**Depression in the Christian Family**

**Many Godly, Christ-centered homes struggle with clinical depression. Here's one family's story,** by Karen Morgan

In the beginning, it seemed we had the perfect life. Earle was a youth pastor, loved for his zany humor and yet so serious about his commitment to Christ. I was Earle’s “dream girl,” a former cheerleader.

Together we worked with the kids in our youth group. Soon after our wedding in 1985, Earle took a senior pastorate. I jumped right into music ministry and all the hospitality-related tasks of a traditional pastor’s wife.

God blessed us with three beautiful daughters. Earle eventually left the pastorate to begin working for Focus on the Family. I taught piano lessons from our home. God blessed us in such tangible ways — perfect timing in the purchase of a home, an incredible deal on a grand piano, a teaching schedule that was always full. Yet on the inside, our hearts were dying.

In the spring of 1995, our youngest daughter was diagnosed with IGA deficiency — a condition in which her immune system never fully developed. We were told there was no cure and no hope for improvement. She would be at greater risk of getting cancer or an auto-immune disease, and would be more susceptible to other illnesses (God saw fit to heal her immune system two years later — but that’s another story!).

At the same time, Earle’s dad was fighting a losing battle with kidney failure. A favorite nephew of Earle’s was also dealing with mental illness that ultimately led to suicide.

Earle was also struggling at work. God blessed him with excellent people skills and incredible discernment, and for 13 years he had ministered to the needs of hundreds of people who called in to Focus on the Family. He listened compassionately as people poured out their stories of pain and tragedy, betrayal and heartache.

He thought he was able to let it all go and not be affected by the stories he heard. But the accumulation of so many years listening to peoples’ troubles was taking its toll. The youth pastor who used to stay up all night with his youth group or drive 300 miles for a day of water-skiing, now wanted only to stumble through the door after work and watch TV.

**Hitting Bottom**

In November 2000, during a belated getaway to celebrate our 15th anniversary, Earle’s world unraveled. He was in tears; hopeless, afraid, unable to eat. He met with a psychiatrist soon thereafter.

We learned that one type of depression is caused by a serotonin deficiency in the brain. Because of the severity of his condition, he was put on medical disability. He remained off work for three months. He was given anti-depressant medication and spent significant time with a counselor.

Here’s how Earle describes this time:

"Mental illness runs in my family, and yet there has always been a lot of denial and shame about it. For a long time, I thought if I just kept focused on God's Word, I'd find relief. But the depression just got worse.

“Spiritually, I couldn’t feel God’s presence. I couldn’t understand why He didn’t heal me. Reading the Bible didn’t help. I couldn’t even pray. Others had to pray for me. Only after I’d received some counseling and started taking anti-depressant medication did I start to feel better.”

**Depression’s Effect on the Kids**

According to Earle, “From the very beginning, Karen and I talked openly to the kids about depression and why I was the way I was.

“Our youngest seemed not to notice my illness. Our oldest daughter, who was 12 in 2000, also handled things OK. She was busy with her friends and school activities. Our middle daughter had the hardest time. She felt insecure seeing her daddy sick, but she had a particularly good public school counselor who was able to help her through things.”

**The Long Road to Healing**

During his time off work, Earle attended counseling appointments several times a week. He explored his insecurities and fears. He relaxed, made sure to accomplish some small task each day, watched his diet and walked. He and I walked and talked for hours on end. By the end of the three months, he was able to return to work, though never again on the phones.

I would like to be able to say we’ve lived happily ever after. But that’s not the case with clinical depression. When things are not going well, the doctor may try a different medication or a different dose. Sometimes this results in a terrible nosedive that may take weeks to stabilize. But depression is a manageable medical condition.

How has it affected our marriage? In many ways, it has brought us closer together. We have learned to share our hearts with each other. We've learned to look at a situation and figure out why it caused such pain.

It hasn't been easy. There are times when Earle is angry and withdrawn. He is often exhausted. I often feel overwhelmed with having to shoulder much of the responsibility for running the home and family. And I sometimes get discouraged knowing we serve a Lord who could reach down and heal this in an instant — but has chosen not to do so.

Earle and I have learned the meaning of our wedding vows, “in sickness and in health.” We are committed to sticking together and working through this. And we have learned how little most people know about mental illness.

Some friends have withdrawn from us because they are uncomfortable talking about it. Others have told us this is a spiritual issue and that if we just pray more and praise God it will all go away. But by far the most common response has been one of compassion, as people have rallied around us even though they don’t completely understand our situation.

Friends have prayed, listened, brought meals, helped with a variety of tasks, given money, taken the girls when we needed time alone, given gifts and words of encouragement, and just “been there“ for us.

**Out of the Shadows**

Earle has been incredibly open and honest about his illness. Right from the start, he has been willing to share his story. He is quick to encourage others to get help. He is quick to inform people that this is a real medical condition, something that can be helped through medication and not something to be ashamed of. Earle is living proof that someone depressed enough to be off work for an extended period can regain the health to return to a full-time career.

**Our Lives Today**

When Earle was still on disability in early 2001, I tried to be a compassionate, loving wife. I was there at every instant, to talk or listen. While often exhausted and stressed, I gladly carried the responsibilities of the home and children. And I enjoyed the support of friends who rallied around us.

By the summer of 2001, I felt Earle and I had never been closer. I was actually thankful we went through this ordeal, which I thought was basically over.

But the years have been tough on me. Sometimes I feel angry when it’s not clear how I should respond to Earle’s moods. There are times I cry out to God, saying I just can’t take it anymore. And then Earle does something that shows his true character — that of a responsible, godly family man who would die for any one of us. Like him, I ride these ups and downs; and like him, I hope for a brighter future.

Our story is still in progress. But we tackle each challenge as it arises, and thank God that Earle has been able to keep working. And we make ourselves available to others who are struggling, thankful that God can use our trials to help others. We live every day fully aware that there are many godly, Christ-centered families who turn daily to the Lord to gain the strength to win their battle against clinical depression.

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**How to Help When Your Spouse Is Depressed**

**Here's how you can help your loved one out of the darkness of depression.**

by Carolyn MacInnes

Tim and Sandra sit close together on their porch swing, holding hands. It's hard to believe that less than a year ago, they'd discussed selling their house, splitting their possessions and sharing custody of their three children. The couple explains that a common but treatable illness nearly destroyed their strong 12-year marriage.

"I remember the day it started," Tim says. "I walked into the kitchen one morning and Sandy was just sitting on the floor. She was still in her bathrobe, and her eyes were swollen from crying."

When Tim asked what was wrong, Sandra told him she honestly didn't know. Their lives were good. They weren't struggling financially or having problems with the kids. She knew there was no reason to cry, yet the tears returned every morning from then on. Her concentration began to slip as well, leading to mistakes that almost cost her a job she loved. Finally, Tim insisted she see a doctor.

"I sure didn't like the diagnosis," Sandra explains, shaking her head. "I expected him to give me vitamins or tell me not to work so hard. I never anticipated what he would actually suggest."

After several tests, Sandra's doctor told her he believed she was suffering from a depressive disorder. He explained that our bodies need to maintain stable levels of the chemical serotonin to function normally — but the receptors in Sandra's brain were blocking its flow to certain areas. When he suggested she try an anti-depressant drug to trigger proper serotonin absorption, she refused.

"I left his office feeling conflicted," Sandra says. "Tim and I were both raised to believe that true Christians were happy, thankful people. I was convinced that my misery was caused by a lack of faith, not a medical condition. But truthfully, I wasn't sure which option scared me more. I couldn't even bring myself to tell Tim that the doctor had called my mental health into question."

Over the next few months, Sandra tried to bury her secret — but her sorrow was too pervasive to hide. Their frightened children began asking what was wrong with Mom.

In the meantime, Tim admits his concern turned to frustration. "I'd ask again and again what was wrong, but she never had an answer," he says. "Not only was I aggravated by my feelings of helplessness, I was angry the life I'd worked so hard to provide wasn't enough to make her happy."

"And the more angry he got, the more he'd withdraw from me," Sandra adds. "Then I'd feel guilty and withdraw even more. We just kept drifting further apart."

Despite her efforts to pray during that time, Sandra admits she found it almost impossible to muster the strength or the words. She felt she was not only losing her mind and her family, but now even God had abandoned her.

**Identifying Depression**

Tim and Sandra's story likely rings true for many couples. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), one in five adults in America will suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. Women face these illnesses twice as often as men, but statistics show men are highly under-diagnosed due to an unwillingness to admit they're struggling.

Stigmas and misconceptions often prevent those with depressive illnesses (which often include anxiety and panic) from getting treatment. For some, words like *mental illness* and *therapy* still evoke images of patients in strait jackets or neurotic movie characters with phobias of germs, elevators and their shadows. In reality, depression can be much less obvious. Even so, it still debilitates and destroys its victims if left untreated.

A few key signs of depression are:

* Daily sadness
* Loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed
* Restless, anxious or irritable behavior
* Trouble concentrating, focusing or remembering
* Excessive weariness and lethargy
* Sleeping or eating too much or too little
* Unexplained aches and pains
* Thoughts of suicide or death

If you recognize any of these symptoms persisting in a spouse for more than a few weeks, check with your family doctor.

**Preparing Yourself to Help Your Loved One**

Flight attendants always tell you to put on your own oxygen mask before helping someone next to you. In the same way, it's important to prepare yourself before attempting to assist others when a spouse is depressed. Deep sorrow can be infectious, and it's not uncommon for caregivers to develop symptoms of depression themselves. Guard against this possibility by eating well, exercising, getting enough sleep, and staying in the Word.

Also keep an eye on your kids. Children are often vulnerable to a parent's anxiety. One study indicates that 20% of 10-year-olds whose mothers suffered from depression were themselves victims within five years.

Don't underestimate the value of caring friends and family at times like this. Let loved ones help you with day-to-day tasks, and allow them to listen to and pray with you. The surest way to intensify your struggle is to isolate yourself and your immediate family from those who love you.

**Reaching Out to Your Spouse**

When a care-giver understands that clinical depression is a genuine medical condition, he or she may actually feel empowered. It's encouraging to realize there are a number of tangible ways to help a spouse who is depressed:  
**DO**

* Pray fervently with and for them.
* Share meaningful Scripture verses.
* Help them see that the family needs them to get well.
* Listen; give credibility to their feelings.
* Seek help for yourself and offer to see a therapist with them.
* Encourage them to consider medication; research shows that 80% of those suffering from depressive disorders can be treated successfully with modern medications.
* Show affection; encourage them to get out and do things with you.

**DON'T**

* Tell your loved one to just pray about it or make them feel like healing would come if they'd simply trust God more.
* Make them feel guilty for the impact of their illness on the family.
* Blame or criticize them.
* Imply that they need help because they're weak. Also, don't immediately exclude other family members from counseling. Sometimes, complex relational issues involving several family members can spark depression.
* Expect medication to solve everything. Also, don't discount the need for prayer — and possibly therapy.
* Let them continue in a pattern of sleep and isolation.

**A Happy Ending**

Once Tim and Sandra overcame their fears and misconceptions about mental illness, they began to counsel with their pastor each week. Sandra also returned to the doctor. Within a few months, she felt like herself again, thanks to a low dosage of a Selective Serotonin Re-uptake Inhibitor (SSRI). The medication helped bring her serotonin levels back into balance. Their children were thrilled to see Mom smiling again.

The couple, now co-leading a mental illness support group at their church, discovered that they could survive depression with teamwork, education, empathy and a lot of prayer.

"The Lord has really blessed us by allowing this experience to bring us together rather than tear us apart," Sandra says. "When times were toughest, Tim decided not to give up on me — and that decision has radically changed our lives."

*Helping families thrive together.*

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