
PREFACE

This book is a collection of journaling and poetry I've written through my mental-health struggles. The chapters ahead show the reader how dark depression can be, but also how bright life can get on the path to recovery. This book is intended for people struggling with depression and also for their family and friends who are looking to gain insight and empathy.

WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM THIS BOOK

This book will be useful both for people suffering from depression as well as the people who love them.

The primary target audience of this book is other depression fighters—to share with them so they may, too, find comfort, understanding, and incentive to seek life-saving help.

It's often said that misery loves company. Some scholars believe this phrase originated as early as the times of the ancient Greeks. Other academics attribute it to *Dr. Faustus*, Christopher Marlowe's 1604 play. Regardless, it's an idea that has stood the test of time.

Thousands of years ago, the Psalmist wrote,

For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave . . . I am a man without strength. You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths . . . you have taken me from my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them . . . I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief . . . I call to you, O Lord, every day . . . Why O Lord do you reject me and hide your face from me? . . . I have suffered your terrors and am in despair . . . Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me . . . You have taken away my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend. (Psalm 88:3–4, 6, 8–9, 14–16, 18)

Perhaps I was comforted because the psalmist, too, underwent spiritual and emotional despondency—with seemingly no prospect of divine help. Just knowing how others felt when battling depression has helped me greatly.

The second group for whom I’ve penned these pages are the family members and friends of a badly depressed person. My goal is for them to better understand and empathize with their loved one. Many books on depression focus on treating the symptoms, but they don’t address how people actually *feel and think* when they’re depressed. This book does just that.

If you’ve never wrestled with serious depression yourself, truly understanding someone else’s paralyzing despair is nearly impossible. Yet, “knowledge is necessity” and this book will give you a glimpse into the thoughts and emotions of a badly depressed and suicidal person.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

The writings in this book share the full story from breakdown to redemption, and you might find value in following that journey

from start to finish. Equally, you might find the greatest value in jumping to sections that are most relevant to your own struggle. Take the approach that best suits your need.

If you are reading this book while suffering from depression, please know that there is hope—in the pages ahead you will find a fresh perspective on your depressive misery. You can outlast the awful pain of your depression and move ahead with your life. In spite of your inner injuries, and maybe even because of them, you can make a difference in this broken world!

If your reading stirs up some unhealthy emotions, please share your feelings with someone safe. Find a person to talk with about your inner reactions—a trusted friend, clergy person, medical or mental health professional, or another safe person.

If you are reading this book to better understand a friend or loved one, take note of anything that resonates with you. Maybe one of my experiences mirrors that of your loved one and you can use it to open a dialogue.

Once you understand how a depressed person thinks and feels, you can help lead him or her to the next step in recovery. There are many resources available, and with your newfound understanding and empathy, you'll be better equipped to apply them in your loved one's journey of mental health.

INTRODUCTION

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?

—Psalm 13:1–2

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 life-long inner hurt and current unbearable torture would soon be over.

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

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?" (Jeremiah 15:18).

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

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

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

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.

Despite 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 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 find only 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 deprivation, 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 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 canceled 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!

Throughout my hospitalizations and during the past three decades, I jotted down notes and mini essays on recovery.

While I never considered myself a writer, I started to write about my life's journey. Much of my research, practical experiences, and journaling resulted in publishing my first book in 2003, *Bipolar Disorder: Rebuilding Your Life*.

That award-winning book has given rise to seven others. Each has come as a positive side effect of various talks I've given. Writing, I am certain, has been a key help to keep my depressions at bay or minimize their ruthless spirals. All in all, I believe my stepping out beyond my comfort zone helped me just as much as my readers.

I am grateful to God, my family, and friends for teaching me how to cope with and overcome my dangerous depressions. Likewise, I am thankful for a second chance at life, as well as the opportunities to use my strength, hope, and experiences to benefit others who struggle.

In the pages ahead, I hope you will find comfort in knowing you are not alone. If you are reading to better help a friend or loved one, I hope these writings will give you a revealing glimpse of the reality of depression so you can better understand and help.

Disclosing my own dangerous, dark, and suicidal thoughts has meant risking my reputation as a Christian leader. But if this book helps only a few "patients" and family members, it will have been worthwhile for me.

DEPRESSION SINKS IN

My eyes overflow with tears. No one is near to comfort me, no one to restore my spirit. See, Lord, how distressed I am! I am in torment within, and in my heart I am disturbed . . . People have heard my groaning, but there is no one to comfort me.

—Lamentations 1:16, 20–21

NIGHT IS MY ENEMY: MY BED IS THE TORTURE PLACE

My stresses swarm around me like bees readying to sting. Instant mental replays won't stop—in the daytime and especially at night. Dread, fear, anxiety are constant companions.

Anger at myself and others escalates: constant making of molehills into mountains; visualizing all sorts of worst-case scenarios; waiting for the next confrontation, the next crisis, the next shoe to drop.

I feel no sadness, and tears don't come. My only "feeling" is numbness and sizzling anger that can explode or implode at the smallest irritant.

In normal, good times my bed was firm, soft, inviting, totally restful. After a hard day's work, I looked forward to the welcome respite of a good night's sleep on my comforting bed.

But not for the past several weeks—whose total darkness has been hell. I used to anticipate the day ahead, ending it with a restful night's sleep.

For weeks now, I've endured the daylight hours, but have dreaded the nighttime torments. During the day, work, family, and other tasks buffered me from the sheer cruelty of silent nights. In bed, I had no activity to keep my mind off the hurtful comments and actions.

Now, the hours of darkness have shredded me with intermittent sleep when I've been terrified by long hours of sleepless anguish, harassed by scary, guilt-filled, or resentment-loaded thoughts.

My formerly looked-forward-to bed of rest has become a place of endless torture. The nocturnal hours and my bed are my dreaded enemies. How long will this nightly agony go on? I can't take much more.

OUT OF FOCUS

When I'm depressed, all of life turns sour. Previous enjoyments turn flat. There's an inner ache that seeps into every cell of my body. This pain penetrates every fiber of my being and grips me like a crushing vice. All of my feelings have been blunted and are now numb. Life and people no longer have color. Everything is gray or black. My stomach tightens. Tears edge the surface of my eyes.

I'm gripped by something stronger than myself. It's beyond my control, like a crippled jet spiraling downward toward oblivion.

Sometimes I can focus on a TV show, movie, or a book—and the sadness goes away. However, usually, deep, unrelenting sadness immobilizes me from interactions with anyone. This melancholy freezes me in place and prevents me from taking even small steps to do *anything*.

This pain goes beyond reason. All my best logic and practical reasoning are useless. My self-talk, “Things will get better,” or “You’ve got an exciting event coming up,” or “You shouldn’t think about taking your life. Look what you’d do to your wife and kids,” doesn’t work. Bible verses are of no help. I can’t pray.

All I want to do is get away from this terrible-beyond-words pain. It’s unbearable. And there’s only one way left to use. I can’t go on much longer “just existing.”

THE TWO-MINUTE CLOCK

It’s the fourth quarter of the football game. Only two minutes left on the clock. No more time-outs left. There are no substitute players to go in for me. The bench has been cleared. The coach has left. My teammates have walked off the field.

We are behind 20–0. And it’s only me against eleven opponents. I’m utterly exhausted from the fierce battle in the linemen’s trenches. I have no reserve energy left. I’ve lost all confidence in myself.

I can’t remember plays, teammates’ names, or past games. I have to write all my plays on adhesive tape on my wrist because I can no longer remember details.

I’m unable to handle any more leadership roles on this team. At times in the past, the fans, coaches, and players criticized, opposed, or rejected me and my leadership. That’s what happened on the last two teams that I coached. I just can’t face that heartache anymore.

I feel like I'm losing my mind from too many long practice sessions, too many illegal blocks on me. I've made some tackles, but I've been double-teamed and trap-blocked and clipped and leg-whipped. I've stayed in games too long without a rest.

Amazing that sometimes even a scrawny, inexperienced player can take me out of a play or put me on my back. When that's happened, I've sunk into bitter dejection and felt like giving up playing football altogether.

Looking back, I've has some good skirmishes. In this present game, I've given it my best shots, even knowing I was playing alone and was losing.

But best shots or not, I've not really progressed much at all as a player. More and more frequently, I've been blocked by my opponents.

Now, who can I turn to here on the field for help, for advice? Assistant coaches come only at halftime to discuss game plays changes. The managers are too busy writing reports. There aren't any more players left on the bench. It's up to me to win, but I'm injured and exhausted and too worn down to ask the trainer to tape my injured knees so I can re-enter the game.

Take me out of the game, coach! I've taken too many hits. There are only two minutes left, and the game's lost. I'm too battered and tired to finish. I can't take any more pain, criticism, and rejection.

I can bear this agony only so long. Even with only two minutes left, it's a hell of a fight just to stay on the field and keep playing. If preferences were allowed, I would walk off the field and quit the team forever.