

# When it hurts to breathe

By Steve Larson

*“Mr. Larson, you’re severely depressed.”*

*The doctor’s office with its white walls and chemical smell felt lifeless.*

*I couldn’t accept the doctor’s words. She’s wrong, I thought. I can’t be depressed. I’m a pastor. Pastors aren’t supposed to be depressed.*

But there had been clues. During the summer of 2002 I found myself watching other people laugh and thinking to myself, *What’s there to be happy about?* I felt like I was trapped in a colorless garden of dying plants. Usually a self-motivated, ambitious go-getter, I wanted to do little more than sleep. I was crying on the inside, hurting so badly in the silent chamber of my soul that sometimes it was hard to breathe.

I began to avoid people. I got in and got out of church on Sundays as fast as I could. I had no motivation to work. Eventually I decided ministry just wasn’t for me. I planned to quit and get a new job.

As dark as that season was, it is amazing to realize that only seven months later, in April 2003, God turned my life around. Today, I’m still the pastor of the church I so badly wanted to leave. And I love my ministry like never before.

I also have a new compassion for those suffering from depression.

## You are not alone

In the midst of my depression, I felt I was suffering alone. But with some research I discovered depression is as common as the common cold.

Two of my heroes, Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill, struggled with depression.

Lincoln once said, “I am now the most miserable man living. If what I felt were equally distributed, there would not be one happy person on the face of the earth.”

“Depression followed me around like a black dog my entire life,” Churchill once admitted.

Great servants of God in the Bible went through doubt, despondency and dejection.

Even after defeating the prophets of Baal, praying down rain upon parched Israel, and outrunning King Ahab’s chariot, Elijah could fall into suicidal depression. “I have had

enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors’ ” (1 Kings 19:4, NIV).

Jonah witnessed one of the greatest revivals in the Old Testament. But he prayed a similar prayer. “Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live” (Jonah 4:3).

I learned God uses people in spite of their weakness. I’m no exception.

## Ask for help

After I realized I was severely depressed and in no condition to lead my own life, let alone a church, I had two choices: I could ask for help or sink deeper in my depression. I decided to ask for help.

First of all, I saw a doctor. Next, I asked for help from my congregation. I decided to tell the people the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I wasn’t sure how it was going to be received.

My congregation rallied around their wounded leader. In fact, people who had never been involved in a ministry before stepped up to the plate and said, “How can we help?”

My loving, caring church gave me a three-month paid sabbatical and encouraged me to get away and heal. In short, when I hid nothing, they loved me all the more.

“I am repeatedly touched when you share from your heart,” one lady wrote to me. “You aren’t afraid to be honest, open and humble before your congregation. ... It makes you approachable ... not someone who appears to have all the answers, lives a perfect life in front of his congregation and makes people feel spiritually inferior.”

I learned victory can come from vulnerability.

## Don’t quit trying

When I hit the wall, I thought quitting the ministry was the answer. While I was out interviewing

for other jobs, I got a call from my district superintendent.

“I am done with ministry,” I told him.

He said something I will never forget: “Steve, we are not going to give up on you that easily.” He asked if he and another pastor could come and talk with me. I knew they were going to try and talk me into staying in the ministry.

Well, they didn’t have to convince me to stay. Someone else did — God. One night I was in the car with my mom and dad telling them about a job I was accepting.

I heard an inner voice say, *I am not done with you here yet. If you quit, you will regret it.*

## Learn the lessons

In the school of depression, I learned many lessons. The greatest lesson I learned was the lesson of empathy. Before my depression, I had no clue what it was like to feel hopeless. I do now. And I work very hard to never forget that lesson. When I counsel someone who feels despair, I try to remember what I felt like during my misery and I can better share his or her sorrow.

“Lessons learned in hard times,” someone has said, “are sometimes forgotten in good times.” My goal is never to forget what my despair felt like, because that experience is my best qualification to help others who are caught in depression’s grip. As Rick Warren says, “Don’t waste your hurts.”

The other lesson I learned from the seminar of suffering is the importance of just being there for someone in pain. This quote really touched me. “When someone is hurting, the best thing you can do is not try and get rid of his or her pain but sit down and share his or her pain.” All of us can do that. As we practice the ministry of presence, let’s remember to have a giant ear, not a giant mouth.

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## Rest, relax and recuperate

"You will soon break the bow if you keep it always stretched," Phaedrus said.

Depression can come when we fail to take Sabbaths. If we neglect to rest, retreat and recuperate, we run ourselves down and have nothing to offer others.

When you get on an airplane, the flight attendants advise you in the event of an emergency to put your oxygen mask on before assisting someone else. Why? You can't give what you don't have. As Gary Thomas said, "If you tend your own spiritual garden, you will have plenty to feed others with."

As a pastor, I learned I needed to take a certain amount of time caring for myself so I could better care for the families God entrusted to me.

## Don't be ashamed of medication

Depression is more than a "mood swing." When properly diagnosed, depression often proves to be connected with physical changes in your body. And these changes can be addressed with medication.

If you have a theological position against any and all medicine, I don't have room here to adequately respond to that scripturally. But if you accept medicine as a gift from God expressed through the wisdom He gives doctors, please understand that medications for depression are no different.

Taking a prescription to address your depression can be just as important as using medication to control your diabetes, high blood pressure, irregular heartbeat or any other ailment.

## Remember the power of prayer

When I decided to quit the ministry, I felt God called me to stay. But after being called to stay, I still had no passion, feeling or conviction for the ministry. I felt like a limp sock mentally and spiritually.

During this time I wrote the following goal: "Lord, give me a pas-

sion for the ministry again." Beside that I summarized my feelings with one word — helpless. I couldn't see myself being passionate about the ministry again.

E.M. Bounds said, "Prayer is not preparation for the battle; it is the battle." I discovered that truth when I cried out to God for help. He opened my heart to the needs around me. He filled me with passion for ministry, love for people and a vision for eternity. He did what I could never do in myself.

## Remember the grace of God

I struggled with feelings of failure for going through my depression. I felt I had let God, my family and my church down. But as I meditated on the grace of God, that feeling of failure lost its grip on my life.

Phillip Yancy in his book *What's So Amazing About Grace?* writes, "Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more.

And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less."

In short, if you are in the midst of depression, remember depression is not a sin.

With God's help and the loving compassion of the body of Christ, one day those dark clouds hovering over you will roll past and that colorless garden will bloom again. The sun will begin to shine.

When God brings you to the other side of depression you will be stronger, healthier and ready to offer a compassionate hand up to others struggling around you. **tpe**

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**ABCs OF SALVATION**

**To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:**

**A. Admit you are a sinner.**  
 "There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

**Ask God's forgiveness and repent of your sins.**  
 "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13 (See Acts 3:19.)

**B. Believe in Jesus** (put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation.  
 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

**Become a child of God by receiving Christ.**  
 "To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

**C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.**  
 "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

*For further help, contact the Assemblies of God church near you.*

*If you would like someone to pray with you concerning your decision to follow Jesus Christ, please contact the church indicated on the back cover or call:*

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