

By Rebecca J. Clayson

Several weeks after my second child was born, a brief conversation with a stranger about life and relationships made me feel completely inadequate and left me despondent. I expected the melancholy to pass within a day or two, but it didn't. Instead it grew worse, and despair almost overwhelmed me. I prayed for the sorrow to go away and read the scriptures and listened to good music in hopes of regaining peace. Nothing helped. It seemed as if my soul, all that was uniquely me, had come under attack. I felt as if I had no worth and that I was unworthy of my wonderful family and good life. I

wasn't suicidal, but I felt sure that if I died someone more deserving could take my place. Each day I sank a little deeper until I lost all hope.

Because my feelings were so deeply personal and painful, I was ashamed and didn't share them with anyone. No one questioned my erratic behavior—most people probably assumed it had to do with my being a tired mother of small children. Some days I would resolve to fight the sadness by being the best wife and mother in the world. I aimed to be perfect at everything. I kept the house extra clean, played with my daughters, and made healthy meals. Other days

I felt as though nothing I did mattered; I would never be good enough. During those times, I became angry easily and found it difficult to manage the basic care of my home and family. Because I felt so flawed, I isolated myself as much as possible.

I prayed constantly for heaven's help to relieve the heaviness in my heart. When the sorrow remained, it seemed as if the Lord had abandoned me and for some reason I didn't qualify for His love. This further fed my belief that I was unworthy of my blessings. Reading the scriptures also fueled my anxieties because each time I came across a verse that described what I



depress

A soft-focus photograph of a woman's face in profile, looking upwards. A hand is visible on the right side, holding an open book. The word "Sion" is overlaid in large, stylized letters across the center of the image.

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felt, the passage had something to do with sin. I could not figure out what great transgression I had committed to deserve such torment, but the scriptural association of despair with iniquity seemed proof of my fallen state.

Attending church and the temple became really difficult. I felt as if I were mocking God with my unworthiness. I continued to attend because logically I knew it was the right thing to do. One of the few things that held me together during this time was the knowledge that my despair contradicted all I had been taught through the gospel. I clung to the hope that I might still be a beloved daughter of God.

"I am speaking of something . . . serious, of an affliction so severe that it significantly restricts a person's ability to function fully, a crater in the mind so deep that no one can responsibly suggest it would surely go away if those victims would just square their shoulders and think more positively."

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland

Recognizing the Correct Problem

After five or six months, my husband finally got me to open up about why I'd been acting so strangely. It wasn't easy to tell him, for fear that he would either laugh or confirm my doubts about my worth. Instead, he was understanding and felt bad that I'd struggled so much. He gave me a priesthood blessing, and I felt better than I had in a long time. But the relief didn't last. The despair returned. It wasn't as intense,

RESOURCES

- Lynn Clark Callister, "Managing Postpartum Depression: A Gospel Perspective," *Ensign*, Aug. 2009, 62–67.
- "Mental Illness" in Disability Resources on LDS.org (lds.org/go/illnessE216).
- LDS Family Services provides a 24/7 consultation service. This service makes telephone consultations and assessments available to Church leaders as they help others with social and emotional issues, including crisis and emergency situations. Church leaders may also receive help to locate and use qualified community resources.



but it hung over me every day. A few months later I finally felt brave enough to tell a friend what I'd been experiencing.

"I think you have depression," she told me.

At first I objected. What I felt was spiritual in nature, not mental. But the more we discussed the symptoms of depression, the more I realized they perfectly described my condition. I knew I'd felt sad, but I hadn't recognized my sadness as actual *depression*. The more we talked, the lighter I felt. My mind cleared. A great weight lifted and the first real peace I'd known in almost a year washed over me. I was not worthless; I was depressed.

I learned all I could about depression—symptoms, causes, and treatment. I found that the causes varied but typically involved a chemical imbalance brought on by an inciting incident such as hormone changes after childbirth or some form of trauma or loss. In many cases it was due to prolonged stress, and often there was a family history of depression or anxiety. In my case, as I learned through a professional diagnosis, it was a combination of hormone changes, stress, an inciting incident, and genetics. Up until then, I didn't know I had immediate and extended family members with depression. However, as I shared my experience with the ones closest to me, others opened up too.

Even with all I learned, it was still hard to accept the doctor's diagnosis and decide on treatment. Because of the stigma associated with depression, my husband and I felt we had to keep quiet about my illness. Both of us were programmed to believe I could just talk it out or choose to snap out of it. This was not the case. While talking and a positive attitude did help, I had a medical condition that needed to be treated.

I soon discovered that medication and cognitive therapy were effective at bringing relief. But the one thing I didn't find in any of my research was mention of the spiritual repercussions of mental illness. This surprised me, since so many of the symptoms I'd experienced seemed spiritual in nature. I came to realize that while the medical texts rarely acknowledged the spiritual effects of depression, I had initially gone too far the other way—I had misconstrued my



depressed feelings as spiritual unworthiness. Indeed, I had been so sure my feelings were manifestations of spiritual weakness that it had never occurred to me I might have a chemical imbalance. I had read pamphlets about postpartum depression and viewed television commercials for anti-depressants that described my symptoms, but I hadn't seen myself as depressed because I had thought my spirit was primarily under attack, not my brain.

As time went on, I became acquainted with other people dealing with mental illness. This gave me strength to cope as I interacted with individuals who understood how deeply rooted this disorder was. As we discussed our experiences, I learned that they had also felt little distinction between the spiritual side effects of depression and actual unworthiness. Most cognitive therapy dealt with "thinking mistakes" and recognizing triggers. Such concepts can be helpful, but I also

wanted a spiritually focused solution because for me, peace and healing came when I was able to truly feel my divine worth and spiritual potential.

Understanding Depression's Effects on the Spirit

Understanding that there are spiritual side effects from depression is important for Latter-day Saints dealing with their own depression or that of loved ones. Depression, in all forms, alters perception, making it difficult to feel peace, love, joy, or any of the fruits of the Spirit. It becomes easy to misinterpret sorrow as condemnation by God, thus causing spiritual struggles and sometimes inactivity in the Church. This may cause further distress for individuals and families facing this challenge.

It is essential to understand that such a spiritual crisis is not a result of spiritual weakness

When I learned that my sadness was not the result of spiritual weakness but was instead caused by a chemical imbalance, I began to break free. I reached out for medical help and started to regain my feelings of divine worth and spiritual potential.

or lack of faith. Rather, depressive feelings and the resulting depressed view of one's spirituality are usually caused by a chemical imbalance. Because our physical bodies and our spirits are necessarily connected (see D&C 88:15), it can be common to feel the effects of a physical disorder in a spiritual way, especially in the case of depression, which alters our very perception of ourselves. Therefore, it is important to seek out the actual source of such feelings, especially when experiencing the often-distorting effects of depression.

FEELING DOWN VERSUS HAVING DEPRESSION

While everyone experiences trials that can lead to feelings of sadness, loneliness, and anxiety, major depressive disorder (MDD) is different. Major depression is a mental illness that requires professional treatment and medication. Feeling down in the face of challenging life events (as opposed to having MDD) may be treated best through family and social supports, finding ways to serve others, and observing proper sleep, diet, and exercise habits. In both circumstances, though, we can seek aid through the healing, enabling, and redemptive powers of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.



Even with proper diagnosis and treatment, however, it can be difficult to reverse dark and discouraged feelings. Medications have side effects; environmental triggers can't always be altered; therapy is not a perfect science. In the light of such challenges, the message given by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the October 2013 general conference offers perspective and hope:

"I wish to speak to those who suffer from some form of mental illness or emotional disorder, whether those afflictions be slight or severe, of brief duration or persistent over a lifetime. . . . These afflictions are some of the realities of mortal life, and there should be no more shame in acknowledging them than in acknowledging a battle with high blood pressure or the sudden appearance of a malignant tumor. . . .

"Let me . . . concentrate on MDD—'major depressive disorder'—or, more commonly, 'depression.' When I speak of this, I am not speaking of bad hair days, tax deadlines, or other discouraging moments we all have. Everyone is going to be anxious or downhearted on occasion. . . . Today I am speaking of something more serious, of an affliction so severe that it significantly restricts a person's ability to function fully, a crater in the mind so deep that no one can responsibly suggest it would surely go away if those victims would just square their shoulders and think more positively—though I am a vigorous advocate of square shoulders and positive thinking! . . .

"So how do you best respond when mental or emotional challenges confront you or those you love? Above all, never lose faith in your Father in Heaven, who loves you more than you can comprehend. . . . Never, ever doubt that, and never harden your heart. Faithfully pursue the time-tested devotional practices that bring the Spirit of the Lord into your life. Seek the counsel of those who hold keys for your spiritual well-being. Ask for and cherish priesthood blessings. Take the sacrament every week, and hold fast to the perfecting promises of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Believe in miracles. . . . Hope is *never* lost. If those miracles



do not come soon or fully or seemingly at all, remember the Savior's own anguished example: if the bitter cup does not pass, drink it and be strong, trusting in happier days ahead [see Matthew 26:39]. . . .

"If things continue to be debilitating, seek the advice of reputable people with certified training, professional skills, and good values. . . . If you had appendicitis, God would expect you to seek a priesthood blessing and get the best medical care available. So too with emotional disorders. Our Father in Heaven expects us to use *all* of the marvelous gifts He has provided in this glorious dispensation."¹

Treating Mental Illness and Nurturing Our Spirits

Recognizing that I had depression didn't automatically cure me, but it gave me hope. It was reassuring to know that I was not a bad person, that I had worth, and that God

had not condemned me. I've treated my illness with medication, some therapy, and a lot of research. The most significant healing, though, came through the peace of the Spirit, which was only restored after medication helped the chemical imbalance.

It has been more than 20 years since that first major episode with depression. I continue to battle mental illness. It is a daily struggle, helped by medication, good nutrition, exercise, recognizing and avoiding triggers, and seeking therapy when needed. But nurturing my spirit as well as my mind through consistent prayer, scripture study, and church and temple attendance has been a key source of strength, because depression, though a mental illness, can still affect our spiritual well-being. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

NOTE

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Like a Broken Vessel," *Ensign*, Nov. 2013, 40–41.

After medication, diet, and exercise helped my chemical imbalance, then the peace of the Spirit could help me heal from the spiritual side effects of depression. Consistent prayer, scripture study, and church and temple attendance have been key sources of strength.