

My Journey with Depression

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THE JOURNEY: If you had asked me in 1994 when depression became a serious issue for me, I would have told you that it was something that started in the late 1980's, even though I wasn't officially diagnosed until 1994. However, now (2021) I realize I've probably been dealing with it since my early childhood. That's because I know so much more now about what it does and how it manifests itself.

1997, at the age of 39, was the year that it got so bad that I finally went to a doctor to find out what was wrong with me. He was both a personal friend and a Christian and was honest with me about what was so dramatically affecting my life.

The previous eight years (1986-94) had been particularly hard...especially 1989. That year had seen my 2-year-old daughter contract a disease that paralyzed her, my dad got lung cancer and died, I got let go from my youth ministry position at a church (*because of budget cutbacks*), and my wife struggled intensely with the pregnancy and birth of our third child. I never was the kind of pastor who talked a lot about my struggles, doubts, worries, etc. so I ended up internalizing everything. Knowing what I know now, I've realized that I had struggled with depression off and on most of my life and the intensity of everything that happened in 1989 simply brought it to a permanent status in my life.

My wife suspected for years that I was dealing with depression but I would never admit it. She would occasionally ask me about it and I would always reply; *"I'm a pastor...I help people who are depressed!"* It was pride that kept me from listening to her and her discernment and we both paid a price for it.

THE SYMPTOMS: Everybody gets depressed on occasion, it's part of life. The kind of depression I'm writing about is clinical depression. It grips you and won't let go. It may ebb and flow some, but it never seems to go away. My list of symptoms that finally led me to seek out the help of a doctor were:

- Constant exhaustion - I could sleep for 8-12 hours at night and take a nap or two during the day, but still never feel like I ever rested. It was both a physical and emotional exhaustion that never seemed to go away.
- Being in a "fog" - I could have a written to-do list of things I needed to do at work and/or home, but I would struggle to make a decision on what to do next.
- Emotional - I've never been a very emotional person, but I'm not afraid of showing my emotions. When depression grips me, I become very emotional. I also would question whether or not my friends, family, and colleagues even liked me and often convinced myself that they didn't. I didn't like who I had become, so I figured nobody else did, either.

- Sense of hopelessness - You've probably heard others talk about how deep depression is like being in a long, dark tunnel and you can't figure out how to get out. This sometimes leads some with depression to get to the point of being suicidal. I, myself, was never suicidal, but I very much understand how a person could be.
- Attempts to Cope - Everyone who has clinical depression tries to cope somehow. Some hide from society, some take drugs, some turn to alcohol, some get angry, and a host of other things. I ate...a lot. I also withdrew from people to try to uncomplicate my life but neither worked well. I might get some temporary relief but it was always very short-lived. Over time, I went from weighing 165 lbs. when I got married to almost 300 lbs. 40 years later. As you can imagine, this led to more health issues that I'm dealing with today.

THE RESULT: My doctor told me that depression is a result of certain pathways in the brain that don't send enough (*or any*) endorphins to the body when stress occurs. He put me on medication to help that chemical problem so that I could get back to "normal" and realistically deal with my stress. I have been on medication off and on (*mostly on*) since 1994 and it's simply a way of life for me now.

Depression still grips me occasionally, even with medication, but I've learned to recognize it so that I can deal with it before it gets too bad. My wife and grown kids are my biggest helps. They have had to live with this as long as I have and know when I need to be left alone and when I need help. It's probably harder for them than it has been for me.

ONE LAST THING: I prayed so many times for God to heal me and take this away, but He never has. Yes, He could heal me but He's chosen to leave this with me for several reasons:

- To keep me humble.
- As a way of sharing with others who struggle with depression.
- To keep me dependent on Him.

Perhaps it's my "*thorn in the flesh*" as Paul described it in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.