

Suffering depression in the Christian Church - one person's experience

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Abstract

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

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My father is a clergyman, so I was brought up in the church, and for as long as I can remember church and God have been a part of family life. I have had depression and anxiety for over a decade and these two parts of my life combined have caused a lot of questions, stigma and conversations over the years.

I was diagnosed with depression when aged 19, although in hindsight I can see that it was building up since my mid-teens. For a long time I did not really do much about it. It seemed simply a constant companion, a sort of mild sadness that coloured every encounter and opportunity. I received counselling and saw a doctor, who suggested medication which I refused, and I 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 simply 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 ever remember being. However, I still mostly tried to pretend that it was not there and allowed the pressure of negativity to build in my head until, at the age of 26, I seemed to reach breaking point.

On one occasion, I described depression in my blog like this:

'Getting up in the morning is the hardest part of any day, not because I am lazy, but because waking up hurts. I am so tired every minute of every day, that there is always a need for more sleep, but, I have to get up so I do. This is the first battle I face each day.

Then all I need to do is survive the day. From the moment I am up, I battle negative thoughts. For my whole adult life, I have been unable to look myself in the mirror as me. I always pretend to be someone else, it's been easier that way. However, recently I have started to be me and it is very hard not to look at myself and hate what I see. This is not about my image so much as just seeing the face of someone you really don't like so close. Learning to look myself in the eye and seek out something about myself that I actually like takes enormous energy and effort. This is the next big battle of my day.

The cycle of negative thoughts in my head is pretty non-stop, and this leads into my exhaustion. I fight the thoughts (as often as I have the energy) whenever they appear, but this takes up the majority of my mental capacity.

This means that I have very little capacity left for work. Which doesn't help the negative thoughts. I work about 2 days a week, and that is the absolute limit, at the moment, of what I can achieve. This leaves a significant sense of failing as I look at all the things I hope to do and achieve, I watch friends who have larger issues than me, who survive and even thrive on a day to day basis. I am reminded by my capacity each day, that I am weak.

On top of this, I tackle the anxiety - a crowded space, unexpected change in plans, a stressful situation, or just those days when my brain is battling the negative so hard that there is no hope left in my head. All of these situations cause my heart to race, my breathing to speed up, my hands to sweat, my eyes to dart and my fear levels to shoot through the roof. It is as if I am under attack, but the attacker is inside

my head and the only way to fight that attacker off is to beat my head with whatever is to hand.

I rarely have a day that ends with a feeling that I have won the battle, but I fight hard enough that I rarely end the day feeling like I lost. Me and my enemy are dug in trenches, each equally determined, each exhausted by the battle, but reconciliation feels like an impossibility.

I am exhausted by the fight. I feel like I am drowning in my own mind. I feel lost and broken, weak and hopeless. This is what mental health means to me. This is the life that I live, and the fight that I fight.'

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

This is how I described anxiety in my blog:

'Most of the time I have my anxiety relatively well under control, but every now and then it slips out and I find that I am entirely overwhelmed by my situation.

Such was the case today. Victoria station, rush hour. I normally avoid rush hour, or plan ahead, but today I was exhausted, my legs were already wobbly, my breathing already shallow and, whilst it shouldn't be a contributing factor, my phone was dead. I had totally failed to consider that when I got off my train I would be entering the mayhem and anxiety inducing chaos of Victoria station in rush hour.

It is hard to adequately explain what happens when an anxiety attack hits, but here goes.

It starts with the image of hundreds of people, many with suitcases, ahead. Then you are amongst them, all walking at different speeds, some pushing, some dawdling, some deciding to stop directly ahead. A ton of noise all bouncing around and the battle to find the exit.

All of this causes my brain to freeze, the oxygen is apparently sucked out of the air, my legs get wobblier, my vision goes slightly blurry. Each bump and shove causes me to mutter and mumble aloud - nothing distinct really, but a vague sort of panic brought on by the chaos of the situation.

I find a quiet (ish) corner and breathe slowly for a few minutes, convincing myself that the world isn't actually falling apart, it is possible to reach the bus and then the safety of home, and that actually if I just take a few steps I will be fine.

When I got home, I was all wound up. Writing this has calmed me down.'

I reached a point where I could not work, I could not see a future, I could not find a way out of the mist that seemed to constantly fill my mind with doubt and fear. At this point 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 realise that it wasn't.

I realised 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 that 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, and the anxiety was keeping me fairly housebound. 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 that the bible is full of verses and promises of God's unfailing love, and the story of Christ is one which promises that he will come to us.

I found a deeply personal faith which 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 that the picture which the bible offers us is a picture of what life is - it may be 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 that 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 because I was depressed, I was failing God, and that somehow, if I had understood God's love more clearly, then the depression would have gone, and that 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 have often been 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. In the past, others had given me to understand that 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, and prayed for longer, he would see how much I wanted to get better. Maybe then I would feel a change. Maybe then I wouldn't let him down.

Mental illness causes stigma, and I have commented about the stigma of depression:

'It is extraordinary to me that stigma still exists in association with something that is so prevalent, and yet it does. I was asked recently 'what is the most shocking thing you have heard in relation to mental health?' but in reality, the more appalling statements seem easier to dismiss as idiotic, the shocking thing is that people still believe (and it is alarmingly common) that people with depression are dangerous. Or that it is a sign of weakness or failing to be diagnosed with a mental health problem. It is shocking to me that people still feel the need to hide their mental health problems, because the negative responses are still a major problem and induce feelings of shame or fear in those already struggling too much.

This stigma though, is changing. Increasingly people are feeling brave and bold enough to speak out about their experience. Other people are listening and learning, wanting to know how they can support a loved one or colleague. Organisations are asking people to come in and talk to them about it, wanting to explore how they can care for their staff better. Today, I was one small part of a world wide conversation talking about mental health - and it is incredibly exciting.'

The stigma still found in churches all over the world towards mental health problems is huge and life changing. The thoughts that I have described 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 within them, to have people implying that they don't have enough faith, to hear that they 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 the experience of others, I have heard stories of guilt and pressure that is not needed and is not healthy. This presents an invitation for us

to examine our theology and practice.

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 one should 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 is 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 could not 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 have 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 live 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. 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, and 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 which 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. This is 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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