

The Power and Pain of Depression

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May is Mental Health Awareness month, first celebrated in 1949. There are three goals: 1) take care of yourself; 2) take care of your loved ones; 3) talk about mental health. Thankfully, more people are talking about their struggles. But so much stigma remains, and people hesitate to seek help for fear of being judged.

A few years ago, a television ad campaign asked and answered two important questions. “Where does depression hurt? Everywhere. Who does depression hurt? Everyone.”

I know from personal experience just how true those words are. I have written many times about my own battle with depression. I have experienced the pain and loneliness of this mental health issue. I know how agonizing it was when I felt useless and unvalued.

About 23 years ago, I was diagnosed with clinical depression. I was serving a church in Regina and had begun to feel that I was doing no one any good. I started to think that the world would simply be better off without me.

When I was afflicted with this disease, I didn’t think about anyone else. I became the tiny centre of my universe; I couldn’t see or feel anyone else. And since I was a priest, I felt like I had to keep it private. I couldn’t let anyone else know how I was struggling. I was supposed to be a helper, not someone who needed help.

I finally crashed. I couldn’t hold it together any longer. I was ready to say goodbye to it all. Literally. I had made a suicide plan and was awfully close to carrying it out.

By sheer grace, someone found me in time. She called the police, who took me to the Mental Health Ward in Regina. I was involuntarily committed. For 72 hours, nurses and doctors watched me. I only had loose-fitting hospital pajamas and booties. Nothing with which I could harm myself. I couldn’t go anywhere without permission. I couldn’t do anything without supervision.

I felt the stigma around mental health, and that was a real problem. It still is a problem, although it’s lessening. It’s easy to admit that you have a broken leg, to get it looked after, and to wear a cast. But it seems not to be ok to admit that your thoughts and your emotions are spiralling out of control. So I hid my pain. I tried to deal with it on my own—which is exactly the worst thing to do when you’re depressed.

When I finally admitted that I needed help, I experienced a profound sense of relief. I wasn’t alone anymore. I didn’t have to worry about keeping up appearances. My dark secret was out.

Guess what? The world didn’t end. In a very real sense, a new world was born. People sat with me in the darkness of my depression and told me that they loved me. They convinced me that I had value as a human being.

As time went on, I got the help I needed from caring, compassionate, and tough psychiatric nurses. Family and friends surrounded me with love. It was clear that I needed help. Once I had admitted in that moment of desperation that I could no longer do it by myself, the healing began.

None of this was easy or quick. It’s pretty scary to become vulnerable and admit our need. But I also know that’s when my life began again. And to be completely honest, I still don’t have it all together. And that’s ok.

I am immensely grateful for the increasing conversation about mental health. The stigma is slowly lessening. Other people are beginning to talk more openly about their own struggles with depression—sports figures, leaders, politicians, celebrities. I was deeply moved when John Fetterman, the first-year US senator from Pennsylvania, took leave from the US Senate to deal

with his struggle with depression. He continues to talk openly about his struggles, and he continues to be honoured for his honesty, vulnerability, and openness.

In his novel, “The Emperor of Ocean Park,” Stephen Carter writes, “I *am* depressed. And I almost like it. Depression is seductive: it offends and teases, frightens you and draws you in, tempting you with its promise of sweet oblivion, then overwhelming you with a nearly sexual power, squirming past your defenses, dissolving your will, invading the tired spirit so utterly that it becomes difficult to recall that you ever lived without it ... or to imagine that you might live that way again. With all the guile of Satan himself, depression persuades you that its invasion was all your own idea, that you wanted it all along. It fogs the part of the brain that reasons, which knows right and wrong. It captures you with its warm, guilty, hateful pleasures, and, worst of all, it becomes familiar. All at once, you find yourself in thrall to the very thing that most terrifies you. Your work slides, your friendships slide, your marriage slides, but you scarcely notice: to be depressed is to be half in love with disaster.”

It is a frighteningly accurate description of what I felt as I slid towards the abyss. I suspect many people who struggle with depression might recognize themselves in it as well.

I suspect that comedians use laughter as a tool to beat the monsters of their world down to size. Following Robin Williams’ suicide after a life-long battle with depression, an interview noted that “Comedy is an alchemy ... it takes pain and turns it into laughter. In a world like this filled with so much horror, why wouldn’t you use all the tools at your disposal — love certainly, and hope and trust, but also laughter.”

Let me end with those three goals. Take care of yourself. Take care of your loved ones. Talk about mental health.

If you, or someone you love, is struggling, please reach out. You are loved. You might just save a life.