. We’re wondering: “Am I alone in this? Am I abandoned in this? Does God still care? Does God still exist? How could this have happened?” We are wondering, “Are we alone in the universe now?” We feel abandoned by our loved one—our child, our parent, our spouse—that has left in this way. It feels like this tremendous rejection, because they chose to leave.

**Bob:** Yes.

**Al:** They didn’t just get hit by a truck; they weren’t taken by cancer—they chose to abandon us or leave us in this way, so it feels like this tremendous rejection.

**Dennis:** I’ve heard some people describe it as worse than divorce. Divorce is a rejection, but a suicide is a rejection that leaves no opportunity to have any dialogue—

**Al:** Right.

**Dennis:** —any discourse—

**Al:** Right.

**Dennis:** —on a human level. Did you feel that?

**Al:** I did feel the sense of: “If my dad had really loved me, he wouldn’t have done this. How could he have left me in this way? How could he have abandoned me?” So, yes; suicide survivors do feel this mix of guilt, shame, rejection, pain, abandonment. It’s all swirling together in this mix.

Something that suicide survivors need to be very aware of is that we have a heightened risk for suicide for ourselves. Some loved ones will want to reenact the loved one’s final steps. They are trying to understand, “How could they have done this?” A mom might
stand in front of the mirror, holding the gun and wonder: “What did my son do? How did it feel?” or they might stand on a balcony ledge and look and imagine their child jumping. Some suicide survivors do fall into self-destructive habits of alcohol or drug use to try to numb the pain.

If anybody is grieving and struggling with those things, I encourage them: “Please get help. Please find people to surround you, to keep an eye on you, and to not let yourself fall into those kinds of destructive patterns.”

Bob: If a friend of yours called you today and said: “It just happened in our family. My wife…” or “My dad…” or “My son just took their own life”; and you had two minutes to talk to them and just say, “Okay; here’s the most important thing I can tell you in this moment,”—what would you say?

Al: As I interviewed other suicide survivors, the two things that they wanted to say to others—the first and most important one is: “It was not your fault. You did not do this. You did not cause this. They chose this for whatever reason, and we may never know, ultimately, why that happened.” The survivors’ guilt is so strong in cases like this, and people just need to hear and to know: “You did not do this to them. It’s not your fault.”

The other thing to know is: “You are not alone. There are others who have walked this path. There are others who grieve with you,”—and to encourage people to surround themselves with community, friends, church—others that can walk through this with them.

Dennis: And I think that’s an important thing to underline here. I’ve been reading in the Psalms. I am amazed at how many times God says: “I am your help. I am your refuge. I am here. I am with you.” God gives us the promise of His presence. I think we, as human beings, forget how powerful our presence—as fellow strugglers in the journey—how important our presence can be to a person, who has just experienced the loss of a loved one—

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: —because of suicide. If you are wondering what to do, the best gift that you could possibly, I think, begin to give that other person—I want you to comment on this, Al—seems to me to be: “You know, I’d just like to come and be with you.”

Al: Yes; presence is important and not to presume to have the answers. I love the Book of Psalms, because the Psalms give us a model in what are called the Psalms of Lament. A significant portion of Psalms—a third or more of the Psalms—are psalms, where the psalmists cry out their pain to God. They are raw, and they are vulnerable. They tell it like it is—they are not sugar-coating things.

Dennis: That’s right.
Al: They’re not hiding things in religious language. The beauty of the Psalms of Lament is that it gives a structure to our grief. Grief, by its very nature, is this formless, nebulous kind of thing. We sort of go in cycles; and go over things over, and over, and over again; and we feel lost in a fog.

The psalmists in the Psalms of Lament—it was a way of ordering Israel’s grief—that we bring our pain to God, and we cry out: “Lord, the world is not the way it’s supposed to be. This loss, this pain, this grief is not the way You intended the world to be; and we grieve that / we lament that. We wish it were not so.”

In doing so, it gets out all the pain that we’re feeling. It’s—a modern-day way of saying it would be: “It’s how they processed things. It’s a way of processing.” So what—it gets out on the outside what’s going on inside. I love how Scripture gives us the permission to grieve. Sometimes, Christians think: “Oh, I should just have a stiff upper lip. I shouldn’t be grieving,” but Jesus tells us that we should grieve: “Blessed are those who mourn, because they will be comforted.” Jesus weeps at the tomb of Lazarus.

Bob: And cries out from the cross—Psalm 22: “My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

Al: Yes; then the beauty of the Psalms of Lament is that, half way through the Psalms, there is a pivot; and we say: “But yet, I will remember You. But yet, I still have my hope in You. I still place my trust in You.” Then there is this recounting of: “You’ve been faithful to us in the past.” So, based on who God is and what He has done in the past, we can entrust—even this great pain / even this awful world, where people die by their own hand—we can entrust that to God. We can trust that God hears our cry and will respond.

Dennis: Death is interesting. It’s a great apologetic for the existence of God, because only God could produce hope in such a dark place; but read the Psalms. You’ll find the God, who is a refuge—our fortress, our foundation, our hope. His Word is sure; His promises are certain.

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: You may not experience it at the moment of the grief, but you will experience His presence.

Bob: You were talking about the power and the significance of presence—and being there for someone else. I am thinking, for a listener, who knows someone who has experienced a suicide—

Dennis: —this would be a great book.
Bob: —but to offer the book—not just “Here’s a book for you”—but to say: “Here’s a book, and I’m here for you. I’d love to read through this with you. I’d love to help enter into this with you.”

Of course, we’ve got copies of the book, *Grieving a Suicide*, on our website at FamilyLifeToday.com; and you can order it from us when you go online. We also have an extended conversation with our guest—with Al Hsu. You can download the file as we talked about some of the pitfalls of remembering the events of the suicide / remembering the family. We talk about how you explain suicide to a child. Again, that’s some bonus content that is online as we are going to continue this conversation with Al Hsu.

Go to FamilyLifeToday.com to order the book, *Grieving a Suicide*, or to download the bonus audio. Again, the website is FamilyLifeToday.com. You can also order the book by calling 1-800-FL-TODAY—that’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

You know, we’ve been talking about tough subjects this week—talking about opioid addiction / talking about suicide. One of the things we try to do, here, at FamilyLife is dive into some of the subjects that can rock a marriage or a family and to bring practical biblical help and hope in the midst of that situation. Every day, this program is reaching hundreds of thousands of people, all around the world, who are listening online, listening on their local radio station, using our app. Many have started listening by asking Alexa to “Play FamilyLife Today” for them. That’s a skill that you can add in your Alexa app.

I just want to say, “Thank you,” to those of you who make the reach of this program possible—those of you who are making *FamilyLife Today* possible for your friends and neighbors—and for people you may never meet this side of eternity. If you’re a Legacy Partner or an occasional contributor to the ministry of *FamilyLife Today*, that’s what your contributions are doing. You’re helping us effectively develop godly marriages and families that change the world, one home at a time.

If you’ve never made a donation, we’d love to have you join the *FamilyLife Today* team. If you’re not yet a Legacy Partner, we’d love to have you join with that group of regular contributors to this ministry. You can do either when you go to FamilyLifeToday.com—make a one-time donation or become a monthly Legacy Partner. Donate, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com; or call 1-800-FL-TODAY to donate.

We have our 2019 FamilyLife calendar that is just now available. We’re starting to send it out to folks. This is a calendar that helps promote *togetherness* in your family throughout the year. The calendar is our gift to you when you support the ministry with a donation this month. Be sure to ask for the Togetherness Calendar when you make your donation, and we appreciate your partnership with us.
We hope you’ll join us back again tomorrow as we continue to talk about how you can help those who are grieving a suicide or how you can find comfort for own your soul if someone you know has taken his or her own life. Al Hsu will be back with us tomorrow. I hope you can be back as well.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

FamilyLife Today is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas; a Cru® Ministry. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

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