

YOUNG ADULTS



I Returned Early from My Mission—Did I Ruin God’s Plan for Me?

By Alec Woodbury

I arrived at the missionary training center as confident and excited as any missionary. No matter what the next two years threw at me, I was sure I would be ready for it.

Less than two hours later, it was like someone had thrown a cold bucket of panic and apprehension at me. I had never experienced anything like it before. A crippling cloud of dread had settled over me, and no matter what I did, it would not go away.

I kept telling myself that things would get better after a few days, but things only got worse.

“I don’t understand,” I wrote in my journal. “It’s probably me doing something wrong. I’ve always heard that you can feel the Spirit so strongly here, that you can almost cut it with scissors because it’s so thick. I don’t feel it.”

Why did I feel so sick? Why did I feel such a massive amount of dread anytime I tried to do anything? And I mean *anything*. I couldn’t even walk to class without panicking. I couldn’t eat, I couldn’t sleep, and I couldn’t focus.

I tried forcing myself to lose myself in the work and in my studies, but the consuming agitation and the sickening dread made it impossible to even think about achieving my goals.

Diagnosed with an Anxiety Disorder

Finally, I felt prompted to tell my branch president everything. He quietly listened as I told him what I had been

experiencing. We cried together, and he immediately contacted a therapist, who then referred me to a doctor.

Finally, I was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.

The doctor briefly explained that my brain completely overreacts to just about anything it decides to and then pumps tons of adrenaline through me. Unless something changed, it would continue harming my mental and physical health. He told me he could prescribe some medicine that might help, but the anxiety disorder was so severe that he recommended I go home.

Go home? How could I go home? Everyone would judge me. I would never fit in again—I would always be that guy who didn’t serve a mission. And I hated to think I had wasted everyone’s time and money.

But that night, I asked the Lord if the doctor’s recommendation to go home was the right choice. To my complete and utter surprise, it was. As much as I didn’t want it to be, it was. It took a while, but finally I felt peaceful about that decision.

I Felt like a Failure

I knew it was the right decision, and my family and leaders were extremely loving, but as soon as I was home, the anxiety, confusion, and pain came flooding back. But this time, they were accompanied by doubt and regret.

How could this happen? I was worthy and I truly desired

Having come home early from a mission, I felt like a failure. But then I realized Heavenly Father still had a plan for me.



to serve. But now I felt like an absolute failure. My parents assured me that I wasn't a disappointment, but I didn't believe them. I just felt lost, drowning in a swamp of embarrassment, pain, and self-loathing. Why was I feeling this way when Heavenly Father sent me an answer and I followed?

“Are You OK?”

One day I was standing in a checkout line at the grocery store, still feeling terrible about myself, when I felt a soft tap on my shoulder. I turned to see an elderly gentleman.

“Are you OK?” he asked.

I knew that this man was an answer to my prayers. I could just feel it. I completely opened up and told him everything. Then I cried. Right there in the checkout line.

He grabbed my arm, looked right in my eyes, and said, “Don't *ever* think that you failed Heavenly Father. Don't *ever* think that coming home from your mission was a mistake. It's not. Heavenly Father has something in mind for you. Now it's time to move forward to your next mission in life.”

I felt the truth of his words resonate through me. They were an inspired message I desperately needed to hear: I still wanted to follow Heavenly Father's plan. I was doing everything Heavenly Father wanted me to be doing. I was *not* a failure.

My Second Mission

Soon after, I began serving as an ordinance worker in the Bountiful Utah Temple. It was the most beautiful experience I had ever had. It was still a confusing time in my life, but when nothing else made sense, my service in the temple always did. It meant everything to me. As time progressed, I felt myself growing in ways that I had desperately prayed for while I was in the MTC. I felt myself developing a testimony that I knew would never go away.

My patriarchal blessing talks about certain experiences I would have on my mission. I can now see that those promises about my mission were fulfilled during my service in the Bountiful temple.

He Always Has a Plan

My Heavenly Father called me to serve, and I answered the call. I accomplished everything I could on that mission. Through that time of trial and confusion, He blessed me with a powerful testimony of His love and His work, and then He gave me another mission. A mission at the Bountiful temple. A mission that I completed and that changed me forever. My testimony is infinitely greater, and at the heart of that testimony is the abiding knowledge that Heavenly Father has a plan.

I came home early and felt like a complete failure. But I can promise you that if you follow God's word, you don't ever need to feel like a failure. If you allow them to, your difficult experiences can make you more resilient, strengthen your faith, and deepen your relationship with Heavenly Father.

I remember people asking me why my testimony had grown through this experience rather than diminished. I was always surprised by that question. How could my testimony not grow when I could feel Heavenly Father guiding me? We live in a confusing time, but I find it easier to hold on to my faith rather than my doubts. It makes everything much more enjoyable and meaningful.

The Lord is mindful of us. Bad things can and do happen. But with Heavenly Father in charge, we never need to worry. Maybe your full-time mission ended earlier than planned, but there's another mission for you, and if you trust in God and follow Him, He will help you find it. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

MORE INFO

Watch "Anxiety after My Mission" (video), ChurchofJesusChrist.org/media-library/video.

Read Kaitlyn Bancroft, "How to Recognize and Cope with Debilitating Anxiety," Church News, Sept. 18, 2018, news.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.

Read Lyle J. Burrup, "Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders," *Ensign*, Mar. 2017, 54–61.



PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING

Missionaries who return home early may wish to seek a referral from their bishop to meet with a counselor at LDS Family Services, where available. Up to six sessions can be provided without charge. Speaking with a mental health professional often proves helpful in the transition back home, whether the return is temporary or permanent.

FIRST PRESIDENCY STATEMENT

"Preaching the gospel to gather scattered Israel will always be the primary purpose of missionary service. . . . [Individuals] unable to serve in this manner . . . may be called to serve the Lord as a service missionary. . . . Some other candidates may, with our appreciation for their desire to serve, be honorably excused from any formal missionary service."

"Service Missions for Young Missionaries (U.S. and Canada Only)," First Presidency letter, Nov. 16, 2018.