

Darkness to Light



Finding Jesus in the Valley
of Mental Illness

Compiled by Jessica Brodie

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South Carolina United Methodist Advocate Press



Advocate Press

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*To all who struggle with often-invisible illness.
Please know you are seen, you matter,
and you are loved.*

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Introduction

Mental and emotional health can be an arduous, exhausting marathon—and it certainly is in my home. One of our daughters has struggled for years with sometimes-debilitating anxiety and other issues, including depression. It's a massive challenge both for her and for me. I don't have anxiety or depression, so I've had to learn a great deal of compassion, patience, and flexibility over the years, as well as much about what it means as a Christian to love and care for someone with mental illness.

I'm no stranger to these issues. It runs in my family, and several relatives have been diagnosed with mental health disorders.

Still, walking through it day after day with my own child has helped me see things in a new light. In many ways, it's become my own struggle, and I'd gladly stand in my daughter's place, taking on her suffering as my own.

But God is calling me to a different purpose in the mental illness and mental health realm: that of an advocate and an ally, a voice to the sometimes voiceless.

Mental illness statistics are alarming, and the National Institute on Mental Health estimates more than one in five U.S. adults were living with a mental illness in 2021—that's nearly fifty-eight million people.

According to the National Institutes of Health, globally, nearly 15 percent of young people ages ten to nineteen experience a mental health disorder.

Numbers are even worse since the COVID-19 pandemic, and many say we are facing an unprecedented mental health crisis. The suicide rate is climbing, and availability of counselors, psychiatric care, and other resources is in woefully short supply. Many insurance plans don't even cover mental health care.

But there is one bright spot: More people are becoming increasingly vocal about mental and emotional health. While in the past there was a great stigma around these issues, and many people avoided dialogue out of embarrassment or shame, now society is embracing much-needed awareness about mental illness. We're discovering what many have known for years: that mental illness isn't someone's fault or caused by lack of faith or perspective. It's a genuine disorder, a brain malfunction often caused by genetic issues they can't possibly control.

Medication is seen in a new light, also. Just like people battling diabetes are helped with insulin, or cancer with chemotherapy and radiation, people with many mental illnesses often are helped by medication and therapy.

Counseling and other therapy are also becoming destigmatized as more people express their own mental health challenges.

As a Christian, I feel strongly that the church can be a resource and a support system for people with mental illness. I've known so many people who have reached their lowest, lost all hope, only to realize Jesus was right beside them the whole time.

Many of today's churches offer counseling, Stephen Ministry partners, support groups, and more. Others, by

introducing people to Jesus and prioritizing discipleship, have been a pathway toward mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness.

The fourteen stories in this slim book offer a look at the personal mental health journeys of a number of people, sharing in many cases how faith played a major role in their healing journey. My own daughter, Avery, shares her story in “My Journey Back to Jesus,” found on Page 25.

Whether you are struggling with your own mental and emotional health or you are supporting someone who is, I hope these stories offer hope and inspiration in what can be a dark, dark world.

Together, we can journey from darkness to light ... the light of Christ.

—*Jessica Brodie, editor*
September 2023

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Finding Hope in God

By Kelly Black

My depression started when I was in the fifth grade. I had a very hard teacher that year and didn't have any close friends around me at the time. Through that, I started to feel lonelier and more anxious, which was causing me to really struggle in school and at home. The overwhelming feeling over me was foggy and dark. I would spend hours alone, locking myself in the closet, just crying. I had the feeling of not wanting to wake up again the next day. Panic attacks came in the night, and I often cried uncontrollably. I wanted the misery to end.

It got to the point that I was crying so hard every morning, begging my parents not to take me to school. They decided it would be best for me to do home-schooling for the second half of fifth grade. Thankfully, my parents were supportive and caring enough that they allowed for this and took me to get professional help. It was at this time that I started on medication.

Through time, with the alleviation of stress and eventual effects of the medication, I began feeling better and suffering less from the extreme symptoms of depression I'd been feeling before. The psychiatrist expressed concern that

public middle school the next year might cause more stress than I needed, and again, thankfully, I had the opportunity to attend a private Christian school nearby.

For maybe a year leading up to and during my sixth-grade year, I would listen to the song “Only Grace,” by Matthew West, as I lay down to go to sleep. Through the new, relative stability in my life at this time, I was beginning to experience some of the relief found in the power of the Holy Spirit and in learning God’s truth for my life outside of a depressed existence. That was the first time in my life I was really praying to God for his help and relying on him to help me with what I was going through.

During middle school, I started to make new friends. They were good influences, and I am now much more thankful for those influences than I knew I was at that time. The biggest blessing was a new neighbor and classmate, Anna, who had just moved in down the road. Even with great friends, there were still times I felt numb or anxious. I would become embarrassed if I had to take my medication during a sleepover. It was a struggle as a middle schooler to explain what it was and why I needed it.

Not all friends struggled to understand, though. There were others who had similar struggles, and we could talk in a way that we understood one another. Unfortunately, through those conversations, I became exposed to the idea of self-harm. This was not something I had encountered before, or even considered, but I came to know about it when a friend told me she was hurting herself. I would plead, “Don’t do that to yourself!” But then at times would find myself doing it, too. For whatever reason, I felt like I needed to punish myself. This is something I still struggle with today, but there is hope.

My hope, and the biggest thing that helps me, comes

from knowing God has taken all of my feelings of guilt and shame away. He is in control, and he has good things in store for me as his child. All of the punishment needed to atone for my own shortcomings was carried out on the cross of Jesus Christ.

Throughout my teen years and into my twenties, I became more comfortable sharing my story and being honest with people I trusted about the struggles I'd had and continue to have. As I had more of those conversations, I found that others had a lot of the same struggles, or at least knew someone who had. It's been through my faith in God that I felt compelled to humble myself, to be openly weak, and to allow my struggles to be transformed into a tool to renew others and point to his sovereignty and grace over us.

During my twenties, just as my life seemed to be trending in a more positive direction—my mental health was largely stable, I was in a healthy relationship, and I had a pretty clear view of my professional growth goals—I went through a fair degree of trauma in my family. All were circumstances I never could've seen coming, and none I'd directly contributed to in any way.

My parents suddenly got divorced. We found out that my sister and her husband were abusing substances and were addicted. I had learned to take care of myself through my own mental health struggles, but these were certainly new challenges. There was very little I could do to make these things better. Sometimes all I could do was trust and pray.

Fortunately, I'd already come to know the importance of community and good influences in my life, and I knew my relationship with and dependence on God was possibly going to be the only thing I'd have to get me through. For that, again, I am thankful. My mental health challenges as

a younger person had made me uniquely tough because I knew I needed to give it all to God. Today, he has redeemed all of what seemed to be so wildly out of control during that period of my life. My sister and husband are now sober and using their redemption stories to help others.

I am now a Certified Peer Support Specialist and volunteer facilitator with a church-based peer-led mental health support group called Fresh Hope. I get amazing opportunities to share my story about my mental health struggles and challenging experiences to empower people—and hopefully reveal to them the power that God has to carry us through and redeem all things. I also work with students in my job and get to build and maintain relationships with them, helping them to understand their identity and purpose.

I am thankful my path has led me to the place I am today, and God has blessed me. I choose to maintain an attitude of hope and gratitude every day, despite my circumstances, because God loves me. And God has proven his love by sending his one and only son, Jesus.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”—Romans 15:13

Black is a member of Advent United Methodist Church in Simpsonville, South Carolina.



About the Editor

Jessica Brodie is an award-winning journalist, author, blogger, editor, writing coach, and devotional writer with thousands of articles to her name. Since 2010, she has served as the editor of the *South Carolina United Methodist Advocate*, the oldest newspaper in Methodism, which has won 123 journalism awards during her tenure. Learn more at <https://www.jessicabrodie.com>