

## Mental Illness and Faith: A Personal Experience

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Why mental illness and faith? To answer this question, please allow me to share my personal story.

I was born in October 1967, into a practicing Catholic family. My parents strove to give my siblings and me everything we needed. They succeeded: I had everything I needed materially. And I was loved. Still, I was missing something I couldn't identify.

Youth is normally a time when a child is happy and full of life. I on the other hand lived under a black cloud.

Life was not a joyful experience, but rather an existence shrouded in fear, anxiety and isolation. I couldn't overcome a sense of apprehension and discouragement. Even though I tried and pretended to be joyful. The Christmas season only served to remind me how miserable I felt. Part of me just wanted to disappear, die.

This ever-present cloud followed me all through adolescence and intensified when I became an adult. I suffered for a long time in my loneliness. It was not until I was 40, after deciding that I could no longer hold out, that I found the courage to consult a psychiatrist. The meeting made a lasting difference. I could *finally* name the cloud that hovered over me. It was called "major depression." The diagnosis was the beginning of a long journey of healing, both physical and spiritual.

What I have shared with you, so briefly, is simply the beginning of my personal journey with mental illness. And my story is merely one among the thousands of similar ones experienced by more than 20 per cent of our fellow Canadians. Each person's experience is different, but we all share the same feelings of isolation and despair. Some even come to believe that they can only free themselves from their pain by committing suicide.

Fortunately, that wasn't the case for me.

So now I come back to the question asked at the beginning: what is the place of faith in the experience of mental illness? For me, it's vitally important. In fact, my faith has become a valuable support to me. I had to educate myself about depression. I had to rethink my way of living with this disease. But I also had to rethink my faith, my prayer life and the way I practice my religion. Which was quite the challenge.

From the beginning of my recovery, I learned that mental illness is primarily a physical illness. Connections between neurons in the brain are not made as they should be. Which leads to emotional upheavals, mood swings and other character disturbances.

In depression, one does not decide to be sad or tired. A depressed person isn't lazy. Nevertheless, there is still a feeling of embarrassment and shame. I know. For a long time, I harbored false beliefs about my illness. I thought the problem was my fault. That I was responsible for my illness. And that if I prayed harder, if I went to Mass more often, if I were perfect, I would be freed of this dark cloud.

I blamed myself for something I had no control over. And to move forward, I had to change my perspective.

Our Christian faith asserts that the human being is composed of a body and a soul. When the body suffers, the soul needs strong support to promote the body's healing. My faith plays an essential role in my ongoing healing. I am not responsible for having a mental illness, but I *am* responsible for doing everything I can to take care of the body that God has given me, to heal myself and to seek healing.

Not that I want to limit God's omnipotence, but it isn't likely that prayer will heal me instantly. So I accept that my disease can be used to help me and others grow in faith. I bless the Lord every day, for this suffering attaches me to Him and I become more and more sensitive and compassionate towards my brothers and sisters who live with a mental illness.

My experience with depression allowed me to accept my illness and discover who I am. I am a child loved by God, and my faith allows me to navigate the waters of healing. I have faith in a merciful God who, through the sufferings of Christ, knows my pain and accompanies me on the paths of life.

Today, I am driven by a deep desire to be present for those who suffer and those who seek an attentive ear and an open heart. If sometimes I'm afraid to reveal that I live with depression, I'm nevertheless moving forward with the confidence that God calls me to serve Him through those suffering with mental illness.