

SUFFERING DEPRESSION IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH-ONE PERSON'S EXPERIENCE

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SUMMARY

The author has suffered for several years from Anxiety and depression. Here she describes her experiences, both of depression and of her experience as a person suffering from depression within the Christian Church.

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I was bought up in the church, my father is a clergy man and for as long as I can remember church and God have been a part of family life. However, I have had depression and anxiety for over a decade and these two parts of my life combined have led to a lot of questions, stigma and conversations over the years.

I was diagnosed with depression aged 19, although with hindsight I can see it was building since my mid-teens. For a long time I didn't really do much about it, it was just a constant companion, a sort of mild sadness that coloured every encounter and opportunity. I got counselling, saw a doctor, who suggested medication which I refused and went about life pretending that it was ok and hoping that the sadness, the fear and the sense of being a burden to friends and family would just fade.

I had a few particularly bad episodes – aged 21, when I became near suicidal, and aged 23 when I moved to London and found myself lonelier than I could remember being. However, I still mostly tried to pretend it wasn't there and allowed the pressure of negativity build in my head until, aged 26 I seemed to reach breaking point.

By this time anxiety had become a major player in my life. Loud noises, crowded spaces, changes in plans, relational difficulties would all set me off. I found breathing was a constant struggle, I always felt like the air wasn't really reaching my lungs.

I reached a point where I couldn't work, couldn't see a future, couldn't find a way out of the mist that seemed to constantly fill my mind with doubt and fear. It was at this point that I began to register the impact of depression on my day to day life. Having spent years ignoring it, hoping it would go away and thinking it was normal to be so filled with negative thoughts and fears, I began to consider that it wasn't.

I registered that every day I was fighting, that the exhaustion I was feeling came from the fact that I was trying to ignore the voices in my head. They were telling me the world would be a better place without me, telling me I was worthless, a burden, a bore. Recognising the magnitude of negativity that had become my norm gave me a desire to fight back, to seek out the happy thoughts, to find the light in the midst of the darkness.

It was during this time that my faith, which had always been a part of my life, came into its own. The weight of depression triggered suicidal thoughts, the anxiety was keeping me fairly housebound and I found that the only place I felt like there was a light was in my bible. There was one place I knew that I would always be welcome and that was with God.

It was a revelation to me, to find that when all felt lost and I was stuck in the bottom of a pit of despair and surrounded by people who wanted to help me out, the bible promised me a God who was happy to just come and sit in it with me. I also discovered the bible is full of verses and promises of God's unfailing love, and the story of Christ is one that promises that he will come to us.

I found a deeply personal faith that gave me permission to live exactly as I was. This permission gave me energy to fight back, the bible offered me insight into how God saw me, as valuable, precious, unique. It gave me an identity that was not based on what I was not, or on what I wanted to be – but on what I am in God. This became an invaluable weapon in fighting the negative thoughts that clouded every moment of the day.

In the bible I started to see common threads that resonated with my experience. The bible I read was one where people's lives were filled with suffering and struggle, where God did the miraculous but also was present in the everyday slog of life. There were people who felt like me – Elijah lay down and asked to be allowed to die, the psalms are full of people crying out in desperation for salvation from persecution and trial. I saw a picture in the bible offers us a picture of what life is – hard and filled with difficulties and trouble, but within it is the hope that is offered by the presence of God. This hope became what I clung to.

This was not a revelation to me, because I had heard it and read it before in my life. However, it was the first time it felt real enough to comfort me as many of the conversations I had had in churches since diagnosis with depression aged 19, had led me to believe that by being depressed I was failing God. That somehow, if I had understood God's love more clearly, then the depression would have gone. If I had passed my anxiety to Jesus

then I wouldn't be struggling to breathe when in a crowded space.

For some people this is explicitly stated, for me it was more an impression I received through many conversations. Depression has a way of remembering the negative and forgetting the positive, and so, despite many more helpful and constructive conversations the ones that remained a present burden in my mind were the ones that said that I shouldn't be depressed.

I am often asked 'can you be depressed and be a Christian?' now I laugh at the absurdity of the question, but for a long time I really struggled to answer it. If what I saw and heard at church was to be believed then when I was prayed for and someone asked God to give me joy, and I walked out of church feeling as awful as I ever had – then I was failing. I was letting God down. Maybe, if I opened myself up to God more, tried harder, prayed for longer he would see how much I wanted it. Maybe then I would feel a change. Maybe then I wouldn't let him down.

The stigma still found in churches all over the world towards mental health problems is huge and life changing. These thoughts that I had are common amongst Christians with mental health problems, there is implied and spoken stigma. It is very common for those with mental health problems in church in some contexts to have people praying against demons in them, to have people imply that they don't have enough faith, to hear that you need to trust God more, to understand his love, to receive his joy.

These implications – whether intended or accidental are incredibly damaging. To someone who already struggles to accept themselves, who already has a daily battle raging in their head over whether life is worth fighting for or not, for those who already feel a failure and a fraud – these questions, statements and implications are destructive. As I have gathered information about others experience I have heard stories of guilt and pressure that is not needed nor is healthy. This presents an invitation for us to examine our theology and practise.

However, as with stigma in wider society there is change coming, more people are talking about mental health in church, and more people are recognising the value of sharing their experience. The narrative is changing across the board. It is a long journey, but there are increasing conversations in church about how to respond to those who might come to church with mental health problems.

My experience of finding hope and peace in the bible is one that many organisations, churches and individuals are trying to spread throughout the church. The reality that God is present in all suffering, as a comforter and companion rather than as a judge.

There are also, and always have been many people within the church who offer love and comfort and hope to those who come in feeling hopeless and lost. For me, the simple act of my vicar coming to see me at home when I couldn't make it to church made me feel visible, valuable and wanted and let me know that my church was a safe space for me whether I was well or not. The experiences I mentioned above are the negative side of the church in relation to mental health, but this is not all that the church is.

The church can offer a home to those who feel lost, it can be a community for the isolated. Throughout the country churches work with those who are on the margins of society, and as mental health rises on the agenda of society there are growing numbers of Christian support groups and church organisations working to make church a safe place for those with mental health problems.

I work with Livability, to help raise awareness with churches of mental health and in partnership with Mind and Soul UK we created the Mental Health Access Pack (mentalhealthaccesspack.org) to be used as a resource for church leaders to help them understand the issues better. The aim of the pack is to generate conversation in churches around mental health, to help them to understand the wider issues, but also the practical steps that they can take when encountering people with mental health problems in their congregations.

My experience of church has not always been positive, but my faith has been an invaluable tool as I tackle the mental health problems I face. Whilst my experience within church has at times had a hugely damaging impact on my faith and health in the past, there have always been people within the church who have been willing to tackle that stigma and point me to a different narrative of faith.

Three years ago, aged 26 I had a mental breakdown, and it was my faith that gave me hope. My church is now one of the safest places in my life. In part due to the regular communication from members of the church checking in and asking how they can help making me know I am a part of their lives even when I feel invisible and useless. The community and support that I gain through them is invaluable in tackling my continued depression and anxiety.

Despite the challenges and stigma still present in church, as with wider society, I see change coming.

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