

“Silent Souls Weeping — Changing the Conversation about Mental Health”

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It is an honor for me to spend a few minutes with you today. I love BYU-Pathway. I believe this program is inspired. In my mind’s eye, I picture many of you right now in your gatherings all around the world. These groups are special — even sacred spaces — where you study, learn, listen, and share.

My remarks today are a bit different from other devotionals you’ve heard. Today, I’m going to speak about depression, anxiety, mental illness.

For many years, I worked as a journalist. As a reporter and television host, I traveled the world, covering the news and interviewing the big newsmakers of the day. After 15 years, I left my career to have a family. I was soon blessed with two beautiful children as well as three awesome step-kids. A few years after, I was living my dream of being a wife and a mother.

I started to experience a deep and serious clinical depression. It was unlike anything I had ever dealt with. It was excruciating and scary. I use words like *drowning*, *sinking*, *choking*, *suffocating* to describe how I felt. It was as if someone had thrown me into a dark pit and I just couldn’t get out. And the longer it went on, the worse it got, until, finally, I started to feel like I wanted to disappear. Just fall asleep and fade away.

It took all my strength — and my husband essentially dragging me to the doctor — to start getting help. And even then, things moved at an agonizingly slow pace while we worked to find the right doctor, the right therapist, and the right medication.

In the midst of my anguish, I had come to believe that I was *alone* in my suffering, and that, perhaps, I deserved — or even had *caused* my depression. As I started to feel better and learned more about the disease, I realized that there are millions of others who also battle depression. Many of them, like me, suffer in silence. I felt a growing responsibility to break that silence, to do whatever I could to open up a conversation about mental health, and so I set out on a mission-of-sorts to do just that.

I recently spent three years interviewing more than 150 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who have suffered with depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses. Men, women, teenagers, and children. College students, single moms, professionals, and Church leaders. The stories I heard were heartbreaking but, somehow, also they brought hope. Each person shared unique experiences about a mental illness that had interfered with their lives and, sometimes, even their faith.

Today I’d like to share with you two important things I learned during the course of my research and my conversations.

First, there is a huge stigma surrounding mental illness, sometimes even among members of the Church. I know many people who feel a sense of embarrassment and shame attached not only to a mental health diagnosis but also to the medication prescribed and the therapy required for treatment. This stigma must be stopped!

Depression is not the result of some sort of personal inadequacy. It is not a black mark on your character. If you broke your arm or found out you had kidney disease, you wouldn’t feel embarrassed to talk about it. You’d do all

you could to try to heal. If you got a diagnosis of cancer or heart disease, you wouldn't worry about being judged or ostracized. You'd likely receive an outpouring of love and support. A mental health diagnosis should be *no different*.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, has taught us that mental illnesses "are some of the realities of mortal life, and there should be no more shame in acknowledging them than in acknowledging a battle with high blood pressure or the sudden appearance of a malignant tumor."¹

Just like any other physical condition, mental illnesses require treatment. And you can't get treatment if you remain silent. It's so important to talk about these challenges. If you are suffering, *talking helps*. It helps *you*, and it also helps those who *love you*, to understand.

The second, and perhaps most important thing, I've learned is that depression can have a very real impact on the ability to feel the Spirit.

For me, depression blocked all feelings, including feelings of the Spirit. So even though I was praying and reading my scriptures and going to church and attending the temple, I couldn't feel God's love like I had before the depression hit. I heard this over and over from the people I interviewed. Many told me that the spiritual symptoms of depression are the most distressing part of the illness.

A psychologist likened it to a circuit breaker in your home being tripped: electricity is still running to your house, but the tripped breaker has blocked it from entering. Depression is like a tripped circuit breaker in the brain. God is still there, spiritual impulses are still flowing freely, but mental illness is blocking Him from our senses.

Fortunately, treatment can alleviate the physical and spiritual symptoms. The circuit breakers in the brain can be turned back on.

I have talked to several BYU-Pathway students who struggle with anxiety and depression. You have told me how hard it can be to come to your meetings sometimes and how discouraging it is to feel abandoned by the Spirit.

And, yet, you still show up! You hold on to hope. Robert Whisenhunt, a BYU-Pathway student, told me, "I know Heavenly Father believes in me, so I need to believe in me."

I know that's true. God loves us. He never leaves us. Brothers and sisters, mental illness does not discriminate. It can strike at any time, even when things seem to be going pretty well. And people from all walks of life are impacted. Given the statistics, it's likely that one in four of you watching this message right now is suffering, in silence.

That silence can be broken.

It is broken every time you talk about your struggles with another person and every time you listen to someone else who is struggling.

It is broken at gatherings, where you come together and put Alma's words into action and "mourn with those who mourn."²

¹ Jeffrey R. Holland, "[Like a Broken Vessel](#)," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2013, 40

² [Mosiah 18:9](#)

I have often heard President Gilbert say that “one of the miracles of BYU-Pathway is in the gathering” — this sacred space where you can be vulnerable and share your own stories.

In that sharing, in these spaces, you can find the beginnings of healing and hope. I encourage you to continue the conversation we have started today. Learn all you can about mental illness. Speak out against the stigma. Share your own stories. And keep going! Remember, you have support.

Recently, my family and I traveled to India where we had an opportunity to meet, serve, and love people who are burdened with the curse of leprosy. We will *never* forget the experience of putting healing oil on their limbs, to offer some measure of comfort and relief from the ravages of the disease. I reflect on that time frequently and find myself thinking about the Savior and His association with the men and women who suffered with leprosy in His time.

Jesus didn't heal them by avoiding them. He waded right into the mess — with His help and with His hope. Leprosy is a disease that cannot be hidden — people are literally, physically falling apart. Mental health needs to be like that; it needs to be dragged into the light of day where we can see that people are sometimes falling apart and where those who are willing to wade in and help can do so.

I never thought I would say it, but I am grateful for the journey of depression, for what it has taught me about compassion and empathy. God lives and He loves us. He visits us in our afflictions and He will never leave us. This I know. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.