Rocky Roads: The Journeys of Families through Suicide Grief
By Michelle Linn-Gust, Ph.D., Chellehead Works (2010)
Reviewed by Ginny Sparrow

Family unit struggles is what veteran author of suicide and loss-related books (and American Association of Suicidology President-Elect) Michelle Linn-Gust, Ph.D., addresses in her latest work, Rocky Roads. Herself a survivor of the suicide of her younger teen sister, family challenges to understand the why's and remain an intact family are what Rocky Roads tackles. Any professional is fast to acknowledge that every person’s grief journey is a unique path. Still, Rocky Roads does attempt to present a roadmap—a loose trail to maneuver through, consider, and be forewarned of treacherous turns ahead.

Rocky Roads is a unique presentation of a basic psychological autopsy of the “typical” family in crisis after a suicide. It is immensely helpful for all survivors, but perhaps vital for counselors who are faced with a family in crisis after a suicide.

Obviates Michelle, marriage is what usually begins a family and joins two units together. When you enter a marriage, you bring yet-unsurfaced opinions with you. If they differ from your new family’s views and experience, conflict rears its head. Michele addresses how each family member, from mother to step sibling, is usually affected by a suicide. How an adopted child might have more feelings of inadequacy and self-blame than perhaps a biological child. How a stepparent feels their grief is minimized, even by themselves, after they busy themselves looking after everyone else. Even pets and their feelings are not overlooked.

Close friends and co-workers outside the family, referred to as the suprasystem, are also addressed, stressing the importance of postvention needs in businesses and schools. While all grief is difficult, suicide grief is definitely notoriously complicated. The tragedy forces once-forgotten feelings to arise. On page 77, Michelle speaks of a scenario where a wife who has lost her husband by suicide also has childhood trauma resurface, being a child of divorce. Michelle also refers to the “replacement” child after a couple loses their only child, which brings perhaps a bittersweet feeling in the family. Honest analysis of the human motive is presented in Rocky Roads, with no sugar coating.

Ways to find “recovery” after a suicide are spelled out simply in Chapter 11 entitled “Finding Hope.” Michelle doesn’t give a list of things one must do in their grief work, but gives encouraging information on how to reach out for help, how to find the right therapist or support group, how exercise and pets can help, and ways to get involved in suicide prevention.

Every book should leave the reader with at least one new thing learned—even if it’s fun fiction. Good books always have gifts to share. There are several cherries to pick in this work, and should be on every professional’s bookshelf. One of my favorite observances by Michelle is her theory on life:

“As I age, I believe that half of what life is about is coping with stress and the other half is about learning to communicate with people.” That line has resonated with me daily since reading.

Every survivor’s story is unique, but the big picture always shows similarities that make survivors feel less alone at the worst time of their lives. If there’s one book every survivor should read, it is this one.