

What to Do When You're a Pastor Struggling With Suicidal Thoughts

My cousin's trembling voice uttered the unthinkable. "Kay, I need to let you know that Wayne took his life this morning." My knees collapsed under me. "No! How can this be? What happened? Why? What was wrong with him?"

My mouth formed tumbling questions despite my mind being frozen in disbelief and grief.

Through his tears, my cousin told me his brother-in-law had struggled with depression and suicidal thoughts for some time. His family thought Wayne was truly improving after he agreed to see a therapist.

On the morning of his death, Wayne said goodbye to his wife, Lynn, as she left for work. But Lynn felt uneasy and came home at lunch to check on him, only to find the worst had happened.

On the kitchen counter was a note he wrote apologizing for hurting his family, telling them he loved them and explaining that he just couldn't go on. Wayne made sure the dog was safe in his kennel before he ended his life.

Raised on the plains of West Texas, Wayne Oglesby was a preacher's kid who followed in his father's footsteps. He met my cousin, Lynn, in college and they made a fine team—vivacious, warm, football-fanatic, Jesus-loving folks who pastored small churches for decades.

Wayne is not the only pastor or faith leader to experience mental illness, addiction, financial difficulty and thoughts of suicide. Sometimes the media blares the news of a pastor who dies by suicide, but often, they die quietly, unnoticed by

many outside of their church and the local community. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for every completed suicide in the general population, there are 25 attempts and thousands more who think seriously about ending their lives. Pastors are not exempt from these statistics.

Wayne devoted countless hours to the duties of a pastor—preaching, teaching, marrying, burying, visiting the sick, showing up in the wee hours of the night for those in need. But over time, his life slowly began to change. Sometimes pastors and congregations don't mesh well, even when there's nothing really wrong, and Wayne and Lynn were asked to resign from a church they were serving. For the first time in his adult life, Wayne was no longer a pastor. Still in his late 50s with many years ahead of him, he was rudderless. He had never been great with money management, and he began to overspend, taking on more debt than they could handle. He started drinking too much. He found employment as a chaplain for a funeral home, but it just wasn't the same as being a pastor.

Depression set in, and he fought hard against the way it sapped his energy and sense of well-being. He often expressed disappointment and confusion on the way his life turned out. The guilt he felt for overdrinking and for putting his family's financial future at stake ate away at his peace of mind.

Wayne didn't really want to die. He was trapped inside himself, seeking a permanent way out. But on March 4, 2010, this kind, loving, dedicated pastor with a west Texas twang concluded that his wife and family would be better off without him. He convinced himself that they would have a better life without his emotional breakdowns, without the stress of his financial mistakes and without the burden of his pain.

He was wrong. His wife, children, grandchildren, friends,

neighbors and former church members are not better off without him. The crushing, soul-shattering grief of his suicide changed them forever.

You are a person before you are a minister. An ordinary man or woman who is vulnerable to the same illnesses, life circumstances and woes as everyone else. Yet you have the added stress of living in a glass house, always under the watchful eyes of church members. Sometimes both faith leaders and the congregation forget that pastors are merely human and expect superhuman feats of endurance, wisdom and knowledge. The unrealistic expectation that pastors and their families walk on water can only lead to deep disappointment and disillusionment, which can be lethal.

Some of you, like Wayne, have faithfully ministered and you're abiding as closely with Jesus as you know how; you've done everything you can think to feel better, but you don't. It's entirely possible that you're experiencing depression. If so, you're not alone. Please don't feel even one second of shame or embarrassment. Biblical figures, early church fathers and mothers, respected theologians and famous pastors and church leaders throughout the centuries—as well as many of the readers of this article—have lived or are living with bouts of depression. It's not a sin to be depressed. You're not weak or flawed, and you don't have a character defect. You're not a spiritual baby. Depression is an illness; it's real, it's common, and it's treatable. It's vital that you understand that untreated depression can be lethal. Make an appointment to see your primary care physician as soon as possible and talk to her about your symptoms. She may run some lab tests to check a variety of conditions that could be affecting your mood, and she may recommend you see a psychiatrist for a more thorough evaluation. She may suggest you take a medication to help manage the bleak darkness that depression can bring. No matter what, don't be afraid to have a conversation with your doctor and don't wait!

We're whole beings— body, mind and soul—so attack depression on every level possible. Take care of yourself physically, emotionally and relationally. Most of all, don't suffer in silence; don't hide your pain from your brothers and sisters in Christ. You're a part of the body of Christ, and when one member hurts, we all hurt. As Larry Crabb insists, the church must be the safest place on earth, where we can bring our broken selves, our depressed selves, our addicted selves, our anxious selves—all of who we are and who we are not—and find not only a welcome embrace but also fellow strugglers who will journey with us no matter how long it takes.

If you, or someone you know, is in distress or crisis, call 800-273-8255. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones. {eoa}

Visit for free mental health resources.

Kay Warren co-founded Saddleback Church with her husband, Rick Warren, in Lake Forest, California in 1980. She is a passionate Bible teacher and tireless advocate for those living with mental illness and suicide prevention following the death of her son Matthew on April 5, 2013. She founded Saddleback's Hope for Mental Health Initiative as well as the HIV&AIDS Initiative. She is a board member of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention. Kay is the author of Sacred Privilege: Your Life and Ministry as a Pastor's Wife, Choose Joy: Because Happiness Isn't Enough, Say Yes to God: A Call to Courageous Surrender, and co-author of Foundations, a popular systematic theology course used by churches worldwide. Her children are Amy, Josh and Matthew (who is in heaven), and she has five grandchildren. Read more about Kay at .

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