

My Depression Story
by Cynthia Hancox ©2007

Hi, I'm Cynthia Hancox. I will share with you the personal story of my own battle with depression, and how I overcame it. If you're struggling right now, I want you to know that you're not alone! I share honestly here in the hope that I will encourage and help other women who are overwhelmed. I will tell you the things I learned, and what I found most helpful in my own recovery.

The first time that I suffered from depression, I had no idea what it was - I thought I was losing my mind! It was hard to tell exactly what triggered it; perhaps it was a combination of factors. It was mid 2000; I had just turned 30. I had 5 children aged 8 and under - the youngest was 14 months old, and my fertility was just returning, so my hormones were all over the place (I don't cycle at all when breastfeeding until the baby is 14 months old). I was struggling with the children, with home schooling (my oldest was not yet reading despite every effort from me, and I was feeling under a lot of pressure from other's expectations). We had moved house numerous times - we had been following the calling of God, and I knew that, but right at this time I had lost sight of why we were living the way we were. I was faced with yet another imminent move, and change of job for my husband. I was feeling like a failure, stressed to the max and not sleeping very well.

My moods became extreme - normally I'm a very easy going person, with a very long fuse. I generally cope well with any situation, no matter how stressful - in the past I'd dealt with things like the near death of my husband without so much as a rise in blood pressure! But now my emotions were all over the place - one day I'd be fine, coping ok, the next the slightest thing would make my burst into tears of frustration. The whole thing started to come to a head the night I got angry:

I was preparing dinner, and the kids were being.....well, kids - you know, mucking around, making noise, fighting a bit - general 5-6pm hungry, grumpy kids. And I just SNAPPED! I yelled at them all to go to their rooms, just to get out of my sight and not come back until I called them; I just couldn't deal with them right then. I started slicing the meatloaf with a large knife, but instead of moving the knife smoothly down through the loaf, I was CHOPPING it with aggressive up and down motions. I was SO ANGRY I was shaking with rage. My poor husband came out of the bathroom and tried to rub my back soothingly, saying "It's ok, just calm down". I slammed the knife down on the bench - it bounced and hit the floor - then swung around and grabbed him by the front of his shirt, and shook him (no mean feat seeing as he's 6'4" and was about 250 pounds!), yelling "I don't WANT to calm down! I want to SMASH something!!"

I left him to finish getting dinner out, and went to my room to sit on the bed and calm down. All I could think, in a surprised sort of way is "I'm so angry! But WHY am I angry??" I really didn't know! I really felt as if I was going crazy - losing my mind and my ability to control myself and think rationally. And the scariest part was, I felt my feelings towards my children changing. I mean, I was still their mother, and cared about them, but I honestly felt as if I didn't LOVE them right then the way I should, and as if I wouldn't

have minded if they had just all disappeared. And that REALLY scared me!

I went to our family doctor, telling him I thought there was something wrong with me. He examined me, asked a bunch of questions, then basically told me I was a normal, overworked mother of young children and I should go out with my husband more often. Nice thought, but not possible, and anyway, I was WAAAY past needing only those kind of simple lifestyle changes.

As a Christian, I consider suicide to be never an option, and my depression didn't change my conviction about that - but I did get to where I could understand why people would do something like that - to thinking how much easier it would be not to have to keep on struggling with life every day. I didn't realize until much later just how easy it is for even a Christian to slide down that slippery slope from thinking like that to actually becoming suicidal.

A few months later, we went to visit a family of dear friends for a weekend. It was the closest thing to a real holiday I'd had in years - I didn't have to take bedding or food, only a change of clothes for each of us. She provided everything we needed, and her older daughters did all the cooking that weekend. I got something I so desperately needed - a couple of days to relax with a trusted friend and just pour out my heart. They have 8 children, and all of my kids had friends there. They have 50 acres in the country, so the kids and the men were happily occupied.

As I described to my friend all I had been struggling with and feeling, including how I seemed to be feeling towards the children, and how hard I was finding to cope with just their every-day childishness, she listened. And then she told me that what I was describing sounded just like the way she had felt a few months after the birth of her youngest - she had suffered from Placenta Previa during the pregnancy, hemorrhaged, had an emergency Caesarean, nearly died from complications, and then was told her premature baby probably had Cerebral Palsy and needed 4 hours of intensive, painful physical therapy EVERY day for months and months, which she had to administer while trying to recover, and home school her other 7 children. Needless to say she became exhausted, stressed, and then finally depressed.

Well, that weekend was a revelation for me - I went home thinking "I'm NOT crazy! There's something actually wrong with me!" Whoo hoo! If there was something wrong, something with a name, then it could be fixed, and I could get better. Sometimes just acknowledging that you have a problem, and knowing what that problem is, is the first step to recovery. It seems to be especially so when your situation is recognized and supported by someone who is a trusted councilor - whether an older friend, or a medical professional.

Now I had a name for my condition, I began to pray with more focus. I figured that if I could figure out what CAUSED the depression, then maybe I could figure out how to fix it. As I sought God, and asked Him to show me what had happened to start this whole thing, I felt Him answer "You've lost your sense of vision". I knew what he meant - I had

lost the sense of being in God's will and plan for our lives, the sense that all the hard stuff we were going through had a PURPOSE. What exactly we had been doing is the subject of a testimony I have written (see God is Our Provider [HERE](#)) , but for my purposes here I will just say that we had given up everything we had to follow where He led, and that sometimes it had been glorious, and more often it had been HARD. But the hard stuff was always ok, as long as we were holding to the vision that God has given us, and could cling to the truth that He was in control and could be trusted. But when I had given up on one specific dream that God had given us, but that hadn't been fulfilled for years, I had somehow let go of all hope for our future.

So I prayed, "Well Lord, what do I DO?" and He said "Ask me to renew your vision". So I did - simply I prayed, "Lord, please renew my vision." And he did. Over the next few weeks, the Lord restored to me my sense of purpose in Him - he brought back the dream I had given up on, and he refreshed my hope in Him.

It took several months for me to recover fully, and I learnt a lot about myself from it. I learnt that I needed to be careful to recognize in myself when my stress levels were getting to danger point, and to tell my husband when that happened, so he could help me to figure out how to change things so I could cope. I learnt that I can no longer function with so little sleep as I used to, and that my energy levels are lower than they once were. I cannot cram so much into my life as I once tried to, and that's ok. I learnt to recognize the things that I found particularly hard to cope with, and either avoid them or ask for help.

For the next few years, everything was fine, until mid 2004.

That year, we had moved to a new town. My husband was working shifts at the local hospital. Every week he did one day shift, two evening shifts and two night shifts. Both our sleep patterns were seriously disturbed! Some of our children had been attending a small Christian school the previous year, and I knew I would be in hospital for major surgery that year, and out of action for 3 months, so when we moved we had made the decision to enroll our children in a small 40 student country school right across the road from our house - it just seemed like it would be better to wait until after the surgery and recovery to begin home schooling again. The situation at the school became extremely stressful - the bullying was unbelievable! I ended up with 2 lots of surgery, and in the middle of it all my husband's mother was diagnosed with cancer, and died 3 months later. We were also financially stressed. In September we pulled the kids out of school and started home schooling again - but that didn't end the bullying. If they even ventured out into our yard during lunch time, kids from across the road would jeer at them, and worse.

All that I needed to do just seemed to pile up. Everywhere I turned, there were things needing my attention, and I never had the time to do them all. My house was a wreck. I couldn't figure out what to do about anything. Making decisions was beyond me. I would get up every morning, deliberately ignore all the demands I couldn't deal with, and spend all day putting one foot in front of the other just doing what I could - preparing meals,

washing clothes, schooling the kids etc. At night, I would collapse into bed exhausted - but as soon as my body stopped moving, my brain would start. Around and around my thoughts would go "Have I paid the electric bill? Bother, I forgot to iron my husband's uniform for tomorrow. I must remember to do the dog's flea treatment. What am I going to cook for the next week? Can we afford the groceries?" and on and on and on. Accompanying these endless thoughts was a rising sense of panic - my heart rate would increase, my whole body would tense up, as I remembered one thing after another I hadn't done or needed to do. And I couldn't sleep, no matter what I did. On a good night, I might drop off to sleep, but an hour later I would wake in a panic, remembering some urgent thing, and then never be able to go back to sleep.

By November, I was a mess! It had been nearly 5 months since I had had any real sleep. And I thought there might be something wrong with my heart.

All of a sudden, I'd have these attacks, where it felt like my heart missed a beat, then went into overdrive, and I'd struggle to breathe. It was VERY frightening! At first it happened only occasionally, but then increased in frequency to where it might happen every few minutes for hours at a time.

About this time, my family had had a dose of the flu. A few days later, I noticed swelling under my jaw, and concerned it might be the beginning of an abscess, decided to get it checked out. My youngest also had a lump in her groin, but I figured that was most likely swollen glands. When I called the doctor's office, I was told that the doctor was at an outlying clinic for the day, but the nurse suggested I pop in and she could take a look. So I took my daughter, and went to see her.

Somehow, during the visit, I got talking about how busy life was, and how I wasn't sleeping, and didn't feel like I was coping. It all poured out, and I used a lot of her tissues! I described how I felt like I was on a roller coaster or a merry-go-round, and I just wanted it to stop so I could get off, but I didn't know how to make it stop. :-)

The kind nurse listened to me, and explained that I really needed to see the doctor. She made me an appointment for the next day, and arranged for there to be no charge when I explained that I really couldn't afford to see the doctor.

The doctor listened to my story, and gently explained that I was suffering from stress-induced depression. He explained that the heart palpitations were "panic attacks", and that if they were not dealt with they could eventually cause permanent damage to my heart. He told me how when there is unresolved stress in our lives, then we internalize it, and it builds up in our bodies, until eventually the body can't cope anymore, and starts to produce psychosomatic symptoms, like insomnia, and panic attacks, or headaches, stiff necks or even cancer.

The doctor also explained to me that when we don't get enough sleep, that our brains do not produce enough neuro-transmitters, which are vital to our ability to function and reason, and make decisions. If we are using more of them during the day than we are

producing at night, then it becomes like an overdrawn bank account, and eventually our minds foreclose! We become unable to make even the simplest decisions, or reason out problems.

The doctor wanted me to begin a course of anti-depressants, but I was not in favour of that idea. I told him I just needed to get some sleep, so I could begin to figure this out. Finally he agreed to give me enough mild sleeping tablets to last a month, on the condition I came back to in 4 weeks, and if I wasn't improved, go on anti-depressants then.

So, I went home, once again armed with a realization of what was wrong with me. You'd think I would have figured it out sooner - after all, I'd been through depression before. But I hadn't realized! Probably because I was so exhausted I just couldn't think straight at all.

Three nights of sound sleep later, I began to seek the Lord as to what steps to take in order to get my life in order. One of the first things I found with his help was Flylady - that dear lady and her wonderful system gave me exactly what I needed; someone to talk me by the hand and tell me step-by-easy-step what to do to get my home under control. Shortly after that I joined an internet support group for homeschoolers who use Flylady, and within weeks I was running it. As the Lord used me - despite my own problems and shortcomings - to reach out to and encourage others, my real healing began.

When I went back to the doctor, he was pleased with my progress, and agreed to just keep monitoring me.

Again, it took several months for me to get back to "normal", and I had to learn all over again to recognize things that stressed me, and deal with them. Overall, I would say that the most important things in my recovery were:

- 1) Recognizing and understanding what I was suffering from
- 2) Getting some sleep
- 3) Turning to God and seeking his help in finding and taking steps in the right direction
- 4) Having a simple, do-able plan in place to get my home under control (chaos at home has always been one of my biggest stressors)
- 5) Letting go of my perfectionism and high expectations for myself
- 6) Sharing with others to encourage them, and to find support myself. Being able to be "real" and share how I felt, and receive encouragement, prayer and support really helped! Also, when you see other people's problems, your own don't seem so huge anymore, and when you focus on helping others, somehow your own situation fades.

As I was writing this article, my husband came and told me that he had just heard on the radio a lady talking about depression in women. Apparently research has shown that women who have daily contact with some sort of support person are 75% more likely to overcome depression. And that does not mean only to talk about your depression - it means daily contact with another human being who understands where you are at, and to whom you can relate - someone to whom you can talk honestly.

You see, one of the reasons why things got so bad for me, is that I was very isolated. And one of the things that isolated me the most was my own pride. All my life I've had people say things like "Oh, you're so ORGANISED", "You are so mature", "Cynthia will do it - she's amazing", "Wow, you're a superwoman!", and so on. And I had this false sense that I needed to always appear to be in control and coping, even when I was falling apart inside. If someone was coming to my house, I would clean in a frenzy, so no-one ever saw my house any less than spotless, despite that fact that 99% of the time it looked like a tornado had just swept through! I was totally unable to tell anyone I needed help. I would offer to look after other people's children, but I could never call a friend and say "I need some time out - could you take the kids for a couple of hours?" I somehow believed that because I was a Christian, a homeschooler and the mother of a large family, that I had to constantly prove to the world that I could do it all, and with style - that if I let them see how often I "fluffed" it, that somehow I would be a bad witness, and wouldn't cause other people to want Christ, or more children, or to homeschool; all things I was passionate about. So I would swallow my pain and fear, plaster a smile on my face, and be Superwoman - at least on the outside.

And you know what? It's not true!! There is no such thing as Superwoman - and you sure don't have to pretend you're her! You remember in the Bible where Jesus says "Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest....for my yoke is easy and my burden is light"? Well, when you take on perfectionism and high expectations, you are taking on a VERY heavy burden, and it is not one Jesus gave you! Please, if that's you - lay it down right now!

On the subject of support people - I think that is why I recovered so well. My support came through the internet group I joined of like minded women. If you live somewhere where you don't have many like-minded friends near you, then that is an option you should consider! And not only if you are already depressed - healthy supportive relationships are vital to anyone, especially women who are coping with all that we are - children, homes, husbands, home schooling etc.

The good news is that you really can recover from depression! In July 2005, 8 months after I had begun my recovery from the second bout of depression, we moved house - and it was a MAJOR move to a whole different part of the country. 5 days later, one of my brothers was tragically killed in a car crash. Over the next three months, my mother was knocked off a bicycle and became a tetraplegic, my father was diagnosed with cancer, and my husband's grandmother passed away. We spent 6 months flying all over the country helping and supporting relatives, as well as trying to unpack, settle in, find work for my husband (in the end he was not able to get a job for 6 months, as every time he would get close some new crisis would happen - so we had no income that whole time either!) and so on. And you know what?? Not once did I ever come close to getting depressed again during that whole time. Yes, it was stressful! But I (finally) learned to allow myself to feel pain, and take the time to deal with it, I didn't try to do more than I was able, I didn't allow things to build up inside of me. I made sure I got the sleep I needed. And God amazingly provided all our needs - plus I could see His loving hand working even through all those terrible circumstances.

A while back, a friend of ours, who happens to be a doctor, was suffering from seasonal depression. He was in a pretty bad way. One afternoon, I was talking to him about depression, and how it feels to be depressed. Having someone describe it in a way that made sense seemed to really help - so here's what I told him (because this is how it felt for me):

Being depressed is like being at the bottom of a deep, deep pit. When you look up, you can see a little light at the top, but it's too far away, and there's no way to reach it. And it feels like the walls are closing in on you. The walls are all the things you think you should have done but can't, the fears you have, the things demanding your attention. As you start to figure things out, you start to climb up those black, sheer walls, and for a while you even seem to make some progress. Then along comes someone or something, and knocks you, and you fall right back to the bottom of the pit. It feels so hopeless!

Beginning to recover from depression is a process of climbing the walls, and falling back, and climbing again. As you improve, and find ways to cope or get help, you get stronger and the walls get easier to climb; eventually they seem to shrink. And suddenly, without even realizing it, you're out of the pit and leaving it far behind.

The only thing is, there are always other pits out there. You need to learn to recognize the danger signs so you don't fall in another one!

If you are depressed, then you can NOT "just snap out of it"! Don't berate yourself for not being able to!

If you, or someone you know, are depressed, please, don't just ignore it and hope it will go away - it usually won't! Clinical depression involves a chemical imbalance in the brain, and this needs addressing for the person to recover. In that case, it is no different to being ill with diabetes or heart problems - no sensible person would deny a diabetic help or medication, even though meds are not the whole solution.

If you are suffering mild symptoms of depression or burnout, learn what you can, and talk to someone who understands. Deal with it before it escalates to serious illness!

God loves you and wants you to live a life of love, joy and peace.

With love

Cynthia

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