

Seeds of Hope

In the fall of 1991, I found myself in a deep depression. I was in my third year as a pastor at a large urban church in San Diego. I was enjoying my career and the opportunity to serve others. But a series of unexpected events hit me like waves until I was overwhelmed by despair. Little did I know that my journey in the darkness would lead to the discovery of a deep and abiding hope.

I had all the symptoms of major depression. I was disconnected from my feelings and myself. I couldn't eat or sleep. Nothing brought me pleasure. I felt completely hopeless.

My doctor gave me my first sign of hope, telling me I would feel better once we found the right medication. I hung on to that hope, and medications stabilized my symptoms. But my illness thrust me inward and downward, and reluctantly forced me to look at my life. Medications could not cure my wounded soul.

One of the unexpected "gifts" of my experience with depression was discovering a hope that emerged from the depths of my being. But this could only happen once I understood that my illness did not define who I was as a person. At first, I felt like a failure because I could not pull myself out of my despair. As I began to stop fighting my negative feelings and see them as part of my illness, hope became more than wishful thinking. It became my companion in my journey toward recovery.

A deeper hope began to emerge through relationships with others. When I felt hopeless, they held on to a faith that I would make it through my despair. They believed that I was a person of worth and that I was loved as a child of God, just as I was. They held on to the hope of recovery until I could find that hope for myself.

I was encouraged when others with depression shared their stories of healing and wholeness restored. They inspired me to follow my treatment plan and use the counseling tools I was given to make changes in my life. I was also able to find assurance in the spiritual practices of meditation, relaxation, and prayer.

When we let go of whatever it is that controls our life, we open a space where the seeds of hope are sown. I was able to face each day because of my faith that God was working in the fertile darkness of my life to bring about healing and wholeness, even when I felt hopeless and alone.

I now know that mental illness affects all aspects of life, including our spiritual well-being. It strikes at our very soul, making us feel cut off from ourselves, from others, and from our understanding of God. Depression is a thief in the night. It steals our sense of self-worth, our hopes and dreams for the future, and it feels like it will always be that way.

And yet, I no longer fear my illness because I know that I persevered. I continue to have my medications monitored, maintain a good support system, and practice good self-care. I reach out for help when I feel most vulnerable. I've learned coping skills and have developed inner resources. I relate to the words of Louisa May Alcott who wrote, "I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship."

The Letter to the Hebrews says, "We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul." I am able to face an unknown and uncertain future knowing that I will be sustained by this anchor of hope.

Rev. Susan Gregg-Schroeder founded Mental Health Ministries to provide educational resources to help erase the stigma of mental illness in our faith communities (www.MentalHealthMinistries.net).

She shares her personal story as she struggled with severe depression in her best-known book, *In the Shadow of God's Wings: Grace in the Midst of Depression* (Upper Room Books, 1997).

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