Stacey Freedenthal, Ph.D., LCSW is a well-respected suicidology researcher, educator, clinician, and person with lived experience. She has drawn from her expertise in all of these areas to write a book for professionals that is scholarly, easy to read, practical, and authentic. This is a nearly impossible task that she has done with aplomb.

There are 89 tips and techniques in Helping the Suicidal Person. These tips are organized with the clinician in mind: they move from assessment, to treatment, to building hope for a life worth living. Her book starts, however, by addressing two issues that all clinicians should have addressed and confronted during their professional training, but most likely did not: their personal relationship to suicide, and the taboo of suicide.

Dr. Freedenthal has done the hard work of reading hundreds of books and articles and distilling the most important information into short, practical chapters. For example, her chapters on suicide assessment cover essential aspects of assessing danger, protective and cultural factors, and estimating risk. She has chapters on conceptualizing treatment following the suicidal crisis. She delves into the nature of the suicidal crisis and how clinicians can address suicidal thoughts, hopelessness, and psychological pain. The last three chapters focus on quality of life and resilience.

The book is well-designed. In addition to the tips and techniques, she has created dozens of boxes with case applications, vignettes, or clinical insights. For example, in Tip 19 there is a box called “Reconciling the Narrative and CASE Approach.” This information is great for advanced clinicians who are looking for more depth of analysis. Another feature of the book that I appreciated is that tips are cross-referenced. This weaves stand-alone pearls of wisdom into a tapestry of deeper understanding. Because Dr. Freedenthal ends each tip with a list of the works cited, she’s transparent that some of these tips and techniques have empirical support, and some do not.

Helping the Suicidal Person is not intended to be read like a novel. It is a practical guide that clinicians can use when they want to help with a specific problem or issue, or because there is something they want to know more about. Say you’re working with someone who is ambivalent about having survived a suicide attempt. Turn to Tip # 78: Determine the Person’s Reaction to Having Survived. What if your client can’t think of any reasons for living? There’s a tip for that! You’ve heard of safety plans but aren’t sure what they are or how to make one? Go to the tip on safety planning. Not sure how to inspire hope? Check out Tip #60 – Frame Suicide as a Problem-Solving Behavior.

Does the book cover everything? No. When I interviewed Dr. Freedenthal for my podcast (http://www.socialworkpodcast.com/2018/04/freedenthal.html) she said that at one point there were over 120 tips. Is this book necessary? Yes. Is reading the book sufficient to help the suicidal person? No. Dr. Freedenthal clearly expects the reader to have training or be willing to get more training. To that point, I believe that this book should be required reading in every graduate professional program; it is exactly the kind of practical and easy to read book that graduate students love and wonder why none of their
professors ever assign. Clinicians and clients will thank those professors, because this is an essential book for every provider’s office.

Disclosures: I have known Dr. Freedenthal since the mid-1990s when we were social work students at UT-Austin. She was a guest on my podcast. My book on suicide was also published by Routledge and has a suspiciously similar cover design. My unbiased opinion, however, is that this book is excellent and Dr. Freedenthal was the perfect person to write it.