

# **SURVIVING DEPRESSION**



# SURVIVING DEPRESSION

*A Catholic Approach*

SECOND EDITION

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*Dedicated to those everywhere  
who have the courage to walk in the darkness  
toward the light*



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# *Introduction*

## Depression Has Many Faces

If you have picked up this book, you are most likely wondering if “surviving” depression is possible for you or someone you know. Perhaps you are grasping at one more glimmer of hope that your or another’s depression might be lifted. It is estimated that one in ten Americans today meet the criteria for recurring depression. Almost half of these meet the criteria for major depression.<sup>1</sup> Major depression is the number one psychological disorder in the western world.<sup>2</sup> At the rate of increase of instances of depression that we are seeing today, particularly among the young, by 2020 depression will be the second most debilitating disease in the western world.<sup>3</sup> In recent years there has been a surge of information about depression in the clinical and popular arena. Talking about depression and its effects on people’s lives has become acceptable even in public programming on radio talk shows and television interviews, internet sites, blogs, Facebook pages, etc. However, the essential link between surviving this illness and faith is still an area that cries out to be explored. I have received many letters and phone calls from people who have read the first edition of *Surviving Depression: A Catholic Approach* confirming that it was precisely

this link between what they were experiencing and faith that was the most helpful. The book has been translated into at least ten languages, indicating that depression, unfortunately, is a widespread problem.

New causes of concern have arisen in the past ten years or so. People have had to find within themselves strength in the face of terrorism and vigilance before the constant threat of a new attack on our country. The sex abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, and the disillusionment in the Church's leaders that accompanied it, has been deeply disturbing. Katrina, as well as other hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fires, earthquakes, and other natural disasters have forced people from their homes and destroyed their livelihoods. Our country is again at war, and some of us are keenly aware of the effect that war has had on our families and on ourselves. Daily we face overwhelming amounts of information and impossible demands on our attention and time. Some of us bear the added burden of a mental illness, psychological vulnerability, the effects of abuse, or depression that is a consequence of a situation we cannot control, the side-effect of medication, or of another illness. From the perspective of faith and the resources that are available to us through spirituality, this book addresses those who are suffering from depressive illness, disillusionment, dark moods, and emotional vulnerability.

I am not a psychologist. I am not a theologian. My claim to credibility in writing *Surviving Depression: A Catholic Approach* is that I have been seriously depressed and have spent a lot of time struggling with God through the years I lived with depression. I know depression from the inside. I know the spiritual anguish it brings. I know the loneliness, the isolation, the fear of "losing it," and I believe one truly understands depression not by studying or reading about it, but by living with it.

In June of 1985, I was admitted to Saint Elizabeth's Hospital in Brighton, Massachusetts for simple outpatient surgery. I went into the surgery a healthy, strong, ambitious, and articulate young woman of twenty-one. I came out of the recovery unit with something terribly wrong. Four days later, I was told that I had had a stroke. I was paralyzed on my right side. I couldn't stand up. I had no strength. I had lost much of my memory. I couldn't use even the most basic vocabulary. Two weeks and many tests later, I was released from the hospital and began an eighteen-year journey of rehabilitation.

Though I recovered much of my strength and coordination within the first few years, for the following twelve years I seemed unable to regain my emotional stability. I quickly found myself in a manic-depressive cycle that became increasingly more pronounced. Violent mood swings sent me crashing between effervescent periods of incredible activity and black nights of paralyzing depression. Twelve years after my stroke I would be diagnosed with Temporal Lobe Epilepsy (TLE), a bipolar organic disorder—which brought about another cycle of depression as I began to live with a new “label.”

## God Has Many Faces

During those first weeks after the stroke, I clearly remember thinking: *God has given me this stroke and I will accept it with graciousness. This is the will of God and God certainly has some reason for it.* And I accepted it with peace . . . or so I thought. It took six years for me to realize how angry I was—angry at God, angry at everyone around me, angry at the world. At that time, I began regular spiritual direction. The more I shared of what was in my heart, the angrier I became, and the farther away God

seemed. I could not understand what possible meaning this cross could have. I spent a year unable to believe God even existed. In this spiritual “blackout,” I read over and over again the second part of the book of Isaiah, though the words were like sandpaper to my heart:

O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted,  
I am about to set your stones in antimony,  
and lay your foundations with sapphires.  
I will make your pinnacles of rubies,  
your gates of jewels,  
and your wall of precious stones (54:11–12).

As the cycle of depressions came and went, with confusion and despair clouding my vision, I wrestled with God, trying to understand just one question: *Why me?* Though I never received an answer to that question, was never given a clue to understanding the meaning of my suffering, I was gradually—very gradually—able to realize that it was no longer an issue for me. I didn’t need an answer; I could live with the mystery.

Depression spares no one. Christians become as depressed as anyone else does; priests and men and women religious suffer from depression. Teens in the flower of youthful dreams become depressed. Even children can become depressed. It might seem that people who have faith or a future should have no reason to be depressed. They should be able to pray, dream, or will themselves out of it. It is hard to reconcile depression— what many still incorrectly see as a moral deficiency—with faith in the power of God. However, depression is just an expression of our fragile human vulnerability. Ironically, this empty darkness is often the source of immense creativity, the black night that gently announces the advent of the divine.

## The Gift of Faith in Depression

Into this book are woven many individuals' unique experiences of depression. I honor those who have struggled through the journey to well-being and wholeness against incredible odds, and I am grateful that they have shared with me their stories.<sup>4</sup>

As you read these pages, you may find characteristics or details that hit home and that mesh with your own experience. People who have suffered depression can learn much from each other's stories. Nevertheless, not every experience related here will be completely like yours. You may feel more or less depressed than the people in the stories I have included. You may or may not experience the symptoms narrated here. Be aware, therefore, that flashes of insight or recognition are not a replacement for accurate diagnosis. This book is not intended for self-diagnosis and does not address the more critical needs of those who suffer severe or psychotic cases of depression or bipolar disorder. Rather, it is meant to be a companion as you, or a friend of yours, struggles with his or her dark periods of life. Much in our Catholic tradition and in spirituality can offer strength, comfort, and powerful insight into this struggle. These pages will introduce you to this wealth and be with you as you find God in new ways along this part of your life's journey.

In this second edition, a new part has been added. In these chapters you will find eight steps for inner peace that are rooted in scriptural spirituality, in practical wisdom from living in the present, and in centering prayer. Learning about depression and reading about spirituality are not enough to bring about the changes that we seek in our lives. A step-by-step process will enable those who wish to embark on a journey

of personal transformation to more easily find the peace they are looking for.

This book is dedicated to those everywhere who have the courage to walk in the darkness toward the light. I am grateful to Sr. Sean Mayer, FSP, and Sr. Mary Mark Wickenhiser, FSP, of our editorial department, who had the vision, now that the cultural and religious landscape has changed so dramatically, to propose a tenth anniversary updated and expanded edition of *Surviving Depression*. I am honored to have worked with Sr. Mary Lea Hill, FSP, in giving the original text a new shape. Finally, I am conscious that I would not be writing this book if it were not for the support of my community through all the years since my stroke in 1985. Because my sisters did not give up on me, I have the courage to show others suffering from depression the path I found, offering it to them should they find it helpful for their own journey through life.



Ah to tear away once and for all—  
to rip my heart out of my breast  
and toss to the stars. . . .  
This heart so dark and full of  
sadness—  
this heart so full of alienating pain—  
this heart alone against so many feelings—  
corrupted by dreams and imaginings—  
forsaken by promise and tender words.  
So slowly turned to stone . . .  
and now this quaking—

the urge to break forth . . .  
to soar to the heavens and freedom.  
And where will “i” be when  
you take sudden flight—  
will you take me with you  
on your wings of pearl?

*Sr. Thomas Halpin, FSP*  
*April 24, 1994*



## CHAPTER 1

# “What’s Wrong with Me?”

“I don’t want anyone to know I feel this bad, but sometimes I don’t even want to get out of bed.” *Cheyenne*



“When I was depressed I felt like a non-person, a burden. The darkness engulfed and suffocated everything. Certain few “true” friends who knew and loved me threw out lifelines that I was able to grab hold of. I still prayed even though it seemed useless. But one day Jesus’s message shouted through the weltering gloom that he too had experienced the same darkness on the cross. Those last moments were actually the depth of darkness for him, feeling even his Father disowned him. As hard as I tried, I couldn’t find life in this inspiration. I couldn’t believe that his situation could touch mine. I shared this with a friend and her response was one of those lifelines: ‘Well, if you can’t believe right now, let me believe for you. Put your trust in my belief that it is true.’” *Anne*

One day a friend shared with me: “Depression was a swirling black hole that sucked me in until I was in well over my head and drowning. The energy needed to fight against

it was immense and at times I just let it take over. I was so tired.”

I could relate when I heard this. Though my experience of depression had been different, and though each person’s symptoms of depression and struggle to survive are unique—it is not difficult to resonate with the story of inner sorrow created by depression when we hear it.

The most difficult thing about taking the first steps toward surviving depression is allowing oneself to *learn* about depression, to stop running, cease the inner chatter by which we try to convince ourselves we are fine, and face the possibility that we may be depressed. In this first chapter I want to lay out simply what depression is, its symptoms and characteristics, the dynamic it creates in our lives. The hardest step, then, will be behind us. The rest of the book can be read with a growing inner peace that opens up the heart to inspiration, courageous insight and resolve, and, above all, to grace.

## What Is Depression?

Depression has been called the common cold of mental disorders.

Everyone experiences situations or events in their life that make them sad for a few days, a few weeks, or even a few months. A death, a move, a change of job, graduating from college, or a loss of a pet can be painful and sad, but the feelings are relatively short-lived and not permanent. Depression, on the other hand, interferes with daily life and causes great distress for you and those around you for an extended period of time. Though depression is a common illness, it is a serious one and should be treated with the same care with which you would handle any other medical condition.