



# RECOVERING & REBUILDING

FROM A SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS

REV. DR. JIM STOUT

## ALSO BY REV. DR. JIM STOUT

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# **RECOVERING & REBUILDING**

**FROM A SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS**



**REV. DR. JIM STOUT**

SHEPHERD PUBLISHING

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## DEDICATED WITH GRATITUDE

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To Leah, my awesome wife of forty-eight years, and to Jim Jr. and John, our two incredible sons. Thank you for loving me, believing in me, and patiently forgiving my many rough edges, which, at times, caused much hurt.

To Dr. Phil Sutherland, who counseled me through both my best and worst times, and is the primary person to whom I owe my life.

To Bob Long, my dear friend, who came alongside me with support and nonstop encouragement.

*Success consists of going from failure to failure  
without loss of enthusiasm . . . If you're going  
through hell, keep going . . . Never give up.  
Never give up. Never give up!*

**Winston Churchill**



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# INTRODUCTION

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK IS TO SHARE MY JOURNEY WITH depression, bipolar disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, emotional and sexual abuses, and also to reveal some of the recovery lessons I've learned from the trenches.

My intent is to describe what has helped me and hundreds of others who've recovered their lives from the debilitating effects of serious mental illness.

My approach is similar to D. T. Niles's description of evangelism: "One beggar sharing with another beggar where to find bread."

As you read, please apply the oft-used slogan from Alcoholics Anonymous: "Take what works and leave the rest."



# CHAPTER 1

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## **My Personal Bipolar Story**

IN 1989, NEXT TO ME ON MY MOTEL BED, I LAID LETHAL dosages of two medications and a fifth of rum. Beside the pills lay a .357 Magnum revolver. Despair had set in—suicide was my next move.

My death would be painless—either a drug overdose or a lethal shot to the head—and I debated which to use. Either way, my lifelong inner hurt and current unbearable torture would soon be over.

### **OUTWARD SUCCESS BUT INNER PAIN**

Most people saw me as a successful pastor. Yet in the fall of 1988, I lost my desire to live. A long history of childhood emotional and sexual abuse had finally caught up with me. In addition, I struggled with other stresses and was exhausted from nonstop organizing, counseling, and meetings.

In three of the five churches I had served, I'd been ravaged by people who'd broken financial promises and stung me with ruthless, unwarranted criticisms.

At one church, I'd even received death threats toward me, my wife, and our two young sons because my preaching focused on Bible-centered theology rather than the current denominational policies and programs.

But it's difficult for a pastor to defend himself. If he were to strike back at his critics, or sue his church for having violated their contract with him, he would be removed from his post.

In 1986, I accepted a call to a large church in California. Every program I started there exceeded my expectations—I tingled with excitement! But mixed with my joy were severe depressions. They immobilized me for days at a time. Yet no one ever noticed the inner desperation hiding behind my outward accomplishments. I echoed the prophet Jeremiah and cried out to God, “*Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?*”<sup>1</sup>

Outwardly I acted pleasant, but inside I was numb and angry and miserable. I had everything to live for, yet inwardly I despaired.

Thoughts of ending my life soon blackened my mind, and I couldn't shake them off. Although my wife and two sons had always been precious to me, and I found my work rewarding, I just didn't care anymore—about anything or anyone.

I had to escape the pain of this all-engulfing depression. When I considered the effects my “exit” would have on my family and others, I could only focus on frightening, inexpressibly lonely thoughts, which only made me feel worse.

#### **EVEN SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE CAN HAVE A MENTAL ILLNESS**

Before this crisis, when I was in college, I played football and wrestled at varsity level. I also boxed, winning Golden

Gloves heavyweight championships in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

For two college summers, I did social work and coached football with teenage gangs in New York City.

While in seminary, I worked in a college ministry of a large downtown Boston church with Harvard, MIT, and Boston University students. In addition, I served for six months as the student chaplain to the men's violent ward at Danvers State Mental Hospital in Danvers, Massachusetts.

Through nine years of hard work, I earned my Master's of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degrees. I was well-read on psychological issues, and for years had taught Bible studies on numerous life-crises topics.

Nearly every month during my first twenty years of ministry, I counseled at least four to six men who were depressed or suicidal.

I spoke at chapels for professional football and baseball teams, and was listed in two *Who's Who* books.

I mention these things about my background to show that *anyone* is vulnerable to getting a mental illness like clinical depression, bipolar disorder (manic depression), or schizophrenia—no matter what a person's abilities, intelligence, accomplishments, or degree of spirituality.

### **MY BREAKDOWN**

Why would a devoted husband and father, athlete, scholar, and senior pastor of three large churches want to commit suicide?

Starting in 1984, I began to realize I'd been seriously emotionally injured from childhood and adult traumas

and was badly depressed. I thought I could handle my depression and anger outbursts on my own—but I couldn't. In spite of all that I had going for me—my terrific family, my ministry, and my effective track record of people I'd saved from taking their own lives—I couldn't pull out of my own emotional nosedive.

Finally, yet suddenly, my life fell apart in November of 1988 while I was working as a pastor at a 3,500-member church.

A series of minor stressful events, and caustic criticisms by several people, pushed me into a deep, depressive spiral. My thoughts simmered in self-pity, anger, and despair.

When I first began thinking about ending my life, I realized I was in a risky condition and needed help quickly. That day, I made an appointment with a psychologist. He agreed that it was essential for me to have professional help in a hospital setting.

I voluntarily entered the psychiatric unit of a local hospital and ended up spending five long, agonizing months there. About three weeks after being discharged, I felt I was still unstable and I entered another mental hospital, where I stayed for nearly a month. There I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness.

During my hospitalizations, I discovered that bipolar disorder runs in my family. But my depressive episodes did not simply come out of the blue, nor were they triggered solely by my genes. Some of the key causes were:

- emotional abuse by my mother, father, grandmother, and uncle;
- sexual molestation by my mother and grandmother;



- vicious treatment by three churches I'd served as senior pastor; and
- my long-held, macho spiritual belief that I could solve my own problems by forcing myself to pray and read the Bible more.

#### **WHAT'S HAPPENED SINCE MY SIX MONTHS OF HOSPITALIZATION?**

After my lengthy hospitalization, I flew blindly in the dark for several years, trying to survive and cope with my perilous moods. I felt like a novice pilot flying on a moonless night, caught in a terrible thunderstorm without any maps, radio, or navigation instruments.

I desperately wanted to rebuild my life, but other than obediently swallow psychiatric medications—and endure their awful side effects—I didn't have a clue how to get better. As a result, I continually beat myself up for not being able to control my moods.

Those years of ignorance about the recovery process meant that I merely “existed.” I constantly had to adjust to a roller coaster existence of extreme and often-dangerous mood swings that, at the time, seemed absolutely unpredictable. I didn't know about recovery tools or the role that stress plays in erupting mood flare-ups.

During my first few years out of the hospital, I could only find a few books on bipolar disorder. I read these and whatever else I could find about mental illness recovery, sexual abuse, and family dysfunction.

Despite this new knowledge, the agony of severe depression and the torment of mania's cruel agitations and sleep deprivations, were, at times, almost too hard to

bear. My volatile mood shifts forced my family and me to live continually on edge.

Oppressive bouts of painful hopefulness and suicidal depression lasted for days, and sometimes as long as six months. During those terrible seasons, I answered few phone calls and avoided people as much as possible.

At night, during depressed “down” times, it was almost impossible to fall asleep quickly or to experience sound, peaceful sleep. Current stresses and memory flashbacks tormented my thoughts with constant replays.

In manic periods, I suffered episodes that lasted up to three months, with weeks of only two or three hours of sleep a night, and some weeks with none. During those times, I vibrated with energy, optimism, and extensive plan making, but also suffered from extreme irritability and irrational judgment.

These mood swings took their toll: for the first few years out of the hospital, I cancelled half my appointments due to depressive isolations, manic over-scheduling, or exhaustion.

Because of my illness, I couldn't return to full-time work as a pastor and was able to work only as a volunteer in part-time church-related positions. On top of this, I had ongoing conflicts with my church denomination's insurance company over my psychiatric coverage. This stress worsened my already radical mood changes.

I knew I needed professional help. Since 1988, I've seen my psychiatrist and psychologist regularly. To date, I have tried over fifty different psychiatric medications, with most causing intolerable side effects and only a few being helpful.

In 1997, my psychiatrist finally found an effective

medication that caused minimal side effects. In addition to educating myself about recovery methods and tools, this drug has greatly stabilized me. Episodes of depression or mania, which used to last from one to six months, now only last a few hours, days, or a week at most.

Now, for the most part, I am at peace. I function well and experience only occasional, short setbacks. I am also productive in helping others with my writing, speaking, teaching, counseling, and consulting. That I am alive, happy, active, and productive is truly a miracle from God!

#### **THINGS I LOST DUE TO MY BIPOLAR DISORDER**

My illness has cost me a lot of things, some large and some small. The loss of each one hurt me, but these are the ones that impacted me the most:

**I lost my career as a full-time pastor.** Full-time pastoring can be demanding, hectic, and nerve-wracking. The long hours, stresses, and conflicts set off too much pain. It was too risky for me to re-enter that stressful full-time “pastor arena.”

**I lost friends and colleagues.** Many completely avoided me. Some condemned me for being possessed by demons, or for not confessing *all* my sins.

Because I took medications and saw therapists, others scolded me for being “unspiritual,” claiming I had a lack of faith in God’s ability to heal my illness.

**At times, I lost the support of my wife and sons.** Sometimes my family had to avoid or withdraw from

me, afraid they'd activate my anger, depression, or mania. They endured the aggravations of my memory lapses, silent isolations, frequent refusals to answer the phone, periodic temper flashes, shirking of my fair share of chores, sleeping all day or staying up all night, and countless other irritations.

In his book *When Even the Devil Deserts You*, Ed Cooper describes how he feels about the pain of being distanced from his loved ones:

Do you know the hurt I feel when I look into my family's faces and see their fear? Fear of me and what I have become. I try to tell them I will not hurt them and to explain it is not their fault. I try to reach out to them to ease their sorrow, but I fail to be a comfort because I cannot hide the agony of my soul.

Oh how I identify with Cooper, because, so often, my family, friends, and relatives evaded discussing or even learning about my mental illness.

**I lost my emotional resilience.** I became more easily hurt by critical comments and actions of others. I grew far more sensitive to phony “love” and had a hard time being around judgmental people, both religious and non-religious.

**I lost my sense of peace.** During the worst times, I could find no solace in God. I often raged at him for my losses and then felt guilty for not trusting him with my circumstances.

**I lost the support of the Christian community.** For several years, I attended few worship services, church events, or clergy meetings. I avoided them because interacting with church people and pastors was emotionally draining.

At church or clergy-related activities, someone would inevitably make a stinging remark. Early in my recovery, it only took one negative comment to knock me into a depressive episode. It hurt to be slammed by insensitive, unloving comments from people who should have been safe.

In addition, I was turned off by some of the unbiblical theology (about mental illness, suffering, and healing) that came from clergy, laypersons, worship services, and denominational meetings.

However, I've processed most of these wounds and have found peace again and I am actively worshiping in a local church—and my relationship with God is the best it has ever been.



## CHAPTER 2

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### **My Personal Faith Testimony**

MANY PEOPLE DIAGNOSED WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS COME from well-adjusted “normal” families—I did not. My mental-emotional meltdown occurred in my 40s, but its seeds had already been planted before I was five years old.

#### **THE EARLY YEARS: FOUNDATION OF A BREAKDOWN**

My younger sister and brother and I grew up in State College, Pennsylvania, the home of Penn State University. My father was a professor of economics there, and my mom was a schoolteacher.

Our home life was constantly tense. Mom wore the pants in the family, and she and Dad fought all the time, mainly with Mom on the attack. It was like living in a war zone, never knowing when you'd step on a land mine. Few days went by without some kind verbal abuse, lengthy silent treatment, or other kinds of emotional abuse against us kids, primarily toward my sister and me.

When I was fourteen, my mom left my dad and took my brother and sister to live with her for a year in Pittsburgh. I stayed with my father.

Eventually my parents reconciled, and the following years were filled with uncertainty and anxiety for me: “How

long will they stay married before they divorce? When will Mom leave again?”

She left us at least eighteen times before I was twenty-one. Most of those times I never knew where she went, when or if she would ever come back, or if she would follow through on her threats of suicide. Most of the time she blamed my dad and me for her leaving.

Starting when I was in second grade, my mom, her brother, and my maternal grandmother “Gram” told me that *I* was at fault for my parents’ rocky marriage and my siblings’ behavior.

I was then made responsible for improving my mom and dad’s relationship, and for making sure my sister and brother behaved well and succeeded in school.

Gram was a nurse and outspoken Christian, yet she exerted both positive and negative influences on us kids.

On the positive side, she rewarded us with special prizes when we memorized Bible passages, and she prayed with us continually. She also paid for our summer church camps and bought us Christian books.

On the negative side, Gram was intolerant, racist, and bigoted. And, starting at age four and lasting until my late teens, Mom and Gram sexually abused me. The worst came from Mom when I was eight and nine while my dad was working in Illinois.

Hundreds of times, Mom and Gram told me, “You are a mean, evil, ungrateful son and you have to stop wetting the bed, pooping your pants, breaking toys, talking back, and acting mean to your mom. Or else you will end up in reform school, prison, and then be executed by the time you are twenty-one.”



While these things were happening, Mom and Dad were moderately religious. Our family went to church and Sunday school several times a month, but rarely said blessings at meals or talked about faith.

Gram, on the other hand, was extremely religious. She and my grandfather attended their Presbyterian church every Sunday. He was an elder there, and she taught a weekly women's Bible study.

I usually walked the one and a half miles each way to Sunday school, even as a young boy. In fifth grade, while walking through part of the Penn State campus en route to Sunday school class, I shot a chipmunk with my slingshot. I shoved it in my pocket and brought it to class. When they passed the offering plate, I dropped the chipmunk in the plate. Needless to say, my offering was met with stern reprimands, and I was told to leave. I did. And except for a few occasions, that was the last time I had anything to do with church until my college years.

Throughout my childhood, I continued to shoot animals, skinning them to learn what they looked like on the inside. I wanted to be a doctor like my maternal grandfather Stevenson, an obstetrician-gynecologist who had played football for the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt). I idolized him. However, instead of his specialty, I dreamed of becoming a surgeon.

When I was a teenager, my mom, her brother, and Gram and Grandpa Stevenson pressured and threatened me into leaving State College High School, forcing me to enter Admiral Farragut Academy, a Naval prep school in St. Petersburg, Florida. This move, they said, would rescue me from a terrible home situation and teach me to study.

I spent my junior and senior years of high school at Farragut hanging on to my dreams of becoming a surgeon. But my Naval exposure there had a strong influence on me and I soon also yearned to become a Naval Frogman (now called a Navy Seal).

In my senior year, a serious knee injury at the start of football season destroyed any hopes of the Naval Academy and a career as a Seal, and also cost me several major college football scholarship offers.

Despite this, I did manage to receive several full scholarships to other schools, but I turned them down, accepting a partial scholarship at Pitt instead. I was confident my knee would heal and that I would play well enough to earn a full scholarship. Since becoming a Seal was no longer possible, I also chose Pitt hoping my grandfather's influence would help me get into medical school.

#### **MY SPIRITUAL TURNING POINT**

As a freshman at Pitt, I was invited by teammates to attend weekly Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) meetings in our dorm. Although I had heard the "Christian message" as a child at summer church camps, nothing had ever made much sense to me.

The FCA speakers talked about having a personal relationship with God. They shared that God had become a man in the person of Jesus Christ to die for our wrongs and to show people how to live a fulfilling life under his direction. This offer of complete forgiveness and life eternal would be mine if I would open my life to Christ's gift of forgiveness and submit to his leadership in my life. All

this talk about Jesus seemed new and strange to me, but I was intrigued.

For the next several months, I attended FCA and other Christian gatherings, talked extensively with classmates and others about their faith, and read nearly forty books on Christianity.

Sometime in that fall of 1960, I decided that I really wanted what my teammates had: a genuine personal relationship with God. In spite of all my research, unanswered questions, and fears, I prayed to God that he would forgive my sins and take over as the Ruler of my life.

All along, the key obstacle that had held me back from committing my life to Christ was the dread that God might want me to leave my pre-med studies and become either a missionary or minister. Finally, I reached the point where I said:

Okay God, if you want me to leave medical studies and become a pastor or missionary, I'm willing. But you'll have to drag me, and I'll be leaving heel marks on the ground. I still don't have many of my questions answered. But I'm going to stick my neck out and trust that you know what's best for me. Thank you for allowing your son, Jesus, to be punished on the cross and suffer the death and separation that I deserve for my sins.

I continued:

Jesus, please come into my life and make me into the man you want me to be. I'm willing to take

directions from you and let you call the shots for my life from now on.

After I had prayed those words, nothing happened. No emotional buzz. No tears. No overwhelming sense of God's close presence. For the next six months, I wrestled with serious doubts over what had or had not happened to me spiritually. I wondered if Christ had really come into my life:

Maybe I'm too far gone to rescue. Perhaps I'm simply not spiritual enough or good enough "Christian material." Maybe I haven't really been sincere enough about turning my life over to Christ.

However, as I learned more of the Bible's teachings over the next two years, God gave me several unexpected gifts: self-acceptance, assurance of his grace-filled love, and guidance for my personal struggles and career direction.

#### **BENEFITS OF BECOMING A CHRIST FOLLOWER**

Looking back, I can see some of the life-changing, practical advantages of accepting God's gift of forgiveness and his management of my life. Some people experience warm, fuzzy, emotional feelings of God's presence, but I don't. Most of my spiritual benefits have come from reading the Bible and trusting his biblical promises for his people. I now have:

- a place in God's forever family, who will support, encourage, and guide me in ways my biological family did not;

- a guarantee that God really loves me, and that he is for me, not against me;
- a confident assurance of going to heaven when I die;
- a healthy, balanced self-esteem, realizing that I am not just a sinful man, but also a man with great potential and usefulness in God's world; and
- a comfort that I am never alone. Christ is always with me in my doubts, inner or outer pain, letdowns, failures, sins, and successes.

Furthermore, the Bible's teachings have:

- enabled me to accept God's amazing forgiveness, and move on—without continuing to put myself down for my wrong decisions, actions, or words;
- empowered me to forgive myself for having said or done things that hurt others;
- showed me how to better accept people as they are—regardless of their age, race, religion, or sexuality—as broken, sinful individuals like me, and who are important to God; and
- inspired me to pass on my experiences and faith to others.

#### **MY NEW FAITH FINDS EXPRESSIONS**

Although I had had no dramatic conversion experience, my outlook on life slowly began to change. During this time, I was searching for the purpose of my life. I had always wanted to help others but wasn't sure of the best way I could make my life count. During college and graduate school, I tried a variety of service opportunities, including:

- teaching a Bible study with my Phi Gamma Delta Fraternity brothers;
- teaching a fifth grade Sunday school class in a small black church in Pittsburgh's Hill District;
- working as a campus minister with college students at Miami University (in Oxford, Ohio) and starting discussion groups, Bible studies, and an FCA chapter there; and
- starting youth groups similar to Young Life clubs for high school students in several cities.

These and other experiences seemed to validate that I would be well-suited for professional ministry.

At that time, I felt drawn toward some type of college or inner-city ministry. To become better trained in biblical knowledge, I enrolled at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Becoming a typical suburban pastor of a local church was absolutely the furthest thing from my mind during seminary. Yet in spite of this, most of my ministry career has been done through local churches.

Since earning my Master of Divinity degree from Gordon-Conwell and Doctor of Ministry from Fuller Theological Seminary, I have:

- served as a senior pastor, associate pastor, or specialist pastor in a number of local churches with all ages of youth and adults;
- served as an area director with The Gathering USA, an outreach ministry to unchurched business and professional men;

- started and led the Career Counseling division of The Gathering USA;
- operated a career guidance and life-coaching practice, Career Compatibilities;
- taught at Fuller and Gordon-Conwell theological seminaries, several colleges, a medical school, hospitals, mental health conferences, churches, and other venues; and
- authored and published more than ten books and numerous articles on mental health and other life issues.

I am thankful for God's incredible faithfulness through my trials and successes. I am a "wounded healer," and am grateful to be able to pass on to others my experience, strength, and hope.





## CHAPTER 3

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### **My Recovery Steps**

WHAT DID I DO TO HEAL AND RECONSTRUCT FROM THE EFFECTS of my brain-soul disorder? The process of rebuilding my life meant starting over and over after depressive or manic episodes and never giving up when my efforts failed—I just tried something else. These are the strategies that worked for me:

**I worked hard to repair and enhance my marriage.** This meant getting marriage counseling, reading books on marriage, and changing my attitudes and communication habits.

In spite of her own inner wounds, my awesome wife Leah has risen above them to be an anchor for me in countless storms. Time and again, she listened to me, comforted me, prayed for me, and offered helpful advice. This has enriched our trust, security, and intimacy.

**I often initiated candid, one-on-one conversations with my wife and sons.** These clarified current and potential future misunderstandings. Fortunately, they were willing to process the hurts I'd caused them. This, I believe, helped them overcome the negative changes they'd seen in me.

This open discussion was immensely helpful for all of us. It strengthened our closeness, added to our sense of security, and provided many opportunities to laugh at ourselves.

**I made it a priority to create positive relationships with safe people.** It took enormous courage to reach out to others and initiate get-togethers, but my efforts certainly paid off and made a big difference with my family and friends.

They knew of my ongoing struggles and failures yet continued to believe in me and never gave up on me. Their support and input kept me afloat in countless storms.

**I played never-ending practical jokes and shared countless gags with friends and strangers.** This often produced outrageous fun and gave fresh outlook that somehow distanced me from a lot of my pain, anxiety, and agitation.

**I scheduled regular breakfasts and lunches with encouraging friends.** These times provided safe opportunities to vent and receive acceptance, affirmation, and guidance. These get-togethers forced me to de-isolate myself and pulled me out of many tailspins. Plus, they gave me opportunities to share new jokes.

**I regularly attended 12-step groups for support, healing, and guidance.** These gave me practical ways of handling problems and great insights into myself and others.

**I read the Bible, recovery literature, and other inspirational, psychological, and self-help books.** I spent considerable time and money devouring more than 350 books and articles. I researched the causes, treatment, and recovery from bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia, posttraumatic stress disorder, stress, and family dysfunction. I also learned about methods to recover from emotional, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse.

I obviously benefitted from applying this information to my own life, but, amazingly, my attempts at passing on these “tricks of the trade” have saved and enhanced the lives of many others.

**I prayed when stressed.** I mentally applied the complete Serenity Prayer (attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr) to my specific circumstances:

God, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference; living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardship as a pathway to peace; taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that you will make all things right if I surrender to your will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with you forever in the next. Amen.

Additionally, I disciplined myself to thank God every morning for at least three blessings of the previous day.

This simple exercise created a positive shift in my outlook that strengthened my inner resolve.

**I attended conferences, seminars, and lectures on mental disorders.** These gave me greater knowledge of mental illness, and gave me recovery strategies to live with my “new normal.” I also gained the benefit of making friends with fellow strugglers.

**I participated in a “ladies-only” YMCA water aerobics class for eight years as their token male.** They warmly welcomed me, laughed at my awful jokes, listened to my manic chatter, and didn’t judge my illness-caused absences. This class provided helpful exercise, fun, and an improved perspective of my situation.

**I started Comfort Zone, a free support group for people who are mentally injured.** After twenty years, it still meets weekly, and has added to my development as a “wounded healer.” Also, its meetings have introduced me to many new friends.

**I presented to numerous men’s and women’s groups, church groups, and psychiatric hospital patients and staffs.** I taught at mental illness conferences, workshops, and seminars, as well as college and seminary classes. These events gave me new purpose and were, for the most part, positive healing experiences.

**I authored books and self-help articles for emotionally damaged people, their families, and their friends. I**

wrote these out of gratitude for the aid I received, and as an attempt to share my experiences.

Among my writing projects was a much-praised and award-winning autobiographical self-help book titled *Bipolar Disorder: Rebuilding Your Life*. For me, writing is therapeutic, energizing, and satisfying.



## CHAPTER 4

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### **How You Can Overcome Your Illness**

LET'S FACE IT—IF YOU'VE GOT MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES, YOU will suffer setbacks: your doctors will fail you, your medications won't work, or people will let you down. But disappointments need not be defeats—there are countless success stories about people who, in spite of occasional struggles, now live stable, meaningful, and productive lives. An important part of this healing process is to implement practical recovery steps, but it is also critical to connect (or reconnect) with God.

#### **TRY OUT THESE RECOVERY TIPS**

Here are some practical suggestions for managing ups and downs that have worked for me and countless others:

- Accept the reality that for anyone, especially emotionally injured persons, living well means coping with and overcoming obstacles and setbacks.
- Never give up. Recovery is all about forcing yourself to get up again and again.
- Realize that there may be new, more effective ways to deal with your problems than what you've tried so far.
- Continue the lifelong process of educating yourself and others about your illness, its treatments, and recovery

strategies. This can involve 12-step or recovery materials, as well as psychology books and articles. Search the Internet. Listen to CDs. Attend mental illness seminars and conferences. Keep asking questions. Never stop learning.

- Use a professional team that includes a therapist, doctor, and/or psychiatrist.
- Build a personal, non-professional team of safe, good-listening, hope-building friends and family members, as well as finding an organized support group.
- Work at keeping a positive attitude about yourself, life, others, and God (or your higher power).
- Seek to improve your conscious contact with God (or your higher power) through prayer, meditation, and other spiritual techniques.
- Laugh a lot. Try to read a cartoon or joke several times each week.
- Exercise regularly and eat healthy foods in balanced amounts.
- Find fun and fulfillment doing hobbies and other activities.
- Reinvent yourself. In spite of your losses, find your special purpose in life. Use your unique skills and experiences (the good, bad, and ugly ones) to make the world a better place.
- Regularly reach out to help others, especially those suffering from a mental disorder.
- Set realistic, measurable goals.

Consider implementing these recovery tactics and tools to stabilize yourself, and experiment to find what works best for you.



## CONNECT WITH GOD

No two people come to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord the same way—each person must find his or her own path to God. Likewise, you will need to discover God in your own unique way. These are some simple steps to take if you'd like to get closer to God and become a follower of Jesus Christ:

1. Admit to yourself and to God that you have broken some of his laws and not lived up to his expectations of you, nor have you lived up to your own expectations of yourself: “Dear God, I’m sorry for my sins and for disobeying you.”
2. Thank God for sending his son, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross in your place to suffer the separation from God and the hell that you deserve: “God, by faith, I accept your gift of complete forgiveness which you provided by sending your son Jesus to die in my place for my wrongs. I’m grateful for your love.”
3. Invite Jesus Christ to spiritually come into your life and be your new Resident Manager: “Lord Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross so that my sins could be forgiven. Please come into my life and be my Guide, my Friend, and my Ruler. By faith, I thank you for coming into my life. Even though I know I won’t follow you perfectly, I will do my best to obey you as my new Leader.”

If you prayed these prayers for the first time, or even prayed them again as a rededication, please reflect on these verses from the Bible, God’s written words to us:

*For God so loved the world, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but shall have eternal life.* <sup>2</sup>

*Whoever comes to me I will never drive away.* <sup>3</sup>

*We have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace.* <sup>4</sup>

*God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."* <sup>5</sup>

*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.* <sup>6</sup>

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.* <sup>7</sup>

*For I know the plans I have for you . . . Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* <sup>8</sup>

*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen and help you.* <sup>9</sup>

After deciding to turn your life over to Christ, and after reading these Bible promises, please ask God to guide you to someone to share what you've done. Welcome to God's forever family! May he bless you on your new, lifelong adventure with him.

## CONCLUSION

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THE PROCESS OF RECOVERING AND REBUILDING IS NOW UP TO YOU. Take to heart Dr. Robert Schuller's saying, "If it's going to be, it's up to me!"

The ball is in your court. It's your responsibility to experiment and use the recovery strategies from this book and elsewhere. It's *your* efforts that will help you to live a positive, purposeful, and productive life in spite of your mental illness.

Yes, you *can* reclaim your life, or reinvent it. And you *can* make a difference in the world!

Winston Churchill once said, "Never give up. Never give up. Never give up!" So go for it!



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## NOTES

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1. Jeremiah 15:18
2. John 3:16
3. John 6:37
4. Romans 5:1
5. Hebrews 13:5
6. Philippians 1:6
7. 1 John 5:13
8. Jeremiah 29:11
9. Isaiah 41:10



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Rev. Dr. Jim Stout is an ordained Presbyterian minister who has pastored in five churches. His other ministry experiences include working with college and graduate students at Harvard, MIT, Boston, Northeastern, and Miami universities; doing social work with Young Life's outreach to teenage gangs in New York City; and working as student chaplain to the men's violent ward at Danvers Massachusetts State Mental Hospital.



He was given the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) California's "Distinguished Clergy Award" for his efforts on behalf of those affected by mental illness.

In college, he participated in varsity football and wrestling, and won Golden Gloves heavyweight boxing championships in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Since then, he has competed in triathlons and finished seven- and eight-day group rides on his bike.

He received his Master of Divinity from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and his Doctor of Ministry from Fuller Theological Seminary.

He has been married to the former Leah Ann Hayden since 1967. They have two sons, Jim Jr. and John, and four energetic grandchildren.

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