

## **Further praise for *Life After a Partner's Suicide Attempt***

“When a person attempts suicide, the world often falls in around their partners and families. Surprisingly, this book is the first scholarly attempt to let partners speak about how that traumatic event impacted them. The stories told here reveal an often life-altering maelstrom of relief, grief, disbelief, doubt, care, exhaustion, exasperation, worry, loneliness, ongoing fear and roller-coaster love that requires huge resilience to navigate. Yet there is hope and help as Dr. McGivern’s seminal work convincingly charts – opening up a neglected landscape for recognition and discussion.”

**Dr. Mary McAleese, former President of Ireland and Professor of Children, Law & Religion, University of Glasgow**

“McGivern has written an impactful book for the millions who experience the trauma of being partnered with someone surviving a suicide attempt. Some relationships are irrevocably damaged, while for others, post-traumatic growth occurs. The inspiration McGivern provides enhances the chances of suffering becoming a transformative experience for both partners and is, therefore, a very important contribution to the field.”

**Linda Bloom, LCSW, Psychotherapist at Bloomwork in California and co-author of *101 Things I Wish I Knew When I Got Married: Simple Lessons to Make Love Last***

“This inspiring book explores the traumatic impact of a partner’s attempted suicide through the intimate stories of those who have experienced this life changing event. Dr. McGivern brings together relevant theoretical perspectives, clinical models and practical strategies to deepen our understanding and to support this neglected population, often considered only in the shadow role of caregiver. These anguished first-hand accounts convey the shocking betrayal of trust, and complex adjustment required to integrate adverse and positive transformative processes. The book shines a powerful light, showing the potential benefits for both partners of incorporating a systemic approach in the quest for relational healing, growth and hope.”

**Diana Sands PhD, Director, Centre for Intense Grief Therapy, Sydney, Australia**

“By faithfully narrating the stories of the partners of those who have attempted suicide in their own words, *Life After a Partner’s Suicide Attempt* plays an important role in shining a light on and increasing awareness and understanding of their lived experience, and identifies ways by which to better support them in their own journey towards recovery.”

**Eddie Ward, HSE Resource Officer for Suicide Prevention, Louth/Meath**

**Life  
after a  
partner's  
suicide  
attempt**

Francis McGivern



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# Preface

Part I of this book provides an insight into how a chance encounter in my role as a counselling psychologist and psychotherapist piqued my interest in pursuing research in this never before identified area of suicidology. It then delves directly into in-depth interviews with partners of individuals who attempted suicide. These accounts are first-hand and uncensored, thereby allowing partners to portray the transformative impact of the attempt on their lives in an articulate and highly emotional way, and with minimal need for analysis on my part. Readers who may have lived through a similar event will probably strongly identify with these accounts, and for many it may feel like acknowledgement of their lived experience, perhaps for the first time ever. Readers who have an interest in this area either casual or professional, are sure to develop greater empathy for those who have lived through this event as a result.

Part II begins with an assessment of how potentially far-reaching the social impact of a suicide attempt may be, beyond the suicide attempter him or herself. It then provides an overview of previous research in this area from as far back as the early 1960s and, in so doing, highlight the stark lack of interest in the personal impact on partners beyond



their role as caregiver. Based on insights gathered from the interviews in Part I, it then offers mental health and medical professionals, and partners themselves, not only a means of making sense of their experience but also a roadmap towards their recovery following their loved one's suicide attempt. Recommendations for practice and policy are offered, concluding with implications for future research.

PART I

GIVING VOICE TO  
PARTNERS

## CHAPTER 1

# The inspiration for this book: a psychotherapy session like no other

'He has put it firmly in the past, [but] it's never in the past for me. It comes across on the radio interviews you hear, it comes across on the news, it comes every time you hear of a suicide, every time I hear of a missing person. It never goes away. Never *ever* goes away ... And I don't think I ever will get over it ... It's happened, I can't undo it. He apologized, he regrets it ... [but] our relationship was never the same again, never ... and I really don't think it ever will be because I know *I'm* not the same person I was.' (extract from interview)

**F**rom the moment I heard these words uttered, I knew immediately that this woman had captured, in one breath, so much of what people live through following a partner's suicide attempt. This includes the trauma of the experience, the transformative impact on their view of themselves, the world and their relationship, and the permanency of all of this. What's more, this same woman also noticed that after the experience of her

partner's suicide attempt, 'Very few people, *very* few people ever said, "How are you?"'. While attention from medical and mental health professionals as well as family members is appropriately paid to the individual who has made an attempt on their life in order to ensure their safety and comfort, the focus of this book is to shine a light on the personal experience of those closest to that person, namely their partner. Placing the focus firmly on the personal impact on partners is in no way intended to minimize or discount the gravity of the suicide attempter's situation. Rather, it is intended to broaden the knowledge base of the wider impact of this event to *include* partners.

The language and terminology applied to this sensitive area has historically been problematic and confusing. However, a large-scale anonymous online survey conducted in 2019, in which people affected in some way by suicide were asked to rate their perceived acceptability of terms related to suicidal behaviour (Padmanathan *et al.*, 2019), revealed that 'attempted suicide' above all other terms (including 'non-fatal self-harm' and 'suicidal gesture'), was deemed most acceptable. I chose to use the term 'attempted suicide' both in reverence to this finding and to be clear that there has been no fatality. Therefore, the term 'suicide attempt', which is at times used interchangeably with 'attempted suicide' throughout, shall be defined here as:

*A serious self-harming event with a clear intention of death but with no such outcome.*

There can be variation in how the individual engaging in suicidal behaviour, their partners, as well as healthcare