



Slumping into the chair in my office, I pulled out a book of matches, then lit the tea light nestled inside the beautifully crafted angel. I stared at the flame dancing on its uplifted golden trumpet. The angel sat on my desk as a reminder of God's call to proclaim his Word. Posted next to my laptop was a favorite scripture: "They will tell of the power of your awesome works, and I will proclaim your great deeds (Psalm 145:6).

But today I didn't want to proclaim anything. Feeling lost, defeated and alone, I blew out the candle, shut down my computer and stared at the blank screen. Depression had gripped me.

I had always been a bubbly extrovert. When people marveled at my exuberant energy, I proudly accepted my title as Superwoman, yet I knew that without God's ability and strength fueling me, I was like an ink pen with a dried-up ink well.

Strange emotions of defeat settled like a black cloud. Uncertainty and loneliness bewildered me. Although I'd experienced the temporary sadness that everyone feels occasionally, this was different. My ability to function normally was impaired beyond my control.

My physical energy was depleted. Brain fog made simple decision-making a major endeavor. Battling severe fatigue, my drive to fulfill the tasks on my to-do list dissipated. *I wondered if I was tired because I was depressed or depressed because I was tired.*

When my family asked what was wrong, I couldn't answer. *I cancelled appointments so I could be alone.* When I had to be around people, it required great effort to appear normal. I felt like a phony

"I can't be depressed...

I'm a Christian."

BY THERESE MARSZALEK

and wished I could flee to isolation.

Can a Christian Become Depressed?

It didn't make sense. My relationship with God had been strong for over 22 years. I enjoyed serving in various ministries. I had a loving husband, a fruitful marriage and three awesome children.

A tormenting thought replayed like a broken record, *I can't be depressed...I'm a Christian.*

I had heard so many well-intentioned messages thunder from the pulpit claiming that depressed people simply needed more faith...they ought to pray more...seek the joy of the Lord...reach out to others instead of focusing on themselves. Preachers said depressed people just needed to "get over it." At the time, I agreed with a hearty "Amen!" Yet now, their words echoing in my mind cloaked me in shame.

I cried privately, unable to express my feelings to God or to anyone. The Prozac jokes I once laughed at weren't funny anymore. I dreaded the thought that someone might discover my secret.

I examined my heart to see if seeds of unforgiveness might have taken root to sprout the misery. I searched my conscience to see if other sin had opened the door for

despair. But I found no explanation for the downward spiral I was experiencing.

After the dark cloud lingered for several weeks, I became desperate. Fighting the thought that I had failed God, I tried to pray, but could only muster the strength to cry, "Help me, God!" When I tried to read the Bible, my heart felt like a rock. Although spiritually numb, I clung to God's promise: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 3:5). Knowing God cannot lie, I believed he was with me, in spite of how I felt.

Looking for Answers

God answered my cry by leading me to resources and people to help me better understand and overcome depression.

I called my dad, knowing he had suffered from depression throughout his adult life, and he had been hospitalized numerous times during my childhood. Dad's depression had never been discussed.

Dad wept as I described my symptoms. I was surprised to learn that my grandfather and several close relatives had also suffered from depression. Dad advised me to seek medical attention and encouraged me not to feel ashamed. *How can I not feel ashamed?* I thought. *I've failed as a Christian.*

I feared that exposing my depression would squelch my Christian influence. As an author and inspirational speaker, I had written and preached about God's provision for health—body, soul and spirit. I wondered if people would consider me a spiritual failure if they knew I was unable to live *God's abundant life* that I taught about.

I was *supposed* to have the joy of the Lord; I was *supposed* to walk by faith; I was *supposed* to be an overcomer; I was *supposed* to be strong. The negative stigma of depression haunted me.

Swallowing my pride, I scheduled a doctor appointment. After evaluating me, she explained the

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various causes for depression, one being an imbalance of certain brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. She said it was a common medical condition requiring treatment.

The doctor prescribed a temporary, mild anti-depressant to help balance the serotonin levels. It wouldn't cause any major change, she said, but would gradually and subtly bring brain chemicals into harmony. When I hesitated, she asked me, "Would you refuse medication or treatment if you were diagnosed with liver disease or cancer?"



"Of course not," I answered. But this seemed different. Liver disease and cancer were *acceptable illnesses*. Depression, I thought, was an *unacceptable illness*.

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I eventually mustered up the courage to fill the prescription. Facing the neighborhood pharmacist magnified my embarrassment. I swore my husband to secrecy and shared my secret with no one else.

As the doctor predicted, I didn't notice a drastic change after taking the medication for several months. I felt increasingly better, however, and didn't suffer any episodes of lingering black clouds.

Confessing My Struggle

When I started feeling better, I confided in two trusted friends who committed to pray for me. Exposing my struggle lifted a heavy burden. One friend, who had also fought depression, recommended a book that answered many questions. Another friend suggested that I play praise and worship music in my home, another key that brought comfort during my recovery.

Because severe fatigue continued to plague me, additional medical tests were ordered. Blood tests confirmed Hashimoto's Thyroiditis, an autoimmune disorder in which the body's immune system mistakingly attacks the thyroid gland. Because the thyroid is like the central control system of the body, if it malfunctions, other physical systems can malfunction also. I was also diagnosed with fi-

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bromyalgia. Depression is a common symptom of both of these autoimmune disorders.

In time, God revealed the causes of my depression and led me to a successful treatment plan. Today, although no longer on antidepressants, cycles of depression still visit from time to time. But when I sense the clouds moving in, I call on the support system to which God led me—and the storms pass much easier.

Depression (when a person experiences deep, unshakeable sadness and diminished interest in normal activities) affects an estimated 17-18 million Americans every year, making it one of the most common medical problems in the



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U.S. Depression is more than twice as common in women as in men.

Sickness or Sin?

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attached to depression, many who suffer from depression do not seek treatment, fearing others will view it as a sign of personal weakness. Some are embarrassed or think they can overcome it on their own.

Although most people occasionally experience temporary sadness, loneliness or *the blues*, depression can impair a person's ability to function normally. Feelings of guilt, despair, hopelessness,

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

Consider seeking professional help if you have four or more of the following symptoms continually for over two weeks:

- Noticeable change in appetite with weight gain or significant weight loss not attributable to dieting
- Noticeable change in sleeping patterns, such as fitful sleep, inability to sleep, early morning awakening or sleeping too much
- Loss of interest and pleasure in activities formerly enjoyed
- Loss of energy, fatigue
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Persistent feelings of hopelessness
- Feelings of inappropriate guilt
- Inability to concentrate or extreme difficulty making decisions
- Recurring thoughts of death or suicide, wishing to die or attempting suicide

"Signs and Symptoms of Depression" from Johns Hopkins Medical Handbook, page 456.

worthlessness and even thoughts of suicide are common.

Symptoms of depression can include difficulty concentrating or making decisions, memory loss, changes in eating and sleeping habits, loss of interest in normal activities and difficulty working or fulfilling daily responsibilities.



Episodes can be brief or long lasting and symptoms can be mild to severe.

Prayer, *desperate prayer*, was a key that opened the door to heavenly intervention on my depression battlefield. Because the process started through prayer is often an ongoing one, those suffering with depression must patiently endure the process through which God brings them. His answer to our plea may come in the form of doctors, medication, counseling, books or compassionate people that willingly walk through the valley with us. Thank God for creating these resources and avenues to wholeness!

Because the root cause of depression is unique to the individual, the journey to overcoming depression is also unique. In the process of submitting to and implementing God's tailor-made plan for recovery and by trusting and believing that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...." (Romans 8:1), you can be free from the shame and bondage of depression. □

Therese Marszalek is an ordained minister who has written articles for numerous publications, including Charisma News, Lutheran Digest, Lookout, Purpose, Signs of the Times, Vision, Evangel and Joyful Woman. She is also an instructor at Christian Writers' seminars and the author of several books, including Miracles Still Happen and Extraordinary Miracles in the Lives of Ordinary People.

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RESOURCES FOR HELP WITH DEPRESSION

Books

New Light on Depression: Help, Hope and Answers for the Depressed and Those Who Love Them, by David B. Biebel and Harold G. Koenig (Zondervan)

Why Do I Feel This Way? What Every Woman Needs to Know About Depression, by Brenda Poinsett (Navpress).

Organizations

National Institute of Mental Health
6001 Executive Boulevard
Suite 8184, MSC 9663
Bethesda, MD 20892-9663
1-866-615-6464 (toll-free)
www.nimh.nih.gov

American Psychological Association
750 First Street NE
Washington DC 20002-4242
1-800-374-2721
www.apa.org

National Foundation for Depressive Illnesses, Inc.
PO Box 2257
New York, NY 10116
1-800-239-1265
www.depression.org

New Life Ministries
P.O. Box 1018
Laguna Beach, CA 92652
1-800-NEW-LIFE (639-5433)
www.newlife.com

Internet Resources

www.depression.com
www.healingfromdepression.com
www.allaboutdepression.com
www.depressionremedy.com

Magazine article:

Depression: The Long, Dark Night of the Soul, by Dr. J. Raymond Albrek-tson, July/August 2005, *Plain Truth*.

<http://www.ptm.org/05PT/JulAug/darkNight.pdf>