Figuring Sh!t Out: Love, Laughter, Suicide, and Survival
By: Amy Biancolli (Behler Publications, 2015)
Reviewed By: David N. Miller, Ph.D.

Amy Biancolli’s *Figuring Sh!t Out: Love, Laughter, Suicide, and Survival* is a warm and welcome addition to the growing literature on surviving suicide. Biancolli is well-acquainted with suicide, having a father who attempted it and both a sister and a husband who died by it. A writer, former film critic for the *Houston Chronicle*, and current columnist for the *Albany Times-Union*, Biancolli writes about her experiences in the aftermath of the death by suicide of her husband Chris. On the book’s first page, Biancolli informs the reader that that her “beloved husband of twenty years” died by suicide after jumping off the roof of a parking garage a mile from their home.

As suggested by the book’s title, Biancolli’s story is one in which the depression, loneliness, and guilt she experiences as a result of her husband’s suicide is leavened by the love and support she receives from her three children, her adoptive parents and siblings, and several close friends. Throughout the book, as she describes her experiences, adjusts to her situation, and attempts to “figure sh!t out,” Biancolli is continually mindful of and grateful for the many blessings in her life that help her cope with the tragedy of her husband’s suicide. Included in this is the gratitude she expresses toward her late husband, particularly in five poignant chapters entitled “Things I Can’t Say to Your Face.”

A somewhat unusual but highly enjoyable aspect of the book is the strong element of humor in it, including Biancolli’s emphasis on the healing power of laughter in coping with tragedy. Many other memoirs that deal with surviving suicide are often searing in their emotional intensity. Biancolli clearly has these moments – many of them – but throughout the book she describes several laugh–out–loud situations that bring a welcome dose of humor to frequently painful circumstances.

In addition to her family and friends, Biancolli is comforted by her Catholic faith and achieves a growing acceptance of both the pain and pleasure inherent in life, regardless of whether one is personally touched by suicide or not. Late in her memoir, in a moving reflection on her new life without her husband, Biancolli states that “the older I get, the more I believe that nothing about life in this mysterious webbing is easy, nor is it meant to be. It’s meant to be beautiful. It’s meant to be rich. It’s also meant to be painful. Why, I have no idea. But if we can accept loss, anguish, death as not merely inevitable, but imperative – as somehow necessary, like a dark thread that binds the fabric – then it becomes part of the beauty, the joy, even, of this transcendental bustle we call living.”

*Figuring Sh!t Out: Love, Laughter, Suicide, and Survival* is a well–written, emotionally honest book that is highly recommended. Biancolli offers no advice or pat solutions for dealing with suicide and clearly recognizes that the pain that she and her family have experienced will never
completely go away. But in the healing process she provides an excellent guide to surviving suicide with grace, grit, and a willingness to embrace life in all its joys and sorrows.