

Like a Broken Vessel

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How do you best respond when mental or emotional challenges confront you or those you love?

The Apostle Peter wrote that disciples of Jesus Christ are to have “compassion one of another.”¹ In that spirit I wish to speak to those who suffer from some form of mental illness or emotional disorder, whether those afflictions be slight or severe, of brief duration or persistent over a lifetime. We sense the complexity of such matters when we hear professionals speak of neuroses and psychoses, of genetic predispositions and chromosome defects, of bipolarity, paranoia, and schizophrenia. However bewildering this all may be, these afflictions are some of the realities of mortal life, and there should be no more shame in acknowledging them than in acknowledging a battle with high blood pressure or the sudden appearance of a malignant tumor.

In striving for some peace and understanding in these difficult matters, it is crucial to remember that we are living—and chose to live—in a fallen world where for divine purposes our pursuit of godliness will be tested and tried again and again. Of greatest assurance in God’s plan is that a Savior was promised, a Redeemer, who through our faith in Him would lift us triumphantly over those tests and trials, even though the cost to do so would be unfathomable for both the Father who sent Him and the Son who came. It is only an appreciation of this divine love that will make our own lesser suffering first bearable, then understandable, and finally redemptive.

Let me leave the extraordinary illnesses I have mentioned to concentrate on MDD—“major depressive disorder”—or, more commonly, “depression.” When I speak of this, I am not speaking of bad hair days, tax deadlines, or other discouraging moments we all have. Everyone is going to be anxious or downhearted on occasion. The Book of Mormon says Ammon and his brethren were depressed at a very difficult time,² and so can the rest of us be. But today I am speaking of something more serious, of an affliction so severe that it significantly restricts a person’s ability to function fully, a crater in the mind so deep that no one can responsibly suggest it would surely go away if those victims would just square their shoulders and think more positively—though I am a vigorous advocate of square shoulders and positive thinking!

No, this dark night of the mind and spirit is more than mere discouragement. I have seen it come to an absolutely angelic man when his beloved spouse of 50 years passed away. I have seen it in new mothers with what is euphemistically labeled “after-baby blues.” I have seen it strike anxious students, military veterans, and grandmothers worried about the well-being of their grown children.

And I have seen it in young fathers trying to provide for their families. In that regard I once terrifyingly saw it in myself. At one point in our married life when financial fears collided with staggering fatigue, I took a psychic

blow that was as unanticipated as it was real. With the grace of God and the love of my family, I kept functioning and kept working, but even after all these years I continue to feel a deep sympathy for others more chronically or more deeply afflicted with such gloom than I was. In any case we have all taken courage from those who, in the words of the Prophet Joseph, “search[ed] ... and contemplate[d] the darkest abyss”³ and persevered through it—not the least of whom were Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and Elder George Albert Smith, the latter being one of the most gentle and Christlike men of our dispensation, who battled recurring depression for some years before later becoming the universally beloved eighth prophet and President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

So how do you best respond when mental or emotional challenges confront you or those you love? Above all, never lose faith in your Father in Heaven, who loves you more than you can comprehend. As President Monson said to the Relief Society sisters so movingly last Saturday evening: “That love never changes. ... It is there for you when you are sad or happy, discouraged or hopeful. God’s love is there for you whether or not you feel you deserve [it]. It is simply always there.”⁴ Never, ever doubt that, and never harden your heart. Faithfully pursue the time-tested devotional practices that bring the Spirit of the Lord into your life. Seek the counsel of those who hold keys for your spiritual well-being. Ask for and cherish priesthood blessings. Take the sacrament every week, and hold fast to the perfecting promises of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Believe in miracles. I have seen so many of them come when every other indication would say that hope was lost. Hope is *never* lost. If those miracles do not come soon or fully or seemingly at all, remember the Savior’s own anguished example: if the bitter cup does not pass, drink it and be strong, trusting in happier days ahead.⁵

In preventing illness whenever possible, watch for the stress indicators in yourself and in others you may be able to help. As with your automobile, be alert to rising temperatures, excessive speed, or a tank low on fuel. When you face “depletion depression,” make the requisite adjustments. Fatigue is the common enemy of us all—so slow down, rest up, replenish, and refill. Physicians promise us that if we do not take time to be well, we most assuredly will take time later on to be ill.

If things continue to be debilitating, seek the advice of reputable people with certified training, professional skills, and good values. Be honest with them about your history and your struggles. Prayerfully and responsibly consider the counsel they give and the solutions they prescribe. If you had appendicitis, God would expect you to seek a priesthood blessing *and* get the best medical care available. So too with emotional disorders. Our Father in Heaven expects us to use *all* of the marvelous gifts He has provided in this glorious dispensation.

If you are the one afflicted or a caregiver to such, try not to be overwhelmed with the size of your task. Don’t assume you can fix everything, but fix what you can. If those are only small victories, be grateful for them and be patient. Dozens of times in the scriptures, the Lord commands someone to “stand still” or “be still”—and wait.⁶ Patiently enduring some things is part of our mortal education.

For caregivers, in your devoted effort to assist with another’s health, do not destroy your own. In all these things be wise. Do not run faster than you have strength.⁷ Whatever else you may or may not be able to provide, you can offer your prayers and you can give “love unfeigned.”⁸ “Charity suffereth long, and is kind; ... [it] beareth all things, ... hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity *never* faileth.”⁹

Also let us remember that through any illness or difficult challenge, there is still much in life to be hopeful about and grateful for. We are infinitely more than our limitations or our afflictions! Stephanie Clark Nielson and her

family have been our friends for more than 30 years. On August 16, 2008, Stephanie and her husband, Christian, were in a plane crash and subsequent fire that scarred her so horrifically that only her painted toenails were recognizable when family members came to indentify the victims. There was almost no chance Stephanie could live. After three months in a sleep-induced coma, she awoke to see herself. With that, the psyche-scarring and horrendous depression came. Having four children under the age of seven, Stephanie did not want them to see her ever again. She felt it would be better not to live. “I thought it would be easier,” Stephanie once told me in my office, “if they just forgot about me and I quietly slipped out of their life.”

But to her eternal credit, and with the prayers of her husband, family, friends, four beautiful children, and a fifth born to the Nielsons just 18 months ago, Stephanie fought her way back from the abyss of self-destruction to be one of the most popular “mommy bloggers” in the nation, openly declaring to the four million who follow her blog that her “divine purpose” in life is to be a mom and to cherish *every day* she has been given on this beautiful earth.

Whatever your struggle, my brothers and sisters—mental or emotional or physical or otherwise—do not vote against the preciousness of life by ending it! Trust in God. Hold on in His love. Know that one day the dawn will break brightly and all shadows of mortality will flee. Though we may feel we are “like a broken vessel,” as the Psalmist says,¹⁰ we must remember, that vessel is in the hands of the divine potter. Broken minds can be healed just the way broken bones and broken hearts are healed. While God is at work making those repairs, the rest of us can help by being merciful, nonjudgmental, and kind.

I testify of the holy Resurrection, that unspeakable cornerstone gift in the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ! With the Apostle Paul, I testify that that which was sown in corruption will one day be raised in incorruption and that which was sown in weakness will ultimately be raised in power.¹¹ I bear witness of that day when loved ones whom we knew to have disabilities in mortality will stand before us glorified and grand, breathtakingly perfect in body and mind. What a thrilling moment that will be! I do not know whether we will be happier for ourselves that we have witnessed such a miracle or happier for them that they are fully perfect and finally “free at last.”¹² Until that hour when Christ’s consummate gift is evident to us all, may we live by faith, hold fast to hope, and show “compassion one of another,”¹³ I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. 1 Peter 3:8.

2. See Alma 26:27; see also Alma 56:16.

3. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 267.

4. Thomas S. Monson, “We Never Walk Alone,” general Relief Society meeting, Sept. 28, 2013.

5. See Matthew 26:39.

6. See, for example, Psalm 4:4; Doctrine and Covenants 101:16.

7. See Mosiah 4:27.

8. Doctrine and Covenants 121:41.

9. 1 Corinthians 13:4, 7–8; emphasis added; see also Moroni 7:45–46.

10. Psalm 31:12.

11. See 1 Corinthians 15:42–43.

12. “Free at Last,” in John W. Work, comp., *American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular* (1998), 197.

13. 1 Peter 3:8.