
17 Years Later: Reflections on My Brother's Fight with Depression

By Ben Hein

My brother will forever be one of my heroes.

For starters, he was a tireless humanitarian. Skilled in business, he instead spent many of his years tirelessly advocating for the less fortunate. Joe spent some time as a peace-keeper in Bosnia during the crisis there. While he was in the United States, he worked for a senator and strongly advocated for reading programs for underprivileged students in the inner city of Washington D.C. He also worked hard to get similar programs started on Native American Reservations in South Dakota. This was a man who didn't have much, but emptied his wallet every time he passed a homeless person on the streets. Charming, intelligent, gentle, kind and attractive – Joe Hein was looked up to by others for inspiration and hope.

More importantly, he was the best older brother I ever could've asked for. He was 17 years my senior, which meant that he was graduating high school and leaving the house around the time I was born. As far back as I can remember, my brother had something of a "legend" status in my head. When he came home from college, his older brother game was always on point. He taught me how to read a clock, and he encouraged me to read with bribes. He played basketball with me in the driveway, and took me out to train as a skee-ball champion at Chuck E. Cheese. He trained me up in the ways of Dallas Cowboy fandom. He wasn't afraid to show me physical affection, and he modeled compassion and mercy for me when he took me to serve in homeless shelters with him.

On April 25, 2000, we lost my brother to this monster called depression.

Depression has seen increasing awareness in recent years – and for good reason. According to

the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, nearly 18% of the U.S. population suffers from some kind of anxiety-depression disorder. Major Depressive Disorder is the leading cause of disability between ages 15 to 44, affecting 15 million people (about 7% of the population). Of course, these are conservative statistics as many who are silently suffering don't come forward to ask for help.

Yet, despite all of the advancements in awareness and treatment, depression still has something of a stigma in our general culture. It is rarely talked about; and our silence encourages sufferers to persist in silence. Silence perpetuates shame, and shame perpetuates depression. It is a vicious cycle which many people fear they can never escape.

Perhaps part of the problem is we don't like the fact that depression does not fit neatly into one paradigm. It's not as simple as positive thinking. Many individuals will still struggle even after receiving years of the best counseling available. While medicine can be of great benefit to some, it can also make symptoms worse. As a Christian, I believe the message of the gospel offers great hope to sufferers of depression. Yet I also know that it's not as simple as "take two doses of John 3:16 and call me in the morning." The Bible doesn't paint the complexity of the human experience so naively, and neither should we.

In fact, I think the Bible gives us much wisdom and insight into better caring for those who suffer from depression. In memory of my brother and – in the hopes that as a result of his death I may be able to help others who suffer as he once did – I want to offer a few pieces of this wisdom to you in the remainder of this article.

First, the Bible presents us with a robust understanding of the human being. Depression is often met with one of two extreme solutions today. The first is a hyper-physical view of the person: all our problems are either medical issues within the body or originate from not having our physical

needs (food, sleep, sex, etc.) met. The second view is a hyper-spiritual one, which centers our problems in our wrong beliefs about ourselves. If we think/feel/believe more positive things about ourselves, our issues (i.e. depression, etc.) will go away.

In the middle of these two extremes is the biblical view of the person. Commonly referred to as the dichotomist view, the Bible presents the human being as both material and immaterial, both a physical and a spiritual being. Some might call us an “embodied soul” – a term I really like. There are many places in Scripture which show this view, but I will just highlight a few of them:

1. God made man out of two substances, dust and spirit (Genesis 2:7).
2. As Christians, when we die our bodies return to the ground but our spirits return to God (Ecclesiastes 12:7).
3. Christ summarizes the person as both body and soul (Matthew 10:28).
4. Paul, in his defense of the resurrection, cannot comprehend of a person without a corporeal nature (1 Corinthians 15:35-49).

What does this mean for us? It means that we should expect suffering like depression to have both physical and spiritual symptoms and consequences. It means we need to labor hard to care for the *entire* person, and not just a part. It means we shouldn't try to neatly fit out friends into a one-size-fits-all paradigm.

It means we must distinguish between physical and spiritual symptoms. This is important for two reasons: 1) because we do not want to hold people morally responsible for a physical symptom, and 2) we do not want to excuse spiritual problems or lose hope for spiritual growth when there has been a psychiatric or physical diagnosis. Here are some examples of what it might look like to distinguish

between physical and spiritual symptoms for someone who is going through depression.

Physical ¹	Spiritual
Insomnia or hypersomnia	Shame
Significant weight changes	Guilt
Feeling of being restless or slowed down	Fear
Fatigue, loss of energy	Thanklessness
Problems concentrating	Unforgiving spirit
Sense of alienation	Hopelessness
Feeling sad, blue or depressed	Unbelief
Tight chest or heart palpitations	Anger
Chemical changes in the brain	

Secondly, the Bible reminds us of the painful realities of life. The world isn't sunshine and rainbows for anybody. Many of us want a quick solution that will fix our many problems and struggles. Some people will even sell Christianity to you in that way – as if confessing belief in Christ will make all your problems go away.

Yet the Bible doesn't give us a quick solution, nor does it lull us into believing that following God leads to an easy life. In fact, the greatest heroes of the Christian faith all suffered immense physical and spiritual torment. Moses doubted his call as a prophet and was often chastised or even betrayed by his family and the Israelites. After defeating the prophets of Baal, Elijah retreated into the wilderness by himself (in an episode *strangely similar* to depression) and wished death upon himself (1 Kings 19:1-18). Jesus was a man of much sorrow (Isaiah 53:3), and after being betrayed

¹ Adapted from Edward T. Welch, *Blame it on the Brain?*, 120.

and abandoned by his 12 closest friends he cried out to his Father, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me (Matthew 27:46)?” The Apostle Paul, having faced much suffering, despaired even of life itself (2 Corinthians 1:8).

Why does this matter? Knowing the realities of this life, we are able to have compassion on people in the midst of their suffering and trials. Rather than giving them platitudes which we know won't help, we can meet them with hope and strength to persevere to the end, even if the darkness never lifts in this life. Which brings me to my last point.

Christianity offers us real hope. Clearly I don't mean the kind of hope which says, “Believe this and your depression will go away.” I've met many people whose faith has transformed their struggles with depression; I've met many people who have still needed years of counseling and medicine to coincide with their Christian faith. So what kind of hope do I mean?

I mean the kind of hope that gives us strength in our temptations to despair. A hope that gives us reason to beat the monster of depression back into its cave. A hope that reminds us even when our soul gives way to thoughts of worthlessness and even death, that our value is not defined by how we feel or even what we think. A hope that points us away from the things we've chosen to give us purpose and define us, and towards the only title which we need to give us purpose: *child of God*.

The Bible teaches us that when we confess saving faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, we are adopted into the eternal family of God. Adoption is the height of our privilege as God's people. This doctrine reminds us that in our salvation we are brought into a family. While we were formerly separate from God and walking in darkness, we are now “called children of God, and so we are” (1 John 3:1). As we become sons and daughters in our vertical relationship to God, we become brothers and sisters in our horizontal relationship to one another.

Today's society wants us to believe that our worth and value is based on our own decisions and merit. Society says that worth and value are measured by your job, performance, charity, or your sexuality. If you haven't found your worth in these things, then you need to keep looking until you're fulfilled. Is it any wonder then that depression is on the rise with every passing year? Failing to achieve these standards of worth only sets us up for doubt and disappointment.

In stark contrast, the Christian knows that their worth or merit is not found in themselves, but it is found in the very fact that they belong to a loving Father. Even when we don't believe it, even when we don't want to believe it – it's still true. Once we're adopted into the family of God we bear his stamp forever upon us, a stamp which reads: *loved, valued, precious, beautiful, created with purpose, a child with full access to all the rights and privileges of a son or daughter of God*. It's a bit of a mouthful.

When we properly understand what it means to be adopted into the family of God, we know that we can't abandon our brothers or sisters to face their struggles alone. Because our worth is found not in the things of this world but in the arms of a loving father, there is no effort, no amount of time, no amount of love that is too much for the people of God to give to those in our midst going through any kind of struggle. That is simply what family does; they care for and love one another when all other lights go out.

So, what can you do to help people struggling with depression that you know? I'd like to offer six things:

1. [Read this article I wrote](#). This isn't shameful self-promotion, but I know many people who have been greatly helped by the material in this article. It is a much more in-depth approach to some of what you've already read here.
2. **Pray.** Pray for them, pray for your own heart. Pray that God would lift them out of the mire,

and give you a greater compassion for their particular kind of suffering – especially if you haven't struggled with depression yourself.

3. **Listen. Be Present.** Often, bearing each other's burdens looks less like speaking and simply lending a listening ear and a bodily present. Simple, small reminders go a long way ("You're not alone", "I'm here", "It's not your fault").
4. **Offer your service, not answers.** It's impossible for us to have the answer and solution for someone else's depression. But, you can offer yourself as an aid during their struggle. Ask them, "What can I do to serve you?", or "Can I go with you?" (to their counseling sessions, should they be in counseling). Counseling can often be more effective when someone you trust comes with you.
5. **When the time is right, encourage them with the gospel.** Charles Spurgeon once said, "If we suffer, we suffer with Christ; if we rejoice we should rejoice with him. Bodily pain should help us to understand the cross, and mental depression should make us apt scholars at Gethsemane."

Remind our friends who are struggling that our suffering confirms our adoption and status as co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17), that we have a savior who knows the pain and struggle that we are going through and meets us in our pain and need.

6. **Ask the hard questions.** Even though it may be difficult or awkward, don't shy away from the hard questions. "What kind of thoughts are you having?" and "Have you thought about hurting yourself?" are important questions to ask when people are going through depression. If they have thought about bringing themselves physical harm, then it is important to pursue immediate help through their counselor or some other means. Contact your pastor, their counselor or other family that can help during this time.

Finally, if you or someone you know are going through depression at this time, I want to highly recommend [this book](#) to you.