

# BREAKING BARRIERS

everybody belongs ■ everybody serves

## **Spring 2019 | Theme: Mental health and spiritual practice**

Authors describe how their own or a loved one's mental illness has shaped their faith and spiritual practice where the rhythms of mental wellness, devotional life, and personal discipleship intersect.

### **Needing God—and My Medication**

**by Sharon McQueary**

Christ's Community Church (RCA), Glendale, AZ

A year and a half ago, I experienced something so dark that I wondered if God could ever reach me. The accuser whispered to me, *“You’re a fake, a phony, a liar. You call yourself a Christian. You’re an imposter. You’re worthless and have hate in your heart. You have no friends.”*

Several months earlier, I had told my doctor that I no longer needed the medication I had taken for 10 years to treat depression and generalized anxiety. I was retired and under less stress. She agreed, and we worked out a plan to reduce the

medication over time. By mid-July, I was completely off the medication, but in September, several life-altering events happened. The accuser began reminding me of my inadequacies. I became angry, argued with anyone, and had no patience. I pushed away those closest to me. I slept a lot and avoided others. I prayed that God would take away my pain. I even prayed that I would lie down and not wake up.

By November, I realized, with the help of the Holy Spirit, that I needed to start taking my medication again. I asked the doctor for a half-dosage, but she prescribed the full amount. On my own, I cut each pill in half and started to feel a little better.

Long before the depression hit, a friend had asked me to speak about the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:36-40) during a women's retreat. How ironic that I was going to teach about love when I was so full of doubt about my own ability to love and felt completely unlovable.

In January 2018, as I was leaving church one Sunday, I sensed that I was breaking through the surface of water—a sign to me that the depression was lifting. I began taking the full dosage of the medication and admitted I have a mental illness that requires not only medication, but also reliance on God.

The Holy Spirit nudged me to share my story of depression at the women's retreat. I was unprepared for the response. So many women thanked me for my transparency and shared their own experiences with mental illness—anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder. For my wellbeing, I've learned I must be in fellowship with God's people and studying God's Word regularly.

## **Mom's Resistance, God's Faithfulness**

**by Neil Carlson**

Shawnee Park CRC, Grand Rapids, MI

My mother passed away last year of a slow-moving dementia.

Mom once recounted a gleeful childhood day. Her father pushed her on a swing while she giggled and begged for more. He obliged her too much, pushing her too high. She fell out of the swing, hitting her head on the crossbar and then on a rock. She was unconscious for a long time, and her behavior was never the same again.

She endured divorces, "boarding school" for troubled teens, and depression. Yet she aspired to so much. Our home was meticulously landscaped and decorated. Mom risked everything to get the very best for my sister and me.

Her zeal burned her down. In 1985, I found her unconscious in our hallway. She spent weeks in psychiatric care and years weaning herself off Xanax, an anti-anxiety medication. She had always been hard to please, but it became impossible. Facial expressions and small noises brought retaliation and rage. Rumors and paranoia ruled. Peanut butter was banned for fear of toxic mold. She read the positioning of the neighbors' trash cans as their personal rebuke. Dark demonic intruders lurked in the attic, and black government helicopters circled in the sky.

Why write such bleak words about a saint now with God? Because she was mighty in spirit and deserves to be remembered for how hard she fought the darkness. She prayed and prayed and prayed. She took up any spiritual weapon she could lay her spiritual hands on. She claimed the promises of God for the people of God in faith that God is faithful.

But too often, the church was her enemy. Its officers were her prison guards, its medics her torturers. I spent long hours in my teens at her bedside, disputing her certainty that she was damned. She was convinced she'd fallen into doubt and demonic oppression. She expertly wielded Scripture passages against herself. Later, I realized she'd been using the certainty of damnation as reason not to commit suicide. She suffered so

much that death was a temptation, but she survived by embracing damnation—for a time.

Now, we can celebrate that she resisted death and the temptation to die for decades, and she won “grace unmeasured, vast and free.” Now she knows how unearned is her salvation, and we know how well-earned is our respect for her battle, at times heroic, always hard fought.

## **Tasting Jesus’ Love**

**by Donna Lee Holley**

Calvin CRC, Ottawa, ON

My mental health challenges are post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic low-grade depression, bouts of major depressive disorder, and seasonal affective disorder. When I feel hopeless and in the pit of despair, I allow others to minister to me and pray for me. Throughout my life, people demonstrated Jesus’ love through actions and prayer.

I have had four psychiatric hospitalizations due to suicidal plans. Many members from my church visited, and one always read Psalm 139. I took comfort from these words affirming that I am a deeply loved child of God, even though I wasn’t seeing myself as lovable.

My mental health issues have become more manageable in the past year. I start my day by reading my daily devotions, which puts the focus on God. When I use my light box for seasonal affective disorder, I listen to praise and worship music to focus my thoughts on the grace of God. Lately, I remember to say thank you to God for all the good things. Practicing gratitude reminds me of God's goodness and how God wants me to prosper. I also thank God for the challenging pieces of my life because I know that struggles help me to grow.

People in my church community show me love and support by inviting me to their homes for fellowship and board games, which reduces feelings of isolation. Some people prepare meals for me, which helps me to eat better. When a person experiences severe depression, she has little energy and motivation for activities of daily living. One close friend even phoned me in the morning to make sure that I was up and out of bed.

Two friends took me to healing prayer ministries, and I participated in a soaking prayer group facilitated by a person from my church. They gently taught me the importance of regular and continued prayer.

I continue to grow in my Bible knowledge by participating in Coffee Break. When our study group prays for each other, I remember that I am not alone. We all have struggles and need to be heard. I have found a tribe where I belong, I have the love of God and my church family, and I have reconciled the relationship with my mother. I am blessed to experience God's love and grace through the care and actions of other people.

## **Ways to Get Involved**

Without monetary support for Disability Concerns, we wouldn't be able to share these stories. To help us make sure that "everybody belongs, everybody serves," would you please consider praying for us and making a financial contribution? It's quick, it's easy, and it's a gracious and beautiful act of obedience.

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# **Worrying about Life, Not Church**

**by Anna Killeen**

Six Mile Run Reformed Church, Franklin Park, NJ

Mental illness runs in my family. One older brother had schizophrenia, and one of my sons has borderline personality disorder. I live with generalized anxiety disorder, but my daily medication lessens the symptoms.

Even with medication, I am often restless if I am not busy doing something. My motor is always running. I often find it difficult to sit still for long and always feel like I have to be doing something. I work part time, volunteer on two boards, play mahjong, go to the gym three times a week, and socialize with friends.

I have a tendency to worry about what could happen in different situations. I find it hard to concentrate when reading a book, or I worry about something that more than likely will never happen. For this reason, I prefer to read shorter articles in newsletters and magazines.

To help me not feel so anxious, I exercise, I dance, and I call family members or a close friend. I talk to God a few times every day and that helps calm me down. My prayers are usually short,

because of my anxiety. I was feeling very anxious writing this article, so I prayed to God to give me the words.

I have been an active member of my church for more than 30 years. Presently, I serve as an elder and a disability advocate. I am very outgoing, and most people who meet me would never know I suffer with anxiety issues. My personality is such that I like to help anyone in need, and I am very sensitive to people's needs.

I love being a member of my church. We welcome all who enter the doors on Sunday morning.

## **Editor's Note**

### **Of Valleys Dark and Deep**

Quoted insensitively, Romans 8:28 can sound glib. Reminding someone in a deep valley that God is working all things for good may be a way of turning away from that person's pain.

Still, God does work all things together for the good of those who love him. This precious verse is not mere observation, but guarantee backed by the full faith and credit of God. The articles in this issue of *Breaking Barriers*, as well as a recent blog by

Michèle Gyselinck on the Disability Concerns Network ([bit.ly/headknowledge](http://bit.ly/headknowledge)), manifest this deep and rich truth.

The authors describe valleys, deep and dark: anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia. Yet, illumined by the light of God's grace and love, each has encountered God in new ways: dance, soaking prayer, head knowledge, transparency and fellowship with God's people, a mother's not dying at her own hands.

God is in the process of making broken people whole. Neither the authors nor others described are overcomers—nor do we have to be. Jesus overcame our struggles for us: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

—*Mark Stephenson*

## **Upcoming Themes**

**Summer 2019—Down syndrome.** Do you or a loved one have Down syndrome? Please send us a story (400 words)—whether a joy, a challenge, a loss, or a prejudice you've experienced—**by April 8.**

**Fall 2019—Deaf and hard of hearing.** Is American Sign Language your heart language? Did you grow up with a Deaf sibling or a Deaf parent? Do you use hearing aids or have a cochlear implant? Please tell us your story (400 words) **by July 29.**

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