



CHOOSING TO LIVE:

OVERCOMING SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

*The Light of the
World helped
me get through
the darkness
of my seasonal
depression.*

Name withheld

My battle with suicidal thoughts began shortly after I moved to a cold city in Iceland, where the lack of sunlight during the winter triggered severe seasonal affective disorder (SAD). As my pain grew too intense for me to handle, I considered suicide.

During the first year I didn't accept that I was depressed. I was scared to tell anyone, even my own husband, about my thoughts. No one in my family or at church knew I suffered from a life-threatening illness; they saw me as an active Church member with a fervent testimony who faced no major challenges. I prayed often, begging for relief, and Heavenly Father strengthened me. I became more careful with my diet, exercised often, immersed myself in the scriptures, served others, and kept all the commandments. But it wasn't enough.

Depression surged toward me like a giant wave. So I ran faster and prayed harder, but I couldn't always outrun the wave. I swam against the current, praying I would survive until my kids came home from school or until lunch. Some days I would live from minute to minute, using sheer willpower to defeat my thoughts and urges.

I remember feeling intense mental pain the first time I almost committed suicide. I did not plan or think ahead—I temporarily lost the ability to logically think. Afterwards I realized how close I had come to taking my own life. I wondered what was wrong with me. I told myself that I shouldn't have suicidal thoughts, and I pretended that they had never existed. I convinced myself that I would never have these thoughts again.

But suicidal thoughts continued to enter my mind when I least expected them. The temptation to end my excruciating pain was very strong. But I wanted to be healed. Though I didn't understand then that I was suffering from an acute illness (an illness that is severe and sudden), I knew I could be healed. So I asked for a priesthood blessing.

My husband, unaware of my struggles, said many things during the blessing that told me Heavenly Father was aware of me. He promised me that I would handle my challenges. Immediate healing was not the solution, but I accepted that Heavenly Father would help me overcome my struggle.

Summer arrived, full of sunshine and long days. It was never dark, not even at midnight. I was happy and felt like myself again. But as the days rapidly shortened in



September, my depression returned and suicidal thoughts infiltrated my mind. I was frightened. At first I tried what I had tried the previous year: praying more, exercising more, and trying harder at everything. But the suicidal urges grew stronger and more severe. I struggled for two months and finally realized that I couldn't survive another winter on my own. I realized that Heavenly Father has blessed us with modern medicine and doctors. To recover, I needed to be willing to open up about my depression and visit a doctor.

Asking for help was the hardest thing I've ever done. I could hardly speak through my tears when I told my husband about my depression and that I needed help. I couldn't say the word *suicide* out loud. My husband made an appointment with a psychiatrist for me.

My doctor prescribed medicine, which helped me get through the winter. Like many people, I struggled to find the right dosage and deal with the side effects. This brought additional stress to my marriage and my family, but my husband and my children supported me.

When spring came, my deep depression lifted, and I no longer needed medication. We moved to a sunny city. I thought all was well and that I would leave my mental illness behind. But I was not completely healed. Feelings of guilt arose for my previous thoughts, feelings, and urges. I disliked that my teenagers had figured out that

I had been suicidal. I felt like I had wasted more than a year of my life.

Also, I was scared—especially when the shorter days in September arrived again. I experienced intense daily flashbacks and feared I would suffer acute depression again. But I could see the Lord's hand in my life as I was led to a wonderful doctor and started therapy. I learned that I also suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). With my doctor's guidance, I dealt with PTSD.

And then I experienced a miracle. After mighty prayer and seeking to apply the Savior's Atonement in my life, the Lord removed my feelings of guilt rapidly, distinctly, and tangibly. His voice explained that I didn't have to carry guilt because my depression wasn't my fault. Jesus Christ carries that burden for me through the power of His Atonement. I was filled with light and felt hopeful again.

I don't know all the reasons why I had to face the challenges of life-threatening illness. Although I still carry all the memories, the mental and physical pains are gone. Every day I am grateful for my family, my doctor, and my time here on earth. Because of my illness, I gained empathy and love for others. I grew emotionally and spiritually and gained knowledge that I would not have learned otherwise. I experienced precious spiritual moments with my Heavenly Father and my Savior. My experiences have encouraged me to embrace life. ■



HE CAN HEAL US

“There is no physical pain, no spiritual wound, no anguish of soul or heartache, no infirmity or weakness you or I ever confront in mortality that the Savior did not experience first. . . . He can reach out, touch, succor, heal, and strengthen us to be more than we could ever be and help us to do that which we could never do relying only upon our own power.”

Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Bear Up Their Burdens with Ease,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 90.

HOW TO CREATE A SUICIDE-PREVENTION SAFETY PLAN

By Doug Thomas

Licensed Clinical Social Worker

You can create a safety plan so that if you have thoughts of hurting yourself, you can start at step 1 and continue through the steps until you feel safe. The best time to create your plan is before you find yourself in a crisis. Keep your plan where you can easily access it, such as in your cell phone. There are websites and apps that have helpful templates to fill out, or you can create a plan with the help of an expert (see step 6 below) or on your own using these suggestions:

1. Recognize the warning signs.

What sorts of thoughts, moods, and behaviors tell you a crisis might be developing? Write them in your own words. For example: “When I cancel all my activities and only want to sleep.” “When I keep having thoughts of being a burden.” “When I feel agitated, like I need to do something immediately to get out of pain.” Noticing these warning signs will help you know you need to activate your plan.

2. Try to calm and comfort yourself.

Create a list of soothing and relaxing activities that you can do when you have thoughts or urges to harm yourself. Examples may include going for a walk, taking a warm bath, exercising, praying, or writing in a journal.

3. Think about your reasons for living.

At times, the pain may swallow up positive feelings. Create a list to remind

yourself of the people you love, things you like to do, and blessings you have felt grateful for.

4. Reach out to others and ask for help.

List several people (with phone numbers) you can talk to and who would be willing and available to help you through the rest of your safety plan during a crisis. These people could include friends, ward members, and family members.

5. Make sure you are in a safe environment.

This may involve asking someone to help remove items that you are likely to use to hurt yourself, or going somewhere else until your feelings shift. Make a list of social settings—such as parks, gyms, movie theaters, and so on—that are safe and distracting.

6. If you still feel like harming yourself, contact a professional.

List names, numbers, and locations of clinicians, emergency rooms, and crisis hotlines. Suicide.org/international-suicide-hotlines.html lists hotlines for dozens of countries. For example, the United States number is 1-800-273-TALK.

7. After doing all of this, if you still don't feel safe, call emergency services or go to your nearest hospital and ask for help.

Editors' note: An article in next month's magazine will have additional helps for those struggling with suicidal thoughts. The website PreventingSuicide.lds.org also has helpful links, talks, and information.