

Out of the Blues

Surviving depression

"Fear, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil." Psalm 23:4

Before I went into deep depression, my husband had a vision of me climbing into a pit and I was quoting this scripture as if I wanted to believe it was true but didn't. My story is one of victory. I overcame the 'valley of the shadow of death' and, as in his vision, I arose from the pit covered in gold and saying, "The Lord is my front and rear guard, whom shall I fear?"

There are many misconceptions about depression. Some say the cause of depression is a demonic spirit, and is therefore, curable through prayer.

Others say it is a choice that the depressed person makes and they should simply choose to change.

Certain medical practitioners relate depression to a number of medical issues including a chemical imbalance in the brain, a genetically inherited mood disorder or a hormonal imbalance.¹

Some would say depression is a symptom of lifestyle choices.

Finally, there are those who have no idea where depression comes from or how to deal with it.

Although depression may be one or a combination of these things, it is important not to make assumptions without investigating the possible causes.

Whatever the cause, there is one thing I know to be true about depression: depression is very real for the person that is experiencing it. The last thing the sufferer needs is for friends or relatives to be at them to "get over it," or further isolate them because of any misconceptions. Prayer is always helpful, but sometimes more than prayer is required.

As a post-natal depression survivor, I can verify that someone who is depressed is in the greatest need of love, acceptance, patience and understanding. My pathway out of depression, a condition I struggled

with for six long months, was paved with people who loved and cared enough to let me talk freely without judging me.

There were multiple reasons why I became depressed. In March 2003, we closed our business after the arrival of our son, leaving us financially crippled. I had been working long hours and by the time my son was born, I was exhausted. I went through a difficult induced labour, and my son spent the first 12 hours of his life in a humidity crib, which was distressing in itself.

Combine all these things with a husband who is in despair and grieving for his livelihood; sleep deprivation that accompanies the early days with a newborn; the responsibility for three other children under the age of five, and it was as though another person invaded my body.

I became unreasonably irritable, snapping at the smallest upset. At night I would roam the house, unable to sleep. I cried at irrational things. Daily, suicidal thoughts plagued me. Paranoia crept in, and with it the voice of deception. It became easy to believe that the world was against me. I didn't want to do anything or go anywhere. When I wasn't exploding at my husband and children, I mechanically carried out my duties.

During this time, I knew I was failing my children, my husband, God and myself. A strong sense of failure prevailed, especially since I had such high expectations of how my life was going to be. When the reality of my life did not meet my expectations, I took a very hard fall.

I literally sat in a chair for the first three days of being on medication, becoming an observer of the world, because the tablets just made my care level vanish. The dishes were piling up; did I care? The children had needs; did I care? Andy, my despairing husband, carried the load; did I care?

Thankfully, in those three days I cared enough to make the decision that this was not who I wanted to be. I had to take my life back.

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick," the bible states in Proverbs 13:12. When things did not turn out according to my expectation this is exactly what happened to me. Equally, when reality found me, I realised that if it was going to change, it was up to me. I had to take responsibility for myself and my reactions to what life threw at me. God wanted me to grow up and get some intestinal fortitude!

Around this time, my sister sent me a plane ticket to visit her. She was genuinely concerned about my mental health. The decision to go was pivotal; two weeks to focus on myself, to concentrate on getting *me* better. With my 3-month-old son in tow, I hopped a plane to Melbourne, and in the back of my mind, I was aware that I was destined for the no-nonsense counsel of my sister, Jodi. Thankfully, her directness helped me to regain perspective and with her support, I started applying for jobs.

As I made the decision to look for a job, I felt a huge relief. Our financial situation was such that I constantly had to seek assistance from agencies and negotiate with creditors. Through sheer will power, we pulled through without going bankrupt, but it cost me a piece of my soul. Although Andy preferred me to stay home full-time, he realized that I needed to work and we, as a family, needed me to work.

In June 2003, I commenced work as an Employment Assistance Consultant, working with long term unemployed people, assisting them to find employment. I discovered that the more I gave out to these people, the more fulfilled I felt. I was able to understand their despair and to share my story with them. Funnily enough, I also found a valid excuse for my passion for reading the vacancies section of the newspaper,

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something I've done for years!

Actively giving to others in more need than me became a key to helping me overcome my depression. The bible says that 'it is more blessed to give than to receive', Acts 20:35. I found it hugely rewarding to support others going through issues I'd recently faced. Interestingly, The Centre for Clinical Interventions (CCI)², Health Department of Western Australia, suggests something similar, that 'involvement in pleasurable activities where there is a sense of achievement helps people who are suffering from depression.'

Another key to my healing process was having a reason to get out of bed every day, a responsibility that I could not shirk.

"Isolation was the worst part of my depression, and in fact, my sense of isolation greatly contributed to my symptoms."

Maintaining a daily routine was important as it brought a sense of stability and security. The CCI³ also recommend this in their course 'Back from the Bluez'. They say that 'when you increase your activity level, this will help you feel better and less tired, and help you think more clearly'.

Isolation was the worst part of my depression, and in fact, my sense of isolation greatly contributed to my symptoms. As a mother of four young children, living in financial hardship, there were no funds left to have a social life. I had to beg food from welfare agencies so many times, as our cupboards were often bare. It was the most humiliating time of my life and it was as though I had joined some club for the poor where a Health Care card is a membership pass!

I believe God allowed this period of isolation and lack, so that I, like the Apostle Paul, in Philippians 4:12, would learn to

be content in whatever state I found myself in.

Looking back, the decision to grow up and take responsibility for my life again, really saved me. Having a plan that gave me some control of my future helped me to connect with the possibility that my life could be different.

As I took the steps towards implementing that plan, I became less and less depressed. I lacked the faith to believe God could change my life instantly – but as I did what I could, I became more able to see how God had been working on me during my wilderness experience.

Three years on, it seems surreal, like a nightmare I can barely associate with. In the ensuing years, I've met many people who

have suffered from depression in varying degrees. I've had time to observe and to help people in this situation. My journey through post-natal depression, I now consider as a tremendous gift. In the midst of it, God showed me that this is what Psalm 23 refers to when it says, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death". This was for me the valley of depression. I walked through it and, like the Psalmist David, I too can now say, "I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

By Hayley Solich

¹ Centre for Clinical Interventions, <http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/docs/BB-1-Overview.pdf>

² Centre for Clinical Interventions, <http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/docs/BB-2-Behavioural%20Strategies.pdf>

³ Centre for Clinical Interventions, <http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/docs/BB-1-Overview.pdf>

Support services for depression sufferers:

Beyond Blue
1300 224 636
www.beyondblue.org.au

Life Line
131 114

Crisis Care
08 9223 1111 or country 1800 199 008
www.reachout.com.au

Samaritans Suicide Emergency Service
08 9381 5555 or country 1800 198 313

Your local GP or Psychiatrist

Sonshine CareLine
Off-air and confidential. Calls can be made every day from 9am to midday, 8pm to midnight (WST), on (+618) 9275 8422

Anxiety Self Help Association
(08) 9346 7262

ARAFMI (the Association of Relatives and Friends of the mentally ill)
(08) 9228 0577 or, for a free call within Western Australia, phone 1800 811 747. Monday to Friday between 9am - 4.30pm

SANE Helpline
1800 18 SANE



How to Support Sufferers of Depression

Include the sufferer in your plans as you would before they became depressed.

The first thing a depressed person wants to do is to withdraw which leads to isolation. This is a part of the mood disorder. You can help them by ignoring the negative responses and remaining positive and non-judgemental. Try to remember that being depressed increases the risk that friends exclude you because it is not always comfortable to be around a depressed person. Choose to be a loyal friend, regardless of how they are behaving. Arrange pleasurable activities to invite them to. Learn to recognise what is the normal behaviour of the person and what is the disorder manifesting. The more stable you are, the more likely they will stabilise in your company.

Encourage them to have plans both for today and for the future.

When you are depressed, the trap is to withdraw from activities, family and friends. Being a partaker in life is beneficial – it opens the opportunity for self-validation and a sense of achievement. "Hope deferred makes the heart sick but a desire fulfilled is a wellspring of life"- Proverbs 13:12. As we give, we receive. If we are not giving, we are not receiving.

Be a good friend.

It is interesting how many people who suffer severe depression can have their mood lightened just by a bit of understanding, fun and empathy. Try to keep your sense of humour, as laughter is infectious.

Organise a pampering activity.

It is easy for depressed people to neglect caring for

themselves. By organising a pampering activity, there are many benefits. The message transmitted to the sufferer is that they are important and cared for. It may also help to build their self-esteem and their sense of belonging to a wider community. It doesn't have to be expensive. For example, a foot rub, a walk by the beach, a home cooked meal, the luxury of soaking in the bath knowing someone responsible is watching your sleeping child. Sometimes the best gifts are free and just require the gift of your time.

Find a way to take some of the pressure off the sufferer.

If they are a parent, offer to do the housework with them, or talk about their situation and offer suggestions on how to make things a bit easier. Just listening to their story is a great help. Resist the urge to force your ideas upon them, to be judgemental or to carry their burdens for them. They should be able to feel in control of their own lives and masters of their own destiny.

Pray for the sufferer.

It is amazing how God knows just what the other person needs if we take the time to ask him, to listen to what he says and to obey immediately.

Know when to walk away.

Sometimes your friend will be just too much for you to handle. Be sensitive to your own needs. If you feel like you are unable to cope any longer with the emotional drain, take time out or seek professional assistance. Make sure that you communicate your decision to your friend.