

When Famous Christians Suffer Public Depression

Every morning, Sheila Walsh grabs a glass of water to wash down her medication. With a prayer of thanksgiving for doctors, the noted author and speaker swallows her antidepressant.

The Women of Faith speaker and former *700 Club* host is a broken woman made whole in Christ. Her platform now teaches women that their history doesn't define their destiny.

It's a message she's lived herself. After her stint as Pat Robertson's cohost, Walsh was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and severe clinical depression. She was placed in a psyche ward for one month.

"Sometimes God will take you to a prison to set you free," Walsh says.

In her first Women of Faith event, Walsh recalls how scared she was to admit her flaws, but the Holy Spirit convicted her to tell the truth of her story. Once she finished, she opened her eyes to see scores of women lining up to speak, all saying, "That's my story!"

So, too, goes the story of former *Maxim* and Victoria's Secret model Nicole Weider.

"I always needed God, and (my depression) ultimately created in me desire to get to know God," Weider says. "I had to see doctors, have medicine, it was the real thing. There's nothing sinful about getting something. Know you're going to come out of it, stronger, more fierce than ever before."

Weider now uses her testimony to connect with young women who are also fighting the same emotional and physical battles.

Consider also Tina Campbell of Mary Mary fame. The gospel singer reached the point where she was “so low that I wanted to die, kill my children, kill my husband and kill everybody and go out with a bang because life was that bad.”

Former first lady Barbara Bush also dealt with the nightmares the illness can cause.

“In an otherwise rosy depiction of life as the helpmate of a rising politician, Mrs. Bush also states, almost as an aside, that she was so deeply depressed in the mid-1970s that she sometimes stopped her car on highway shoulders for fear that she might deliberately crash the vehicle into a tree or an oncoming auto,” *The New York Times* reports.

Roll the clock back a few more years, and one can see famed politician Winston Churchill as a case study with his “great black dog.”

Even one of history’s greatest preachers, Charles Spurgeon, experienced the signs of depression throughout his life.

Though Spurgeon dealt significantly with the illness before his conversion, he was not exempt after experiencing God’s saving grace.

“He saw his depression as his ‘worst feature,’” John Piper writes.

To quote Spurgeon himself, “Despondency is not a virtue; I believe it is a vice. I am heartily ashamed of myself for falling into it, but I am sure there is no remedy for it like a holy faith in God.”

There’s a stigma that surrounds depression—particularly chemical depression, or major depressive disorders—that prevents people who are struggling to come forward and reveal how God is working in their lives.

In the words of rap superstar Lecrae, “Depression is not a

sign of lack of spirituality. The most renown spiritual leaders walked thru deep depression.”

His words reflect a growing trend of younger believers begging for authenticity in the church, particularly regarding depression.

In fact, a Barna study reveals that nearly one-fifth of young adults leave church because their faith “does not help with depression or other emotional problems” they experience. It certainly doesn’t help that the church can sometimes frown on medication. However, the tide appears to be shifting.

“I think Christians are beginning to talk about it a little more,” Walsh says. “It’s not so much an issue of lack faith as lack of chemicals in your brain. I had a big struggle with medication until my doctor explained I’m one of those people with a chemical imbalance, so take my little pill with a prayer of thanksgiving.”

Walsh certainly isn’t the only one battling depression. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, major depression is one of the most common mental disorders in the United States.

More than 16 million people were affected in 2012, according to that same report, and most of them were between 18-25.

Clinical psychologist Al Saunders says depression is as prominent inside the church as outside the church. However, as the church stigmatizes depression, many may be afraid to come forward and admit their struggles.

“I think church needs to quit telling people depression is a sin problem,” Saunders says. “It doesn’t help anyone get better if I just judge you and pound you for having that problem. This is forcing depressed people to go underground, to hide in shame.”

The stigma in the modern-day church as that many believe “depression” is only thoughts of sadness, where in reality, the disease is characterized by much more.

Officially, most depression symptoms are medical and physical, not just emotional. Someone may be in a depressive episode if they experience a change in sleep or eating habits, motivation, enjoyment, energy level or concentration for a period of at least two weeks.

But faith in God is sometimes not enough. Whether the cause is spiritual or physical, if ignored, depression can rip apart the soul.

“If you get stuck in that rut long enough, it morphs from spiritually triggered thing to a medical problem,” Saunders says. “It sets in on you which takes time to pull back (from) and affects the way I view myself in God.”

Fighting this battle could require anything from counseling to medication to stints in psychiatric institutions, like Walsh experienced.

Others in the church, however, avoid medication, claiming that taking medication means you’re not putting your faith in God to heal you.

“I think as far as medication, the church views it as a cop out, a short cut, a masking agent, covering the real problem. They view (depression) as 100 percent spiritual,” Saunders says. “They don’t understand the medical-chemical problems in the human body, and view antidepressants just like street drugs, but it restores healthy balance. It restores (those who take them); it doesn’t change them.”

Women of Faith’s Walsh says she experienced much of that turmoil when she was initially assigned an antidepressant. But now that little pill is part of her mornings and her prayers; it enables her to build bridges with her audience that would

be unattainable without her having first walked through that valley.

The struggle against depression certainly has a biblical precedent, Saunders says. Look to the psalmist, to start, then add in the books of Job and Jeremiah.

Ecclesiastes 3 addresses a time for sadness, and Galatians mandates that Christians bear one another's burdens.

But for the church to bridge the gap and fight depression, its members must first remove the stigma associated with admitting a mental illness or other emotional problems.

If left untreated, depression will grow, Saunders says. The emotions will run deeper and last longer. However, if the church builds a "band of brothers," it has the power to aid in the treatment and prevent devastating effects.