



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Surviving Suicide Loss

Guest(s): Rita Schulte

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Dr. James Dobson: You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting division of the James Dobson Family Institute. I am that James Dobson, and I'm so pleased that you've joined us today.

Roger Marsh: The following program is intended for mature audiences. Listener discretion is advised.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Welcome in to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton, co-host of Family Talk. As a licensed professional counselor and marriage and family therapist, I'm honored to serve alongside Dr. Dobson as the resident authority on mental health and relationships here at JDFI. I also serve as president of the American Association of Christian Counselors. Today on the program, we're going to take on a tough, difficult subject. That's the topic of suicide loss. Our country is currently experiencing what I am describing as a mental health... It's not just a crisis, it's a mental health disaster. In this climate I think it's safe to say that a majority of people in the United States have been touched by suicide in some way or another. And that's why we're taking the time this month, September, Suicide Awareness and Prevention Month, to focus on the painful and confusing subject of suicide.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And so it's an excellent time to turn our hearts and our minds to a life situation, again, that affects a lot of families, more than you would think. Maybe a classmate of yours took his or her life. Maybe an acquaintance, a neighbor, a friend, maybe even a family member. Our guest today knows that pain and grief of losing someone very close to her to suicide. Her name is Rita Schulte. Rita is a licensed professional counselor who specializes in the treatment of mental health disorders. She's the host of Mind Matters, a podcast and broadcast that dives into relevant topics influencing today's culture to equip, educate, engage, and cultivate awareness on how mental health affects the hearts and minds of us all. I'm going to give a special shout out to KLTT.

It's a Crawford station up in Denver where she hosts the program out of. And Rita is a frequent contributor to many publications. She's the author of several books, speaks all over the country on mental health related issues. She actually received her bachelor's degree in psychology and her master's degree in

counseling from Liberty University. Rita makes her home in Northern Virginia, in the suburbs of Washington, DC. Rita, it's so great to have you. Thank you for joining us here on Family Talk to share your story and the hope that you found in the midst of tragedy.

Rita Schulte: Thanks for having me, Tim. It's a pleasure. And boy, Dr. Dobson, that goes back many, many years for me, my family, Mike, especially. We raised our kids up on a lot of Jim's books, so it's an honor to be here.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Rita, as we get started, we're going to talk about Mike. I wanted to just ask you, I mean, how you met, your relationship together and then maybe a little bit about how things began to spin in a dark direction.

Rita Schulte: Well, we were high school sweethearts. When we met, I was 16 years old. And Mike got into dental school and we moved down to Richmond, Virginia, went to dental school and then moved back to the Northern Virginia area, actually Stafford, and he started his dental practice there. We had two kids. He was very involved in ministry, pro-life ministry, anti-pornography ministry, so he did a lot of that. He preached and taught, led Bible studies. We kind of did everything. Then we moved down to Northern Virginia, Fairfax area, and again, continued all of those ministries. And Mike was like Superman. He was very charismatic, dynamic personality. He was just an amazing man. Later on in life, he got an airplane and got his pilot's license and was really loving that. So it was great. I mean, we had a really amazing love story, him and I.

And all of a sudden, he started becoming increasingly paranoid and depressed and anxious, which was very unlike him. And we started noticing these signs. He thought people were out to get him, people were watching us, people were following us. We couldn't talk on our cell phones unless we went outside. And things began to just kind of spin out of control. He felt like he didn't want to live anymore. And I'm freaking out and trying to get him help. And so I actually got a hold of the Meier Institute in Dallas, I got him in there. But he never made it, Tim. He went to a couple of places around here in Northern Virginia. There was no help there. And he just really, I think, believed that nothing was going to help him. I mean, he just got so paranoid. He was sitting in his office one day and Wilma, his chief assistant, kind of kicked him underneath and he was working on somebody and she's like, "Doc," she said, "What's the matter?"

And he goes, "They're coming to get me." And she's like, "Who's coming to get you?" "You'll see." So a lot of this was fueled by an article Mike read in a dental journal that came, about a guy who was doing Medicaid. And Mike was the only dentist within 200 miles that did it. He did free dental work on everybody. So this particular dentist was being searched out by the FBI and apparently he had made some fraudulent claims. \$300,000 work, and I think it was 10 grand fraudulent claims. Anyway, this guy got carted off by the FBI and sent to prison for two years. And Mike read that and it just, oh my gosh, he just couldn't get that out of his mind. Now again, this is a rational human being. He has never

displayed anything like this before. And yes, it happened over a number of months.

He took my daughter to the Greenbrier that February, he died in November, and he said to Ashley when they were walking through the halls, "Who was that lady that was talking to you?" A lady had come up to Ashley and said, "How nice you can do this with your dad." And Ashley said, "Yeah, it's wonderful." And she said, "I hope you have a great time." And Mike thought, he told Ashley that the woman was there to watch them, that she was planted there. So this happened many, many times. Things really started going downhill in August. He had actually not shown up for work one day and Michael and I went to find him, and he actually was in his airplane hangar.

The plane was being worked on. And I knew he was in there, and I mean, I couldn't even feel my body. I knew he was in there and he had taken his life. So Mikey goes in and there's Mike sitting in the car in 104 degree heat. He'd probably been in there for two or three hours, sitting in the driver's seat with my picture and his, sitting right there and a gun. So I mean, I'm hysterical, obviously. Finally, long story short, we got him to the hospital. He was fine, totally back to himself. "Don't say anything about suicide, Rita. We can't risk the practice, we can't risk my airplane," all of that. So it just got increasingly worse until the last weekend. We'd gone to Florida, we had a home in Palm Beach and we went to Florida with some friends. And Mike was just curled up in a ball half the time, it was bad. So he was supposed to fly to Dallas on Tuesday. He was going to leave Monday to go back.

I was going to leave Tuesday. And I talked to him that Monday night. I asked him to please let me know that he was safe when he got there. And Tuesday morning I started calling him and I couldn't get ahold of him, so I started to panic. I got to the airport. By then, I was really panicking because there's no answer. He was supposed to show up at a doctor's appointment. And I had called that office and they told me he had showed up, so I breathed a sigh of relief. I get on the airplane and I get home, I get in a cab, I drive up the driveway, I get out of the car, and I go into the house. Now I see his car in the garage, so I'm thinking, oh, okay, well, maybe he took a cab to the airport. But when I walked into the kitchen, I saw all of his stuff there, his Bible's on the counter, his bags. And I walked upstairs and when I turned the corner, I could see him in the bed and he had shot himself.

So, I ran in there, I started just screaming, obviously, I'm just screaming through the hallway. I ran downstairs into the kitchen and I just kind of collapsed and curled up into a ball. And I called my son. I don't even know how I was able to do that, but they're all screaming. And they told me to go to the side door, that they were going to call 911. And so that's about all I remember. I remember kind of curling up in a ball by the side door, and I remember the police coming in and that was about it.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Rita, I'm rarely at loss for words, but in this moment I just feel, again, a sense of grief for you. I know it's been a long time, but as you recall those details, it's stunning. I think it grips all of us because that's not the way life's supposed to be. Life's supposed to be about joy and love and happiness. The mind can be a very free, beautiful, creative place or it can become a very dark, turbulent place. And when it gets dark, and there's that word rumination, when people start ruminating over something and they can't shut it off, it's that piece that wakes them up at 2:00, 3:00, 4:00 in the morning.

And I know we're talking a little bit here about mental health-related themes, but it can be a relationship breakup. This can be acute, this can be chronic. There's just so many factors that fuel into it. But the one thing that seems to be consistent, Rita, is they've lost their sense of hope. There's a despair that kicks in. I've often heard people say this, people who are suicidal don't hate life, they hate life the way it is. And they don't think it's ever going to change, is that right?

Rita Schulte: Yeah. And they also have a tremendous sense of self-loathing. Dr. Tom Joiner's model, and he's a prominent suicidologist along with David Jobes, who's done the CAMS model. And Tom was gracious enough to endorse my book, but his model suggests a couple different things. Why would somebody desire to die by suicide? And the answer is, a) a sense of fearlessness, and that's a whole nother topic, But this idea of a perceived sense of burdensomeness and a thwarted sense of belonging. So these folks can, depending on what it is, this loss that's driving it, they can actually loathe themselves. So they actually believe they're doing their loved one a favor by taking their own lives.

Dr. Tim Clinton: I want to go to the days and the weeks after the loss of Mike and what started happening with you. Can you take us into what you experienced?

Rita Schulte: Well, it was like a bomb went off in my life. And everything you believe comes into question. I mean, I was decimated. I was nonfunctional, basically, for the first few months. The only way I felt like I was alive, Tim, was just getting in the shower and feeling the water beating against my flesh. And there was a pivotal moment for me about four or five months in, when I was at my daughter's. And they were watching a little cartoon, my grandbabies were watching a cartoon. And so there was a Scottish accent. It was Brave, the little cartoon. And I got up because Mike and I had just had such an amazing trip to Scotland that summer. And I couldn't watch it, and I got up and I just passed out. And my son-in-law took me upstairs, put me in the bed. And later, Ashley, my daughter came in, and Ashley's like her dad, very strong.

She looked in my eyes and she started to cry and she's like, "Mom, please try." And that moment I realized I had to live, right? I had to go on because I had them and I had a couple of grandbabies. And so that was a real shift for me. In the beginning I think I stayed alive for them. But as time went on, as years went on and I gained my footing, I started to believe that God had a plan and purpose for my life in this. And I've always believed that God is telling the ultimate story

of redemption through Christ. And if that's true, then everything in my story has to fit in the larger story. And hope tells me there's a bigger picture, one that I couldn't fully understand or even see, but it's being told nonetheless. And so if I believed that, I knew I had to go on and finish the work that God called me to do.

And that's the journey that I've been on. The first couple years were pretty dark for me. I experienced panic attacks, lot of flashbacks. As I told you, I curled up in a ball after I ran down the stairs screaming. And we know as therapists that those patterns, traumatic memories getting coded in the brain and in the body, sometimes without the person realizing it. And so what started happening for me for a couple years was that anytime I would be triggered, I would just curl up in a ball. I didn't even realize I was doing it at first, but those memories had been encoded in my brain because that's what I did that first night.

And anytime a trigger would come, that was my behavioral pattern. And so I worked with my therapist. Obviously, that's a big thing for me now as I counsel folks, to intercede into that pattern and help a person come out of that shutdown state. So whatever a person is feeling, we want to normalize that, whether it's high activation and the post-traumatic stress that we are experiencing, with the flashbacks and the panic and the terror, or whether it's a shutdown state like I would also do.

Dr. Tim Clinton:

I was prepping and reading through the story and realized, Rita, that one of the big pieces for you was trying to ask and answer the question why? It's like, why God? Why us? Why now? Why this? Why me? A few years ago, Dr. Dobson wrote a book called *When God Doesn't Make Sense*. I remember making my way through it, trying to understand even some of my own journey. But Rita, that's a tough piece to get through, isn't it? And there was a place for you where you finally came to a moment, and I know the stages of grief where working your way through something like this, the Kubler-Ross stages become significant. A lot of people talk about everything from that shock piece upfront, denial, to anger, bargaining, acceptance. What's amazing to me, Rita, is you're dealing with grief and loss. That can come in waves and it can be all over the place. There isn't any specific flow, really. It's unique to you as a person, isn't it?

Rita Schulte:

Absolutely. I mean, you can be up, down, all around, twisted up into a pretzel. It doesn't make any sense. So I think that's been one of the big things that... Misconceptions about her theory, if you read some of her later work. And David Kessler, he co-authored some books with her. It's not supposed to be a linear thing. So I think people just need to know that. Wherever you are, one of the biggest things I want to do with folks is to normalize whatever their experience is. And so I also take a very strengths- based approach to that. So I'm always looking for what's right with the client, not what's wrong with them. "Oh, you're doing the stages wrong." No, that's not it at all, right? We want to tap into their strengths and their potential for resiliency, and we want to normalize whatever their experiences is, because it's all normal.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Let me put something down here real quick. There's hope. You don't have to live in this broken, dark world. I was excited and encouraged by the new national three-digit telephone number, Rita, 988. That's the new suicide prevention hotline, if you will. There's hope 24/7. It's free, it's confidential. For people who are in a suicidal crisis or emotional distress, I think the lifeline actually helps thousands of people overcome crisis situations every day. Just your thoughts, Rita, on what people should do if they're worried about someone who is threatening to take their life.

Rita Schulte: Yeah, I'm so glad you brought that up, Tim. I just read an article about that yesterday, the 988, and I think that's beautiful. I mean, call that number for sure. Get your loved one help. I mean, I took Mike to the ER and that was all I knew to do at that moment because he had been locked up in an airplane hangar for three hours in the heat. So whatever you have to do, you're going to do that. And then a team of professionals can help you lay out a game plan to treat your loved one.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Rita, we're fighting time, and I've got two more questions for you that I'd really love for you to address. One is, for someone listening right now who's trying to create a new life beyond that loss, what's one or two, three key nuggets you could give to them that would speak into their heart right now?

Rita Schulte: Yeah, what do they need? What did I need? I think it's to experience a different reality apart from the hell they're living in. How do we help make that happen? I think it's by encouraging them to risk. See, they need more than an intellectual knowing that life can be different or better, they need an experiential knowing of that, because what do we know about new experiences? They rewire neural networks. They create new thought patterns. They bring new perspectives. In short, they foster post-traumatic growth. The reality that folks are living in after they're decimated by a loss like this is really only a small way of looking at reality. They don't see that now. I didn't see that now.

I could have cared less about post-traumatic growth, I just wanted Mike back. But we are capable of experiencing a different reality. It just takes time and it's going to look different for each person. For me in the early stages, as I said, it was my new grandbabies and my children, so that's a big piece. I had people walking alongside of me who pushed me a little bit to take some risks, join a group, I was in three groups. Go back to church. Even the smallest things are going to enlarge your world so that you can begin to breathe around this massive hole that's in your heart.

Dr. Tim Clinton: What lessons did you learn about God? I know you were angry with Him, you were extremely disappointed and discouraged, lost. What do you see now, looking back, and as you look inside and look to the road forward?

Rita Schulte: Well, I think I've grown a lot, Tim. I mean, Mike was... We kind of both said, we made idols of each other. And because he was Superman, I relied on him a lot. He kind of did it all, and when he was gone, I had to start doing it myself. I don't

mean my relationship with God because I was always close to the Lord, but I had so many things nailed down about who God was. And that is such an important part of this whole thing is concept of God for a believer. Because you know all the tacit assumptions we hold about life, God and the world around us get challenged by a loss of this magnitude, and doubts about God and His goodness are certainly a big part of that. And I had to consider that if God was good, He wasn't out to break me.

He was out to break my confidence in all the ways I'd managed to try to make my life work apart from Him, and loss was simply the vehicle that He used to get my attention. I just feel like we have to decide some things about the heart of God, because every loss that we have moving forward, every trial that we have moving forward will stir seeds of doubt about the goodness of God unless we do that work.

Dr. Tim Clinton: I love Psalm 46 that reminds us when we face difficult times and trouble in our lives, that He is in the midst of it.

Rita Schulte: Amen.

Dr. Tim Clinton: "When you can't," as Spurgeon said, "when you can't feel His hand, you can always trust His heart."

Rita Schulte: Oh, that's beautiful.

Dr. Tim Clinton: It's so difficult, but I believe there are times when God weeps with us in our brokenness. He hates the pain and brokenness of this world. But as Jesus said, "Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world." Rita, I wanted to in closing, some are listening right now and they have a loved one or they know someone and they often struggle with what to say when they don't know what to do, any words of wisdom on how to just care for someone who's living in that pain?

Rita Schulte: Yes, Tim. I think the biggest thing is just offer your presence, your attuned and compassionate presence. Don't try to fix them. We don't need to be fixed. We just need to feel presence, both of the Lord and both from the people that love us. And that can mean just sitting, listening, asking, "What is it you need right now? Do you need to talk? Do you need to be still? I love you. I'm here for you and I'm praying."

Dr. Tim Clinton: If you are going through a dark season in your own life and you just want to talk with someone, know we've got people here at Family Talk who are available to you. Our toll-free number is (877) 732-6825. That toll-free number again, (877) 732-6825. Rita, it's been a real privilege to spend some time with you. As a matter of fact, I was sitting here thinking we need to have you back. There's so much more to talk about. But if people want to learn more about you and your ministry, where could they go?

Rita Schulte: Best place is my website, ritaschulte.com. We've got everything there, pretty much. A lot of helps, podcasts. The radio show airs, it'll be up on my website soon, but you can access it through Crawford Broadcasting or Charisma Media Podcasts, if you just Google Mind Matters. But I have a counseling practice and everything is pretty much on my website if people want to connect.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Our special guest again has been Rita Schulte. She's a licensed professional counselor, author, podcaster, speaker, radio host. Book out called *Surviving Suicide Loss: Making Your Way Beyond The Ruins*. Rita, it's been such, again, a delight to have you. On behalf of Dr. Dobson, the entire team here at Family Talk, know of our prayers, our continued prayers for you, as God continues to lead you on your journey, and that He would strengthen the voice you have, especially around suicide awareness and prevention for such a time as this. Thank you for joining us.

Rita Schulte: Thank you, Tim. God bless you and all the work you're doing over there.

Roger Marsh: You've been listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, and that was Dr. Tim Clinton's conversation with author and licensed professional counselor Rita Schulte. The two colleagues discussed Rita's book called *Surviving Suicide Loss*. To learn more about Rita, her ministry and her books, visit drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. That's drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. Or remember, you can email our team with any questions about Family Talk, today's show, or the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute at constituentcare@drjamesdobson.org.

As always, thank you so much for your prayers and your financial support. It's because of your faithful generosity that we can continue in our work of helping families thrive. Remember, you can donate securely online at drjamesdobson.org or you can give us a call at (877) 732-6825. I'm Roger Marsh, and from everyone here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, thanks so much for listening. Hope you'll join us again next time right here for another edition of Family Talk.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.