

**Hope for Depression**  
By Cheryl Rettig

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**Note to Readers:**

The information in this book is not intended, and should not be considered, as a replacement for consultation, diagnosis or treatment by a licensed health practitioner. If you are experiencing symptoms of depression, please see your doctor.

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This book is dedicated to my mom, dad, and Caleb. Without their love, encouragement, and support, I would not be where I am today and I never would have had the courage to write *Hope for Depression*.

This book is also for the millions of people suffering from depression right now. Please don't give up. There is hope. You don't need to continue to suffer. I am living proof.

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## **Introduction**

This is a book about depression from a person who has battled it for over a decade. As someone who has fought this debilitating mental illness for years, I am extremely familiar with hopelessness, despair, and darkness. But this is not just a story of depression. More than anything else, my story is one of hope, perseverance, and faith. Though depression has been one of the most challenging struggles I have faced, it has also been one of the biggest catalysts in helping me become the strong, disciplined, and faith-filled person that I am today. The most powerful messages I desire to bring to people struggling with depression is that there is hope and to never give up. My journey is evidence that depression does not have to be the end of your life. When we accept the help that is available to us, we can develop the strength, ability, and determination to overcome depression and transform our negative mental programming into positive thinking, beliefs, attitudes, and energy. No one has to suffer needlessly with depression.

I want to stress this is not a book about “quick fixes” and I am not here to say what causes depression or what the best treatments are. I am not a doctor or psychologist so all I can offer are my own experiences and lessons I have learned. I am not advocating that if you do what I did, then you will be cured. Instead, I discuss the strategies I attempted over the years, what worked for me, and what I have learned from my struggle. It is my desire that my story will bring hope to people struggling with depression and encourage them to never give up. There are so many strategies and tools that can help you overcome depression.

### **Overview of Strategies**

Like many people suffering from depression, I have tried many different strategies to alleviate depression symptoms, and hopefully eliminate depression from my life completely. My experiences have taught me that even though I might never totally “get rid of” depression from my life, there are so many strategies I can utilize and put in my toolbox so that when I am faced with depression, I know how to respond. Rather than throwing my hands up in despair, I now have the tools to fight back. And I know that I am stronger than depression.

Throughout the rest of this book, I will be discussing the following strategies:

### ***Counseling***

This strategy is so important. No matter what other techniques you decide to try, I strongly encourage everyone experiencing depression to begin seeing a licensed therapist or counselor right away. Counseling can tackle problems in our mind, emotions, and body. He or she can help you come up with a plan, help determine if you require antidepressants, and help you implement many of the strategies in this book as needed. Reach out for help from someone experienced and qualified. Please don't try to beat depression on your own.

### ***Antidepressant Medications***

For some people, antidepressant medications are extremely necessary, especially when first starting to deal with depression. Without medication, some people would be unable to implement any of the other strategies in this book because they wouldn't have the energy, focus, or balance to do so. However, medication might not be the best solution for everyone, especially long-term use, depending on the severity of the depression and the side-effects you experience. That is why you must start and stop any antidepressants while under your doctor's care.

Further, some people might need to try several different medications before they find one that is right for them. Some people might only need to be on antidepressants for a little while and then be able to manage depression through counseling and many of the strategies in this book, while others might

require medication for the rest of their lives. Again, it is imperative that you talk to your doctor about starting or stopping any antidepressant medications, the correct dosage, any side effects, and the length of time you need to be on the medication.

It is important to stress that I am not advocating the use of antidepressant medications for everyone, nor am I discouraging their use. This is a personal decision that must be made with your doctor on a case by case basis.

### ***Support System***

Being surrounded by a group of loving, encouraging and supportive people is important for anyone experiencing depression. Battling depression is hard enough, but to try to deal with depressive symptoms and work towards healing alone is almost impossible for most people. Please don't be afraid or ashamed to reach out for help from people around you that you trust and who you know will be there for you as you begin the journey to healing.

### ***Changing Your Thoughts***

In my life, I know that depression had such a strong foothold for so many years due in part to the thoughts that I was dwelling on. My mindset was extremely dark and my automatic mental programming was stuck on the negative. For years I never fully realized the power of my thoughts. And I didn't understand that I had the power to change my thoughts, thereby changing my energy, emotions, and the way I viewed my life. In this section, I will discuss several habits I have implemented that have helped me change my thoughts, including positive affirmations, Mind Movies, uplifting music, and immersing myself in encouraging books, videos, and articles by personal development experts.

### ***Keeping a Journal***

Even though writing in a journal is a physical act, there are so many mental and emotional benefits involved in this activity. It has helped me get my rambling, negative thoughts on paper and then help me see my problems in a completely different light. This strategy has lifted a weight off my shoulders and is so empowering, allowing me to take action on my own that has great benefit for me.

### ***Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) and Hypnosis***

I include these two strategies in the same section for three important reasons. First, they both involve getting past our many negative and deeply rooted thoughts in our subconscious mind. For everyone who has tried so hard to speak and think positively but have seen no change in their lives, these strategies might help. Both EFT and hypnosis can take you past the invisible gatekeeper standing guard between your conscious and subconscious mind that refuses to allow in new programming that conflicts with the old. Second, they are both strategies that many people might never have considered before because they are a little bit “out there.” But I would encourage you to take a chance and try things you've never attempted before. What have you got to lose? Besides, if what you are doing right now isn't working, then why not try something you haven't attempted and see if the results are any different? And finally, both of these strategies have the potential, when done regularly, to completely transform your energy and mood.

### ***Hormonal Balance***

It is important to understand that things happening in our body can greatly impact our mind (and vice versa). Further, there are many symptoms of hormonal imbalance that show up as symptoms closely mirroring depression. Attempting to alter your brain chemistry with antidepressant medication may be the right choice for you, but if you don't carefully look at what is going on in your body, and not just your mind, you may continue to experience depression symptoms even while on antidepressants because the root cause has not been addressed. It is vital to look at all aspects of

yourself – mind, body, emotions, and spirit – while on your journey of healing. Hormones are an area that is often overlooked by women struggling with depression because the focus is often exclusively on problems with the mind and emotions.

### ***Taking Care of Your Body***

Because our physical health is so important and it has such an impact on our mental health, I look at nutrition, exercise, and natural supplements in this section. There are specific changes we can make in how we take care of our bodies that can have a dramatic impact on how we feel both physically and mentally.

### ***Following Your Passions***

I can barely put into words how important this strategy has been for me. Depression drains life while passion is what makes life worth living. Once I discovered what I was passionate about, what I loved doing, I felt so much hope. During times of severe depression, I felt like there was no point in me being on this earth if all I was here to do was suffer. But during times that I have followed my passions, depression rarely had the opportunity to drag me into darkness. Following your passions is one of the most important ingredients to life-long happiness and fulfillment, not just temporary alleviation of depression.

### ***Life Coach***

Working with a life coach was a great experience for me. She helped me come up with clear and concrete steps for following my passions and making positive changes in my life. My mindset changed while working with my life coach and my problems didn't seem so overwhelming because together we devised small steps that would get me where I wanted to go. She also helped me see myself differently. Rather than focusing on my flaws, she helped me really see my value and worth as a human being.

### ***Faith***

Since our spirit is often the part of ourselves that gets overlooked during the healing process, I wanted to devote time to discussing my journey from fear of an angry God to faith in a God of love. This change in belief has given me strength, hope, and encouragement, filled me with love for myself, and completely revolutionized my life.

It is important to stress that none of the strategies and techniques I discuss are designed to be a replacement for receiving mental health care from your doctor and a licensed counselor. The information in this book is not intended as medical advice. If you are experiencing symptoms of depression, please see your doctor.

### ***A Few Final Words Before We Get Started***

Until recently, depression has been a constant struggle and my life was filled with sadness, hopelessness, worthlessness, darkness, excessive crying, and a lack of energy. However, many of the strategies above (over the course of many months of consistent work) have helped and have brought hope back into my life. My life is not perfect, and I still have bad days where I am feeling low, but these days are coming around less often and are staying for a much shorter time. I now have hope and a renewed belief and confidence that I am here for a reason and that God is right here with me. I have found hope and purpose even in the midst of depression.

Finally, it is important to mention that even though I have included research in each chapter to help people understand the importance of each strategy, this is a book first and foremost of my own experience with depression and my path to healing. The bottom line is that this is my story, not a research paper on depression. I do not include an exhaustive examination of the research that exists on each strategy. If I did, this book would be thousands of pages long. Instead, I have included the

research to help readers understand more about each strategy and to give greater context as to why these strategies were so effective. Most importantly, I pray that my experiences give you hope and that the strategies I have employed might help alleviate your depression symptoms like they have done for me.

This is my story. I hope it helps.



## **Chapter 1: A Little Bit About Me**

Before I start discussing the many strategies I have discovered and utilized over the past several years to alleviate depression, I want to start by giving you a bit of background about me so that you have a better idea of where I am coming from throughout this book.

Growing up, my life was filled with love and family. I am the oldest of six children and we grew up raised by parents who loved us and each other very much. My parents demonstrated through example what a healthy, happy, and supportive marriage looks like and I am proud to be their daughter. Most of my memories of childhood and adolescence involved my family. We went camping every summer, played baseball in the park, had family dinners filled with loud talk and laughter, enjoyed regular movie and game nights, and celebrated every holiday and birthday with gusto. I always knew that my parents loved me and the support I received from my family was fantastic. I can't tell you the number of times my dad helped me with my homework, my mom discussed with me the problems I was facing, and my parents attended my school plays and sporting events. For my parents, their children were their life and my siblings and I grew up secure in that important fact.

Despite the love and wonderful memories, I began to experience depression and anxiety in my early teenage years. Since I am not a doctor or psychologist, I am not going to attempt to determine exactly why I developed depression and why it has continued for so many years. Brain chemistry and genetic factors that lead to depression are beyond my areas of expertise. But I do know that particular elements of my life and specific experiences contributed to my negative mindset and the incredible pressure I put on myself to be perfect, resulting in depression whenever I felt I could not measure up.

### ***Family***

Even though my family has always been my greatest source of support and strength, with two parents and five brothers and sisters (and pets), my house was rather chaotic when I was younger and I sometimes felt overwhelmed and anxious. And even though my parents never actually put a lot of responsibilities on my shoulders, I took a lot on myself due to the sheer number of people and things that needed to be taken care of in a family that large. I wanted things to run smoothly, so I did my best to be perfect, not make waves, keep my feelings to myself, and take care of people as much as possible.

### ***School***

If the seeds of perfectionism were planted in the many responsibilities and stresses of my wonderful, yet large and chaotic family life, then school and church were the sunshine and water that made that particular weed grow so large that it threatened to choke the life out of me. I attended preschool at one school, kindergarten in another, grades one to five at another, grades six to nine at still another and the rest of high school at another. No matter which school I attended, however, my perfectionism only grew. Since I was never very good at sports, art, or music, and I didn't have a lot of friends (just a small group at each of the schools I attended) I focused all my attention on academics. My dad was a teacher and my mom, who stayed at home to raise us, taught me how to read when I was four. Needless to say, learning was encouraged at my house and I loved school. My mom actually had to tell me to put my books down in the summer and go play outside. As much as I loved school, however, there was a drive to succeed inside of me that went beyond a healthy desire to do my best. I had to be perfect. Failure was not an option. I got one C in university, and I almost had a heart attack. Over the years, I managed to equate my worth as a person with my performance at school. And this took such a toll on my health and self-esteem. It wasn't until recently that I have actually begun to let go of this compulsion to be perfect, and let me tell you, it feels like a weight has been lifted from my chest.

## ***Church***

Despite my present love for God, church was not a pleasant experience for me. I have spent the last decade searching for the truth that would set me free after spending the first sixteen years of my life at a church so fundamentally evangelical that the only thing I felt towards God was fear. My mom started going to this particular church when I was just a baby and I spent all of my formative years attending church services every Sunday morning (and often the evening service as well), Wednesday night, and for four years, from grades six to nine, I attended the private school run by my church. For those four years, I followed a curriculum that required me to teach myself through the completion of workbooks (12 books in a particular subject comprised one grade level). Talking in class was not allowed, a fact underscored by the dividers placed between every desk. If you talked at any point during class, you received a demerit. Physical contact with the opposite sex and dating was not allowed. Any action deemed an infraction of the rules led to the receipt of a demerit. Three demerits in a day led to a detention where you would have to write lines explaining how you would never again do whatever you had done. The memorization of Scriptures was also a daily activity.

One experience stands out very clearly in my mind from my time attending my church's school. I was in grade eight and that year my class was attending a convention in New York where several other Christian schools gathered to compete in various areas, including drama, music, spelling, public speaking, art, history, sports, etc. Since we were a private Christian school, we didn't have the opportunity to compete like this throughout the year. What might have been an amazing experience was turned into severe stress and anxiety by my school's mandate that each of us were required to complete a project in every single category. That meant I had to complete an art project (oil painting), craft (crocheted blanket), speech, spelling bee, volleyball tournament, singing solo, dramatic performance, and history project. This was on top of all my regular school work and tests. I was so overwhelmed and of course I felt like I had to be perfect, even though many of these projects weren't even things I was good at or enjoyed doing. I vividly remember sitting on the edge of my bathtub sobbing hysterically, unable to breathe. My dad was so confused since he couldn't understand why I was having a panic attack at the age of 12. Looking back, I know this environment contributed to my recurring battle with anxiety and depression. My inability to handle the stress in my life at that time, along with my mounting feeling that I had to be perfect in order to be loved, were factors that contributed to depression for me.

If you talked to many people who attended my church, they would mention positive experiences. Unfortunately, however, the messages that I internalized were extremely damaging to my self-worth and my faith. Perhaps it was my sensitive nature, or the fact that I believed the message that questioning the pastor was tantamount to questioning God Himself, but I grew up at that church feeling like I had to be perfect or else God wouldn't love me and would send me to Hell. In my mind, nothing I did was ever good enough. We were told that Christians "should be the happiest people in the world." I felt a lot of guilt over the depression I was experiencing and felt like I couldn't talk to anyone about it. So of course I just "tried harder" to be happy. I memorized Scriptures about joy, tried to adopt the "fake it until you make it" mentality, and tried to never show or share what I was feeling, for fear that people would think I was a "bad Christian."

By the age of 16, my parents decided to leave the church of my youth and begin attending a different one that was less fundamentalist, but still not what my heart was looking for. Around age 19 or 20, I left church altogether for a few years. After so many years of fearing God and feeling like a disappointment, I didn't want anything to do with God. I felt like God was the source of all my problems and pain in light of everything I had ever been taught. In my early 20s, however, I began to search for God on my own terms. Deep down, I knew that God was not the monster I had imagined throughout my childhood and I decided to explore various religious traditions and spiritual paths in order to find the God I knew must be out there. I will talk more about my long journey from fear to love in a later chapter, but for now I will just say that I did in fact find a much more loving God when I

began to let go of the lies I had been fed as a child. This discovery has helped alleviate depression more than almost anything else in my life.

I know that for many people who did not grow up in this type of environment it might be difficult to understand the huge impact my years in church have had on my life and depression. This book is not about blaming religion for my depression. But I knew I had to mention the effects my particular religious upbringing had on my life for two reasons. First, my time in church comprised a huge amount of my early, formative years and the messages we receive during that time have an impact on all of us long into adulthood. Second, I have a feeling that there are many people out there who can identify with my experiences. Many people grew up in an environment, whether it be at church or home, where they felt like they would suffocate under the rules and expectations placed on them, and that if they weren't perfect then they wouldn't be loved. I want to tell this part of my story to give you hope that God doesn't require perfection. God just loves us for who we are. But unfortunately that is a truth that has taken me a long time to really believe.

### ***Grief and Loss***

While I realize that death is a part of life, that knowledge did not lessen the pain I felt when I experienced the loss of several people extremely close to me, particularly my grandmother, uncle, and father.

My grandmother and I were extremely close. Growing up, we spent so much time together. She taught me how to knit and crochet, we had fun baking together and watching movies, and she was always there to listen and encourage me. Watching her slowly deteriorate from a weak heart, visiting her many times in the hospital, and spending time with her near the end of her life were all very emotionally draining. After she died, I didn't take any time to grieve or really talk about my feelings of loss. I just threw myself into working two jobs that summer to make money for school. Several months later when I began my second year of university, I received my first diagnosis of clinical depression. Though I do not think that my grandmother's death caused my depression (as you can see from above, the seeds of depression and anxiety had been planted long before), the timing was challenging, especially since I did not have any coping mechanisms in place at the time to deal with the depression.

A couple years later, I experienced the death of my uncle and dad in the same year. My uncle passed away first. He had Down Syndrome and as a result he had a weak heart. When he was born, the doctor told my grandmother that he wouldn't make it until age five. But my uncle defied the odds and lived until 37 when he contracted an infection from a bad tooth that just spread through his body and he wasn't able to fight it. Watching as my grandmother said good-bye to her son while clinging to his hospital bed is an image that is burned into my mind. Little could I imagine that only five short months later I would be in the exact same place, holding my dad's hand as he lost his almost two-year battle with kidney and lung cancer.

My dad handled his disease with more strength and grace than I can even put into words. Throughout my whole life, my dad was a person I could always count on, someone who put his wife and children before himself, someone who loved each and every one of his students. Despite the pain of his last months, I don't remember him ever complaining. Even when he could no longer speak, eat by himself, or walk on his own, he still had a smile. Heck, a week before he died he still managed to beat me at Gin Rummy. At the end of his life, in the hospital room, he was surrounded by his wife, each of his children, and all of his brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews. Everyone he loved and who loved him was there to say good-bye. Despite the sadness and pain, I felt love in that room.

My mom was just as strong, just as much of an inspiration during this challenging time. She took care of my dad for almost two years without complaining, making healthy meals and giving him his injections every day. Their entire marriage was based on love, respect, and support, and this was all the more evident while my dad was fighting this insidious disease. In the years since his death, my mom has only continued to amaze me. She went from raising six children with the support of a partner to

becoming a single mom overnight. In addition to her own grief and financial concerns, she had to deal with six people grieving the death of their father in various ways. For me, I threw myself into completing my last year of university with excellent grades (of course), while one of my brothers began drinking excessively, rebelling, staying out until all hours, and treating all of us horribly. For the past seven years I have seen the level of my mom's strength and courage. Even when my depression has been at its worst, I know my mom's love for me has not wavered (even though her patience often did).

### ***Unbearable Miscellaneous***

Starting when I was a teenager, anxiety and depression became my fair-weather “friends” that were in my life sometimes but thankfully absent during other times. In other words, I had many moments of happiness and opportunities to live my passions, but I also had many dark times. I think the best way to describe it would be like the ups and downs of a roller coaster, or perhaps hiking trails that take you deep down into the valley one day, but high up on a mountain the next. Sometimes I would go months without the weight of depression on my shoulders and other times, it would not leave for months. A future section will look at some of these happy times and how I got there, but the following is a snap shot of two times in particular when depression had a strong grip.

During my first year of university, I had a great time. I got excellent grades, made some friends, and took classes I was really interested in. But as soon as I started my second year, something shifted drastically. I was sad all the time, I couldn't concentrate in my classes, I had a hard time getting out of bed in the morning, and I felt such a physical weight on my body and mind. I remember one day during my second or third week of classes when I was writing a test and I answered all the questions, handed it to the professor, and didn't realize until later that I had forgotten to turn the test page over. Needless to say, that was one of the worst marks I have ever received. Soon after, my mom took me to the psychiatric intake at our local hospital. To make a long story short, I had to withdraw from all my classes that year, a decision that was very hard for me due to the strong emphasis I had always placed on academics and perfection. I began seeing a counselor every week and I was placed on antidepressant medication. A few months later I began working a part-time job while I continued with regular counseling. After a year of counseling I was physically able to go back to school. I was embarrassed that I had to write a letter to the registrar's office at my university to explain what I had been through that year and ask to be allowed back into school based on medical grounds. Despite the help I received, that was a tough year because I felt like I lost a piece of myself and I was afraid that this was going to be my life from now on. Especially difficult was going to work and living my daily life and seeing people walking around looking happy. I couldn't understand what was so different between them and me. Why couldn't I “just be happy?”

Another significant period of depression occurred during my second year of graduate school and the year and a half after graduation. During my second year of my Master's program, I was writing my thesis full-time. I felt overwhelmed most of the time and I rarely felt like going out with my boyfriend and friends. I was exhausted and the world looked dark. Most of my thoughts were negative, particularly about myself. For example, many of the other people in my program were completing their theses much more quickly than me and I felt like there was something wrong with me, that I was a horrible researcher and writer. This was especially difficult for me because I did not have much confidence in myself or my abilities and some of the feedback I was receiving from my thesis adviser was confirmation (in my mind) that I was not a good researcher or writer like I had previously believed. Further, every time I looked in the mirror I saw myself as ugly. These are just two examples of some of my negative programming.

So I began to see a counselor again and worked with her regularly, as well as trying out several different antidepressant medications in order to find one that worked for me. I managed to complete my thesis and graduate in June 2010 with a Master's in Political Science (ironically enough, at graduation, my academic adviser told me I had done a great job with the program and with my thesis). I was so

happy, relieved and excited. I felt so proud of my accomplishment, especially since I had worked so hard to achieve it. I had so much hope for the future. I knew that most of the human rights organizations I wanted to work for required a Master's degree in Political Science or a related field, so I just knew that it was only a matter of time before I was hired for an entry-level researcher/writer job working to advance women's rights around the world -especially since I had so much on the ground experience in developing countries. Wow! I can't believe how wrong I was!

It has been a little over 18 months since graduation and I have yet to be hired for a job in my field. I have worked as a writer for a translation company for several months, as well as a sales associate at a clothing store. But my lack of job opportunities has not been for lack of trying. At this point I have sent out approximately 300 resumes to specific job advertisements. Some of my applications have received a "thank you for your interest, but we have decided to go with someone who has more experience." Even worse were the myriad of applications that didn't receive any sort of acknowledgment or feedback at all. So much work goes into all my applications and to be ignored time and time again has been quite challenging.

During this past year and a half several more challenges came at me fast and furious. Due to the lack of job opportunities and the huge school loans and car payments I am carrying, I had to move back home a little over a year ago. Going from being on my own for several years to living back at home with my mom and brothers has been challenging to say the least. Though I am extremely grateful that my mom allowed me to move home and only required a small amount of rent, it has been a humiliating experience. Losing my independence has been really tough, along with being almost completely broke. Oh, and I also gained 50 pounds on my last antidepressant medication which of course has been quite depressing and severely impacted how I view myself and my worth. I also broke up with a wonderful man after being together over two years.

As hard as this tumultuous existence has been for me, it has also been extremely difficult for the people who love me but don't know how to help. My mom has been so supportive over the years, both encouraging me and kicking me in the butt when I need it. But I know that watching a child with depression and being unable to help them has taken a toll on her. I would give anything to have been able to spare her that pain. Since I can't go back in time, I can only move forward and I hope this book helps others who are where I have been, as well as their families.

Disappointment, challenges, loss, sadness, frustration, anxiety, fear, and depression -this has been my past couple of years. But just talking about the challenges would only be half the story. The pain of the past several months didn't break me. Instead, it forced me to search high and low for any and all strategies that would help me beat this depression. If depression hadn't been this close to destroying me, I might not ever have sought out help like I did. I probably wouldn't have been desperate enough to try each and every one of the strategies I discuss in this book. Plus, I wouldn't have experienced the strength and growth that comes from facing depression each day and refusing to let this disease win. I wrote this book so that you can learn from my experiences, benefit from the strategies that helped me, and discover the strength deep inside of you that you might not even know exists.

## Chapter 2: Some Important Definitions

*"Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it." - Helen Keller<sup>1</sup>*

### What Does Depression Look Like?

If you are one of the millions of people who suffer from depression every year, then you could probably write this section just as effectively as I can. But for those of you who have not personally experienced depression, but rather are reading this because someone in your life is battling depression and you desire a better understanding, then this section is for you.

Depression is more than just occasionally feeling bad, low, or “down in the dumps.” Even the most positive, happy people have bad days (and anyone who says they don't, well, they're probably lying). Depression is much deeper and generally lasts longer. Further, depression does not “just” affect the mind. In other words, depression is more than negative thoughts. It also affects your physical body, your emotions, and your spirit. The effects of depression can also lead to destroyed relationships, inability to hold down a job (and accompanying financial troubles), and a complete lack of hope for the future.

According to *The Agency for Healthcare Research*, common signs of depression include deep sadness that won't go away; feeling sad, anxious, or “empty” for more than two weeks; no longer enjoying the things you used to; appetite changes including weight loss or weight gain; trouble sleeping; feeling restless and irritable; difficulty making decisions or concentrating; feeling tired all of the time and lacking energy; feeling hopeless or worthless; and thinking about suicide or death.<sup>2</sup>

If you are experiencing any combination of these symptoms please see your doctor; don't try to diagnose and treat yourself if you think you have depression.

For me, depression brought darkness into every area of my life. During times of severe depression, I felt sad, scared, anxious, lonely, hopeless, lethargic, exhausted, irritable, and angry. I couldn't make decisions or experience joy. I felt like I was totally alone in the universe and that God had abandoned me. A dark cloud was always overhead. I felt like life would never get better and that it would just be best if I never woke up again. Deep down, I knew that there was more to life than what I was experiencing, but I couldn't dig myself out of the deep pit I was in and reach the light. I felt like I was one person during my periods of depression, but that I was another person when the depression lifted. And the latter was a really good, kind, friendly, smart, hardworking, and loving person. But it was always just a matter of time before she disappeared again. For me, that loss of my true self was one of the most frustrating aspects of depression. The real Cheryl was always just out of reach.

### Causes of Depression

There are many theories about what causes depression involving numerous biological/genetic, social, and psychological factors. For example, abnormal activity in certain parts of the brain, low serotonin levels, raised stress hormones, nutritional deficiencies, loneliness, lack of exercise, and low self-esteem are some of the many factors that may interact in someone with depression.<sup>3</sup> But attempting to figure out all the causes of depression, or what specific life experiences, biological and psychological factors have contributed to the depression I have battled for over a decade is not what this book is about. At this point in my life, I do not really care *why* I have experienced depression. I do not aim to explain the causes of depression so much as to give hope to those who suffer from it and to share the techniques and strategies I have discovered over the past several years (through much searching, trial and error) that have been effective for me and that I believe can help others begin their own healing process. The most important message is that depression can be treated. Even if you have experienced depression for years as I have, there is still hope.

I do not claim to be able to “cure” depression. Attempting the strategies in this book will not ensure you never experience depression again. But for me, when I utilize the strategies outlined in this

book and become consciously aware of what I am thinking about on a regular basis, work on altering my negative (automatic) programming to one that is filled with positive thoughts (and ultimately positive energy), and focus on healing all aspects of my being (mind, body, emotions, and spirit), then I see drastic changes in my life. I can't say with 100% certainty that I will never experience debilitating depression again, but I do know one thing for sure. I now have enough tools in my toolbox that when I choose to use them, I have the power to overcome depression.

### **Three Choices**

Picture someone you don't like very much knocking on your door. They are an extremely negative person, always critical, angry, anxious, and afraid. You have three choices. First, you can ignore the knock completely and continue to go about cooking dinner with a smile on your face. Second, you can briefly stop what you are doing, open the door, and politely, but firmly, tell the unwanted visitor that you are busy and do not have time to talk right now. Then shut the door and walk away. If you refuse to let them in enough times, they will probably get the hint and stop coming around. Or third, you can throw the door wide open and invite them inside for dinner, all the while knowing you are in for an evening of misery. This example illustrates the three choices I have with depression when it shows up. I might not be able to keep depression from knocking at my door, but I do have a choice whether or not it gets inside. For most of the past decade, I didn't realize I had the choice to tell depression that I didn't have time for it, or even that I had the power to keep the door shut completely. But it is through the strategies I discuss in this book that I have begun to understand the power I possess in living a life free from depression. It has been a long journey, and I am just starting to learn these powerful lessons, but I know that if they are working for me then they can also work for other people.

Please note that these strategies have done wonders for me, but I am not promising that everyone with depression will experience the same results. My journey to healing has taken me over 10 years. Some people may see immediate changes in their lives while other people might require much more intensive intervention. The depression I have experienced over the past 10 years was severe, make no mistake, but I have never had hallucinations or any form of psychosis, I have never attempted suicide, and I have never hurt other people. I say this to make clear that I understand depression comes in varying levels of duration and intensity. The strategies I discuss in this book are working for me, but they might not be effective for everyone. For example, some people with severe depression may require strong antidepressant medication or intensive therapy over the course of many months. Please remember that the information in this book is not intended as medical advice. If you are experiencing symptoms of depression, please see your doctor immediately.

### **Body, Mind, Emotions, and Spirit**

Even though I cannot say with certainty why I have experienced depression, I do know that the strategies in this book have helped me. I have gone from living in darkness to a complete shift in thoughts, beliefs, and mood. I am not saying that I don't have bad days or that depression doesn't creep up from time to time, but I know now that there are strategies I can turn to that will help me. I have realized I am more than a physical body and that depression involves more than just problems in my mind. Humans are made up of a body, mind, emotions, and spirit. True healing from depression can't take place unless we take the time to tackle the hurts and problems in each of these four areas.

In "Anatomy of the Spirit: The Seven Stages of Power and Healing," Caroline Myss, PhD, underscores the importance of the mind-body-spirit connection in her thought-provoking definition of healing, which she describes as an "active and internal process that includes investigating one's attitudes, memories, and beliefs with the desire to release all negative patterns that prevent one's full emotional and spiritual recovery."<sup>4</sup> I love this definition because it shows that true, long-term healing is about more than just following a set of rules set out by your doctor. Instead, complete healing can only

take place when the person experiencing the illness is an active participant in his or her own healing, when they take responsibility for emotional and spiritual recovery through identifying and releasing all their negative attitudes, beliefs, and thought patterns. The following strategies can help you do just that.



## **Chapter 3: Counseling**

*“Psychotherapy is a learning experience. Improvement is not produced by an external substance, but by changes within the person. It is like learning to read, write or ride a bicycle. Once you have learned, the skills stay with you.” - Irving Kirsch<sup>5</sup>*

The benefits of having someone who listens to you without judgment and who can work through the garbage with you, pushing you to take full responsibility and holding you accountable for your progress, but also supporting you unconditionally, cannot be overstated. You may have to keep trying different people until you find the one who is best for you, but don't stop until you find a therapist who you feel comfortable with and who you can work with in a safe and non-judgmental environment. Rather than trying to figure out all the answers on your own, please talk to your doctor about counselors in your area who offer services at affordable rates. If you are suffering with depression, please don't let the cost of counseling keep you from getting the help you need and deserve. At my doctor's office there is even a psychologist on staff who sees patients free of charge. Don't be afraid to ask your doctor if he or she knows of any similar services in your city.

### **Different Types of Therapy**

You may have heard of different types of therapy and wondered which one was right for you. Or perhaps your idea of counseling involves a patient lying on a couch pouring out all their miseries to a therapist who just sits there and nods. However, therapy has evolved quite a bit over the years to include a multitude of approaches. When deciding on an appropriate counselor, it can be useful to understand the different therapies they may use. Although all can be effective, you may find one approach more appealing than another, or find that some approaches are more effective for you than others. The following is a brief description of several forms of therapy.<sup>6</sup> Please note that this is only a simple outline and many therapists may incorporate more than one philosophy or approach when counseling patients.

#### ***Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)***

This approach is based on the way we think and behave. This philosophy accepts that it is possible to reprogram our thoughts and behaviors. For example, if thoughts and perceptions about a particular problem affect a person's feelings and behavior, then reprogramming those thought patterns can result in a change in behavior. Changing thoughts can change the way you view a situation and the way you behave and feel, even if the problem itself does not go away. This form of therapy can be effective when dealing with depression, anxiety, phobias, and addictions.

#### ***Psychoanalytical and Psychodynamic Therapies***

This approach focuses on subconscious thoughts and beliefs, often developed in childhood, and how they influence current thoughts and behavior. Free associations and dreams may be used to interpret memories and experiences that are deeply buried in the mind and causing a patient problems.

#### ***Humanistic Therapies***

This type of therapy focuses on self-development, growth, and personal responsibilities now, rather than analyzing a person's past or subconscious thoughts and feelings. Counselors utilizing this philosophy will help patients recognize their own strength, creativity, and power to make positive choices.

#### ***Person-Centered Counseling***

This approach stresses an individual's value as a person, without judgments, in order to promote self-acceptance and the opportunity to reconnect with who they are.

### ***Other Types of Therapy***

Additional forms of therapy include Gestalt Therapy, Transactional Analysis, Existential Therapy, Family Therapy, Art Therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (used to treat people suffering trauma from war, natural disasters, car accidents, and sexual assault), Group Therapy and Integrative Counseling.

As you can see, there are many different types of therapies. Each counselor you visit may ascribe to a different approach, or they may vary their strategies depending on the patient. It is perfectly acceptable to ask your counselor about their training, philosophy, approach to therapy, and what exactly your sessions will involve. And if after a few sessions you feel that your counselor is not right for you for whatever reasons, try another one. It is imperative that you work with a counselor you trust and who listens to you without judging, but who also respects your goals for therapy.

### **But is Therapy Right for Me? Do I Really Need a Counselor?**

Some people assume that counseling is only for those suffering from a serious mental health disorder. But in fact, counseling has many benefits, even for people experiencing only occasional mild to moderate depression. Anyone with an emotional or behavioral problem can be helped. Further, if you are taking any antidepressants, I would also recommend counseling in order to hopefully get to the root causes of depression and help you develop useful coping skills to possibly prevent or mitigate future bouts with depression. In my experience, medication on its own was not as effective as medication combined with other strategies, particularly counseling with a licensed therapist.

But keep in mind that therapy involves much more than talking incessantly about your problems. According to FamilyDoctor.org, therapy can also “teach you new ways to think about the situations that bother you and help you cope with your feelings. It can help with feelings of anger, fear, anxiety, shyness and panic. It can also give you tools to help fight low self-esteem and depression.”<sup>7</sup> Despite its many benefits, however, people often hesitate to get counseling because of the stigma still attached to mental health issues. For people with this hesitation, the most important message you need to hear can be summed up in one sentence: “Don't let shame and fear stop you from getting the help you need.” So many issues can be better handled through counseling, including depression, marriage and family problems, stress and anxiety, addictions, grief, anger, phobias, and eating disorders.<sup>8</sup>

### **Benefits of Counseling**

According to the *American Psychological Association*, psychological counseling is also important because it “offers people the opportunity to identify the factors that contribute to their depression and to deal effectively with the psychological, behavioral, interpersonal, and situational causes.”<sup>9</sup> They also discuss other benefits of counseling. For example, a skilled counselor can work with people who are suffering from depression to identify particular problems that are contributing to the depression, assist them in understanding specific parts of those problems they may be able to solve, identify options for the future, and help with setting realistic and attainable goals. Counselors can also help patients “identify negative or distorted thinking patterns that contribute to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that accompany depression.” Other benefits of ongoing counseling may include reducing the risk of recurring depression and developing coping techniques that may reduce the intensity of any future periods of depression.<sup>10</sup>

### **My Experience with Counseling**

I cannot stress enough the benefits I have received from counseling, particularly my most recent

counselor. Paula has helped me to view my life in a more positive light through an examination of my thoughts. She helped me see how one negative thought is often connected in a web to many others and in this way, as soon as I start down the path with one thought, there is a snowball effect with so many more. She also listened to me without judging and helped me see the positives about my life. Paula also gave me various “homework” assignments in the form of writing in a journal and keeping a log of the various thoughts and struggles I was dealing with.

After numerous sessions, I have more hope that depression will not have the last word and I have more coping strategies when depression does hit me over the head. For example, one of my assignments was to come up with a list of activities I find relaxing that alleviate stress and make me happy so that when I start to feel low I already have tools in my toolbox to keep me from sinking in the quicksand of depression. For me, this list includes walking, bubble baths, baking brownies, reading, writing in my journal, watching a funny movie, and listening to music. I would encourage anyone battling depression to come up with their own list of activities they really enjoy so that when you begin to feel depressed, you don't even have to think about what you should do to feel better. This has been an effective coping strategy for me. In my experience, the longer I stay mired in depression, the longer it takes me to get out of it, but when I can catch it early and focus on something pleasant, fun, or enjoyable, then depression doesn't have the same amount of time to latch onto me.

One of the things I really liked about my counselor was the fact that we focused on the ways my thinking was affecting my behavior in the here and now, rather than trying to go back through my childhood to figure out what, or who, “caused” my depression. Though I did have one counselor who was very much focused on that approach, I did not find it as beneficial for me. But again, keep in mind that this was my particular experience. Some people who have experienced trauma of some kind in their childhoods may benefit from that approach. I just know that I had to try a few different counselors until I found one who was right for me, someone I felt comfortable with and trusted. I encourage you to do the same and please don't stop searching until you do.

## Chapter 4: Antidepressant Medication

*“Medication may treat some symptoms of depression, but can’t change underlying contributions to depression in your life. Antidepressants won’t solve your problems if you’re depressed because of a dead-end job, a pessimistic outlook, or an unhealthy relationship. That’s where therapy and other lifestyle changes come in.”<sup>11</sup>*

*“Medications can be very helpful for reducing the symptoms of depression in some people, particularly in cases of moderate to severe depression. Often a combination of psychotherapy and medications is the best course of treatment.”<sup>12</sup>*

When I was first diagnosed with depression at the age of 20, I was prescribed an antidepressant medication by a psychiatrist at my local hospital. This marked the beginning of my tumultuous love-hate relationship with antidepressants. Unfortunately, this particular medication was not a good fit for me and I experienced an increase in irritability, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. One night, I felt like my heart was going to jump out of my chest and I could barely breathe I was hyperventilating so badly. Knowing what I know now, I am fairly certain I was having a panic attack, possibly combined with side effects from the medication. Due to my emotional and physical symptoms while I was on this antidepressant, my parents insisted I stop taking this medication immediately. And while I firmly advocate starting and stopping any antidepressant medication under the care of your doctor, I can totally understand why my parents reacted like they did. They were watching their child who was supposed to be getting better actually getting worse and there was nothing they could do about it. Thankfully, my parents also insisted I receive counseling, rather than rely solely on medication.

Based on my experiences with depression over the past decade, I feel that antidepressant medications definitely have their uses in certain situations. For people who are severely depressed, medication may be needed to stabilize them before any other strategies or treatments can even be attempted. I know that there have been times in my life where medication was a necessary first step so that I would have the much-needed strength and mental clarity to pursue and gain benefit from counseling, positive thinking, keeping a journal, exercise, and several other strategies I discuss in further detail below.

However, since I have also experienced side effects on several different antidepressant medications, including irritability, fatigue, and extreme weight gain, I know that antidepressants are not a cure-all, nor are they the best solution for every person in every situation. Some people with depression definitely require medication while for others this might not be the best course of action at all. That is why developing strategies with your doctor and a counselor are so important. They may be able to suggest strategies for beating depression you have never thought of and they will also be able to recognize any possible harmful side-effects of antidepressant medications you are taking, whether or not you should be on a particular medication or not, how long you should be on it, etc.

### All Medications Are Not Created Equal

It is also important to stress that just because one antidepressant medication did not work for you that this does not mean they will all be ineffective. If you and your doctor determine that antidepressants are necessary for you, then be willing to insist on trying new medications until you find one that alleviates your symptoms if the first one doesn’t work. For example, after trying a couple of antidepressants without much success a few years ago, I began to do my own research. I realized most of the medications prescribed by my doctor were SSRIs – selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. Now, since I am not an expert in this area, I am going to include a definition from *The Mayo Clinic*:

*“SSRIs ease depression by affecting chemical messengers (neurotransmitters) used to*

*communicate between brain cells. Most antidepressants work by changing the levels of one or more of these naturally occurring brain chemicals. SSRIs block the reabsorption (reuptake) of the neurotransmitter serotonin (ser-oh-TOE-nin) in the brain. Changing the balance of serotonin seems to help brain cells send and receive chemical messages, which in turn boosts mood. SSRIs are called selective because they seem to primarily affect serotonin, not other neurotransmitters.”<sup>13</sup>*

And even though this type of antidepressant is one of the most commonly prescribed, I was not experiencing the success I had hoped for. So I began to research other types of antidepressants and I realized there was another group of medications I had not tried called serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs). Rather than solely focusing on serotonin like my other medications, this type also affects norepinephrine. And since both serotonin and norepinephrine are neurotransmitters that are involved in mood and deficits in either one may cause depression, it made sense to me to try a medication that would affect the levels of both. When I tried a medication from the SNRI family, I did experience positive changes in my mood, thoughts, and behavior (although I did experience a few negative side effects as well).

Please note that I include this example, not to encourage the use of SNRIs over any other type of antidepressant medication, but rather to highlight the fact that you may need to try more than one medication before finding the right fit for you. Just because one particular medication was beneficial for me, does not mean this type will work for you. I advocate research so you will be armed with necessary information to assist you in making informed decisions about your own health and well-being, but I do not advocate making these decisions on your own. Bring any information you find to your doctor and together work towards effective strategies for you.

### **How Do Antidepressants Work?**

We know that antidepressant medications are a common form of treatment for depression. But how do they work? According to the *National Institute of Mental Health*, “Antidepressants work to balance some of the natural chemicals in our brains. These chemicals are called neurotransmitters, and they affect our mood and emotional responses. Antidepressants work on neurotransmitters such as serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine.”<sup>14</sup> Put simply, antidepressants can be prescribed by your doctor to treat depression and they can alleviate many depression symptoms through improving your mood, sleeping patterns, appetite, and ability to concentrate.<sup>15</sup>

Even though some medications that I tried caused negative side effects, including one that made me gain more than 50 pounds (which ironically just made me more depressed), some medications did lead to relief from my depression symptoms and allowed me to feel more hope that my life could get better.

It is important to note, however, that even though antidepressants provide many people suffering from depression with positive benefits, antidepressant medication may also include side-effects which can impact people's quality of life and it may take several weeks for the patient to experience any benefits. It is therefore imperative to always start and stop any antidepressant medication under the guidance of your doctor, as well as develop additional coping strategies so you don't have to rely solely on medication for alleviation of depression.

### **Types of Antidepressants**

The following is a brief outline of the major types of antidepressants commonly prescribed today and their possible side-effects based on several online sources, including the *U.S. National Library of Medicine* and *National Institutes of Health*,<sup>16</sup> *The National Institute of Mental Health*,<sup>17</sup> and *The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality*.<sup>18</sup>

***Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)*** - Fluoxetine (Prozac), Citalopram (Celexa), Sertraline (Zoloft), Paroxetine (Paxil), and Escitalopram (Lexapro)

***Serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)*** - Venlafaxine (Effexor) and Duloxetine (Cymbalta)

***Norepinephrine dopamine reuptake inhibitor (NDRI)*** - Bupropion (Wellbutrin) – works on the neurotransmitter dopamine

Possible side-effects of many antidepressants may include one or more of the following, including trouble sleeping/insomnia, fatigue, feeling sick to your stomach, constipation, diarrhea, nausea, dry mouth, headaches, sexual problems (i.e. reduced sex drive), weight gain, dizziness, and agitation (feeling jittery).

### **A Few Things to Keep in Mind**

*The National Institute of Mental Health* stresses the importance of communicating with your doctor when taking antidepressants. Tell him or her if you are experiencing any side-effects and how severe they are. Be sure to disclose if you are taking any other medications, vitamins or herbal supplements as they might interact with your antidepressant medication and cause unwanted side-effects or complications. Also, be sure to continue taking any prescribed medication, even if you are feeling better, since it is best to stop taking antidepressants gradually rather than all at once. Don't stop taking any medication without talking to your doctor.<sup>19</sup>

According to *The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality*, “Antidepressants can increase the risk of suicide for people younger than 25.” They also stress the importance of talking with your doctor immediately, no matter what your age, if your depression is getting worse or you are having thoughts of hurting yourself.<sup>20</sup> Of course it goes without saying that all antidepressants must be taken according to the directions of your doctor and pharmacist. If you have any questions about the correct dosage, how long you need to take the medication, the time of day you should take the medication, possible side-effects and their duration, or how to gradually decrease the dosage while going off a particular medication, please talk to your doctor. This is extremely important.

### **Effective for Some People, But Not a Miracle Cure**

It is also important to stress I am not pushing pills as a solution to depression, nor am I discounting their potential benefits. Though I do not believe antidepressant medication is a cure-all for depression, I know they have been effective in alleviating my depression symptoms when monitored by my doctor and when used in conjunction with additional strategies. To truly beat depression, you must be willing to do “the work” of healing the scars in your emotions, body, mind, and spirit. This takes time, medical/psychological care, a strong support system, and many other techniques I have added to my toolbox over the years.

To make a very long story short, in my experience medication can be extremely beneficial (though rarely when used as the sole strategy), but there are possible negative side effects ranging from irritating to potentially dangerous. Antidepressant medication may not be right for everyone or in all situations. It is because of this I stress that anyone experiencing depression and considering going on antidepressants only do so while working closely with a doctor you trust and who listens to you and your concerns. If your doctor discounts what you are feeling, or simply prescribes a generic antidepressant without actually listening to all your symptoms and without working with you to develop additional, non-pharmaceutical approaches to alleviating depression, then you might want to consider trying to find another health care provider who is more knowledgeable about depression and its treatments. Since I have attempted several different medications over the years and have realized antidepressant medications by themselves have not been able to prevent depression from recurring, I have also utilized several additional strategies that carry more long-term benefits for me.

## Chapter 5: Support System

*“Depression can make you feel alone — and make you want to be alone. But isolating yourself can actually worsen your depression symptoms...Many of life's challenges — and that includes dealing with depression — are easier to face with the support and love of a strong network of friends and family.” - Diana Rodriguez<sup>21</sup>*

Surrounding yourself with positive, encouraging people is extremely important. I know I would not be where I am today without several people in my life who supported me even in my darkest times. The patience, love, support, and encouragement of a small, but invaluable group of people, particularly my mom and my brother, is one of the most important reasons I continued to persevere and why I am even in a place in my life where I am able to write this book. Because of this support, even when things were very, very dark (and I felt abandoned by God), I knew I was not alone. The hope provided by an encouraging support system that you can count on is so valuable. For this reason I cannot stress enough how important it is for everyone suffering from depression to seek out a support system. This could take the form of family members, close friends, relatives, or a local support group for people your age experiencing depression. Whatever it takes, please find at least one person you can count on.

### **What a Support System Is, and What It Is Not**

However, it is important to stress that the purpose of a support system is not to find a group of empathetic and compassionate people you can just dump all your problems on when you are having a bad day. This tendency to constantly go back to the same people to repeat your problems and dwell on your negativity is one of the quickest ways to 1) stay stuck in depression, and 2) alienate the people you love and strain relationships. Believe me when I say I speak from experience on this point. I know my mother has suffered extensively because of the depression I have experienced and my reliance on her to prop me up, listen to me, give me advice, etc. I know living with me has been extremely exhausting, frustrating, and painful. Causing the people I love pain has been one of my biggest regrets over the past decade and it is one of several reasons I am writing this book. I hope the strategies that have helped me might spare some other families pain like the suffering I have both experienced and caused.

The purpose of a support system is to provide encouragement and stability so you do not feel like you are battling depression alone, especially since social isolation is one of the trademark signs (and results) of depression, and unfortunately isolation can actually worsen depression. But the most effective support system are people who encourage you to take proactive steps to address the depression you are experiencing rather than just allow you to remain mired in it. And when you are unable to take those steps by yourself, a support system will assist you in finding and accessing the professional help you need.

### **Benefits of a Support System**

Besides, it just makes sense to surround yourself with positive and encouraging people when you are battling depression. In “Benefits of a Depression Support System,” Diana Rodriguez outlines numerous reasons that a support system is so important. She says that like many of life's major problems, it is easier to face depression with the support of people who love you and who give you hope that things can and will get better. When you are isolated, you are not accountable for your behavior. In other words, you can think negatively or engage in destructive behaviors and there is no one there to help you go in a different direction. But a support system can encourage you to get regular exercise, adhere to a consistent sleep and waking schedule, eat healthy foods, attend your counseling appointments, and take all medications as prescribed. Being surrounded by people who love and support you can also encourage you to keep going and not give up, even when you don't see the results you were hoping for right away. Finally, a depression support group can also help because you will

have the opportunity to learn coping strategies and listen to others who have experienced the same feelings, emotions, and struggles as you. Knowing there are other people experiencing what you have is extremely powerful because it shows you that you are not alone and it validates your own experiences. Talk to your doctor or therapist about finding a depression support group in your city.<sup>22</sup>

Surrounding yourself with a loving and encouraging support system is one of the most important ways to ensure hope stays in your life and to help you stay committed to recovery. No one should have to battle depression alone; you deserve to be loved and supported through your journey. Don't stop looking until you find someone (or hopefully a group of people) who are willing to be there for you.



## Chapter 6: Changing Negative Thoughts to Positive

*“I know for sure that what we dwell on is who we become.” - Oprah Winfrey<sup>23</sup>*

I have tried many things over the past year and a half to reprogram my mind and replace negative thoughts with more positive ones with the goal that this change in thinking would lead to a change in behavior and feelings. Some of the main strategies I have utilized include positive affirmations, Mind Movies, and consuming personal development books, articles, videos, interviews with experts, etc. When I practice these strategies consistently, I do see an improvement in my energy levels and mood and I am finally starting to see myself and my life in a whole new light.

These practices clearly illustrate the link between our thoughts and our emotions/energy. When we focus on the positive, in the end, we feel more positive (though I recognize this is a long journey, one that takes a lot of practice and hard work) and when we dwell on negative thoughts (i.e. I am fat, ugly, always depressed, nothing will ever get better, no one loves me, I suck at life, etc. etc.) then we feel lousy. It is a relatively simple concept in theory, but one that often takes a long time to master. Just like any other practice, it takes time to develop the consistent habit of choosing our thoughts, rather than letting them run wild in whichever direction they choose to go. Unfortunately, unless we control our minds rather than the other way around, our thoughts often automatically go down a dark and negative road. The following briefly examines four powerful techniques that have helped me.

### **Positive Affirmations**

*“After people have repeated a phrase a great number of times, they begin to realize it has meaning and may even be true.” H.G. Wells<sup>24</sup>*

Positive affirmations have been explained as “positive statements that describe a desired situation, and which are repeated many times, in order to impress the subconscious mind and trigger it into positive action.”<sup>25</sup> Speaking positive affirmations on a regular basis for the past several months have helped shift many of my thoughts from negative to positive, and that has been an important factor in loosening depression's grip. Plus, it helped me to regain a sense of control over my own life. Even when I couldn't control anything that was happening to me and around me, I still have the power to choose my thoughts.

### **My Personal Affirmations**

My positive affirmations have focused on many different areas of my life, including getting a new job, financial abundance, spirituality, health, love and relationships. I wrote all of my affirmations in the present tense and with an active voice in order to give them more power. This strategy helped me visualize each affirmation like it had already happened (rather than some future event that may or may not take place). I actually have posters with positive affirmations all over my room. Some personal examples include: “I am healthy in mind, body, soul, and spirit.” “I am energetic, happy, and filled with passion and purpose.” “I am a beautiful, precious, and valuable child of God.” “I attract love, new opportunities, financial abundance, and my soul mate into my life.” “I have complete financial freedom. All my debts are paid off.”

I am sure you get the idea. For me, it was important to take a close look at each area of my life and create a list of positive affirmations that would help me to think positively, give me hope, and reprogram my mind away from constantly dwelling on my present, negative situations. Obviously, it does no good for me to allow negative thoughts to perpetually swirl in my mind. If I constantly think “I will never have enough money, I am unworthy and unlovable, I am a failure....” then that is all I am going to see show up in my life. It is a basic law of the universe – we get more of what we put our

attention on. We see this principle in action all the time whenever we start the day off with a negative attitude, convinced that nothing will go right and then, miracle of miracles, our prediction comes true. Our day really was horrible and nothing went right. Based on that principle, I figured I had nothing to lose by choosing to speak (and eventually think) more positively.

It is important to mention that positive affirmations are only one piece of the puzzle and they are not a quick fix designed to make your life free of trouble. There have been days when I spoke all of my positive affirmations out loud, but then had a horrible day filled with sadness, frustration and disappointment. In hindsight, I know that my worst days were days when I allowed my negative thoughts to swarm through my mind unchecked. A few moments speaking positive affirmations will not outweigh an entire day of thinking negatively. Despite this struggle, I know positive affirmations can be beneficial. It is a practical and visual tool that can assist in reprogramming negative thought patterns. Instead of only seeing what's going wrong in your life, positive affirmations can help you see other possibilities and hope for the future.

### **How to Create Positive Affirmations<sup>26</sup>**

It is important to create affirmations using positive language. For example, “I am healthy and at my ideal weight” is much more effective in helping you retain a positive focus and mindset than “I am not fat or ugly.” It's not so much the words you speak as the focus you have. Focus on what you want, rather than what you don't want to have, do, or be. Also, try to become aware of your thought patterns. It is easy to speak positive affirmations when you wake up, but then spend the rest of the day dwelling on negative thoughts. And believe me, whatever thoughts you are dwelling on and focusing on will trump whatever affirmations you are speaking a few times a day.

Remember to visualize what you are saying and focus on the positive feelings and emotions that come up when you are speaking these positive affirmations every day. Consistency is really important in creating a new habit and reprogramming those negative thought patterns. But don't be discouraged if it takes a while for positive affirmations to really seep into your subconscious. Change depends on numerous factors including the amount of time you spend on positive affirmations, the faith you have in what you are saying, the positive feelings you focus on while you are affirming, and the size of your goal.

### **Why Don't Positive Affirmations Always Work?**

But you might be thinking, “Do positive affirmations and positive thoughts really work? Can thinking positive thoughts actually change my reality? I've tried this approach and nothing in my life has ever changed. Why?” This was one of my earliest challenges with positive affirmations. It seemed like I was saying positive things all the time and even had dozens of affirmations posted all over my room, but I still felt negative thoughts and beliefs constantly encroaching on me. This was frustrating to say the least. But recently I read something interesting from Dr. Isaac Eliaz, an integrative physician, holistic healer, and meditation practitioner that helped me understand why positive affirmations don't always work:

*“More often than not, the thought is generated in a contrived way, and is not genuine. We may tell ourselves that 'we are healthy and happy,' but deep down, we might not really believe it. Often, our positive thoughts are just a few thin layers covering a multitude of suppressed negative beliefs... positive affirmations do work, but only to the degree that they are truly genuine— that you generate them and sustain your belief in them from the deepest core of your being possible.”<sup>27</sup>*

In other words, speaking positive affirmations when we don't really believe them, when our true beliefs about ourselves are actually quite different, is like spraying air freshener in a room where your dog that was just sprayed by a skunk is sitting. For a brief moment, you will smell something pleasant, but the overwhelming smell of skunk is not really gone, just covered up for a few seconds. Instead of “covering up” our deepest fears, insecurities, and negative thoughts with positive affirmations that

never really penetrate to the beliefs in our subconscious mind, it would be much better to root out the negative thought patterns first. So if you have not seen any noticeable change in your attitude, feelings, and daily reality, despite speaking positive affirmations every morning, noon, and night, then perhaps the real blame lays not in the ineffectiveness of positive affirmations, but the fact that right now, your negative beliefs are actually drowning out the positive “Band-Aid” you are trying to apply. In order to achieve the benefits of positive affirmations, we must be willing to delve into the deep recesses of our mind and experiences and do the work necessary to heal those hurts, fears, and negative beliefs about ourselves. Then, in the words of Eliaz, “when the openness is there, love and compassion flow effortlessly as a natural expression of our true nature, and anything can happen.”<sup>28</sup>

### **One More Tip**

One more bit of advice based on my personal experiences. As you speak your positive affirmations, try to incorporate positive emotions. For example, if you say “I am wealthy and generous with my money” then take a moment to experience what it would feel like to have a lot of money. What would you do with it? What things would you be able to enjoy? Who would you be able to help? Emotions are extremely powerful so please don't discount them.

To some people, positive affirmations might seem “too easy.” But I know that when used in conjunction with other strategies, positive affirmations can be an important piece of the healing puzzle. As long as you don't rely on them as the only piece, then positive affirmations can yield benefits in terms of helping to reprogram your mind.

### **Mind Movies**

*“He who cannot change the very fabric of his thought will never be able to change reality, and will never, therefore, make any progress.” - Anwar Sadat<sup>29</sup>*

The concept of a “vision board” is not new. Many practitioners of the law of attraction and visualization recommend creating something tangible you can look at every day that represents your goals, dreams, and passions – everything you desire to attract into your life. The philosophy behind this strategy makes sense. If you are focused on negative thoughts (i.e. nothing will ever get better), then that is where you are going to stay mentally and you will feel lousy. On the other hand, if you have a huge poster board in your room or office filled with pictures of things that make you happy and hopeful, things that remind you of the life you desire, then it is more likely you will attract those positive things into your life when you put your focus and attention towards them. Now, there are a lot of resources out there for people interested in the law of attraction, and I am not going to go into detail here. The important thing to understand about visualization is the principle that we attract what we put our sustained attention and thoughts toward.

### **We Get What We Focus On**

This principle can be illustrated in a simple example, one that I am sure you have heard before (it is a common example used by people teaching on the power of our thoughts). Imagine you wake up in the morning and the first thing that comes to mind is the thought, “Oh crap, today is going to be awful. I have to sit through that boring meeting, give a presentation, rush around after work to get a whole bunch of errands done, and Emma is going to need help with her homework. And of course, I have to make dinner and clean the house because God forbid Eric actually help me with any chores....” The list of ways your day is going to be horrible just keeps reverberating through your mind; that is all you focus on. And what happens? How does your day unfold? You spill coffee right before you have to walk out the door, your kids absolutely refuse to get up on time, you get stuck in traffic, your meeting goes 45 minutes longer than you had expected (and hoped), you forgot an important part of your presentation and your boss chastised you in front of everyone, you didn't have a minute to yourself all

night because of all the chores you had to do, and to top it all off, you got into a huge argument with your husband. As you lay in bed at the end of it all, you think to yourself, “See, I knew today was going to be horrible!”

But what about the days when you wake up and choose to focus on the good things? You might still have all those things to take care of, but as you go about your day, you are grateful for your beautiful children and loving husband, you are thankful you have a job to go to when so many others don't, you enjoy every bite of the delicious meal you worked hard to make, and you take a moment to enjoy the gorgeous sunset that caps off a challenging, but also rewarding day. How do you feel at the end of a day like that?

I know that I have experienced both types of days and I have to admit to myself that the quality of my day is largely dependent on the thoughts I am dwelling on. And of course I don't mean that if you have a negative thought, then your whole day is going to go down the drain. What I am trying to highlight is the importance of the thoughts we continue to think. If you are feeling low emotionally, then perhaps you need to take a moment to really examine the mental loop that you have been allowing to play over and over again. I do not say this to blame you for bad days or for depression. But I know from personal experience the importance of taking responsibility for my own thoughts. Letting negative thoughts control your mind will only contribute to continued depression. If you need help curtailing these thoughts (because some of them are SO strong), then I recommend seeing a licensed counselor who can help you change some of your negative thoughts, as well as attempt some of the other strategies in this book, including hypnosis, EFT, and Mind Movies.

The purpose of this section is not to blame you for having negative thoughts, but instead, to give you a few strategies that can really help you shift focus in your mind from negative thoughts to ones that are much more positive. Keep in mind though, that all of these strategies that involve “reprogramming” negative thoughts require repetition and continued practice. It is not enough to say a positive affirmation a couple times, or make a mind movie and watch it once, and then expect your mind to completely shift to the positive. If you have experienced depression for a long time, it may take several months to really root out your negative thought patterns and reprogram your mind to think more positively.

### **Vision Board in Motion: Mind Movies<sup>30</sup>**

One of the most innovative and fun ways I discovered to help reprogram my dismal outlook on life, negative thought patterns, and inability to see a hopeful future has been through the creation and continued watching of Mind Movies.

Mind Movies combine the pictures of vision boards with positive affirmations and uplifting and upbeat music into a movie or slide show designed to raise your energy and vibration levels, help you visualize the future you desire, and get into a much more positive frame of mind. One of my most favorite aspects of Mind Movies is that they are something you create for yourself: you choose the affirmations, you choose the pictures, and you choose the music. So in the end, you have a movie that uniquely reflects your personality, hopes, dreams, and areas that you really want to change in your life. In this way, the process of creating your Mind Movies actually helps you get clear and specific on what you want in your life. For example, I created six slide shows several months ago that covered health, wealth and money, spirituality and harmony, friends and family, love and marriage, and career and travel. I watch them regularly and I am at the point in my life where I actually believe that everything I see on the screen is possible for me and will come into my life. This is a huge change from when I first started watching them. I would read the affirmations and see the pictures and think to myself that those things would be nice to have in my life, but I really didn't think it was possible. Now, after watching my Mind Movies many times (repetition is key) I believe I deserve every good thing that flies across the screen. Talk about reprogramming!

## **The People Behind Mind Movies<sup>31</sup>**

Another thing I really like about Mind Movies is that the people who started the company and design and distribute the software have all experienced amazing changes in their lives in large part due to repeated visualization using Mind Movies. Before launching MindMovies.com in 2006, Ryan Higgins had spent years working in jobs that never really made him come alive – real estate, business consulting, retail, and a factory job packing boxes. He knew he wanted to run his own business, but he felt stuck in jobs he hated. He knew he needed a change.

Higgins had a vision board but noticed it wasn't really making his dreams come alive for him. But he knew the importance of emotions to the visualization and manifestation process. At this point Higgins had the idea to make a movie detailing exactly what he wanted his life to look like, after he saw a slide show video on YouTube. The rest is history. He created a three-minute video filled with pictures, positive affirmations, and motivational music outlining the life of his dreams. Soon after, Higgins teamed up with his friends Glen and Natalie Ledwell and the three worked around the clock before launching MindMovies.com. Higgins now lives the life he always yearned for – a job he loves and is passionate about, great friends, beautiful home, lots of sunshine and travel, and now he is engaged to a wonderful woman. He couldn't be happier and he credits the visualization and positive emotions derived through Mind Movies to helping him manifest and attract the life of his dreams.

Natalie Ledwell is another of MindMovie.com's founders and she and her husband have worked alongside Higgins to build the business to the place it is today. She is a successful businesswoman, filled with passion for her mission to inspire others to live their best life. She has created the educational program “7 Secrets to Happiness” and hosts an online video blog called “The Inspiration Show.” I love this show! She interviews guests who are passionate and successful in their fields and draws out the principles and strategies that helped them get there so that viewers are able to make positive changes in their own lives as well. In a recent email video (I receive regular updates from Ledwell and links to her show) Ledwell shared a deeply personal moment as she was looking out at Machu Picchu, a place she had yearned to go for years. The scene she showed us was one of the exact pictures on her vision board, illustrating once more the importance of having clear goals and dreams, as well as the power of continued visualization and focusing on what it is you desire in life, rather than continued focus on those things that you don't want.

You can learn more about Mind Movies at <http://www.mindmovies.com/>.

## ***Personal Development Books, Articles, and Videos***

*“It's not what we don't know that hurts us, people say. It's what we believe is true that isn't that does the damage.” - Melody Beattie<sup>32</sup>*

The more positive messages you watch, read, and listen to, the easier it is to reprogram your negative thought patterns and the harder it is to sink back into negativity. Over the past year, I have subscribed to content from several personal development experts who send me articles, inspirational videos, encouraging stories, newsletters, e-books, reports, workshops, and webinars. Learning who I like and who I don't has taken some time weeding through hours of content, but the journey has been worth it. I have learned so much, especially in the areas of the law of attraction, positive thinking, health, financial abundance, relationships, visualization, manifesting my dreams, discovering and igniting my passion, self-esteem, etc. Further, the content I have received from these experts has helped me stay upbeat and focused on positive thoughts during my journey from depression to healing. They have continued to remind me of what I know to be true – that I do have value and purpose and that I am on this planet for a reason.

Examples of authors and speakers I have come to respect include Marci Shimoff, Janet Attwood, Bob Proctor, Bob Doyle, Lisa Nichols, Natalie Ledwell, and Wayne Dyer, among many others. With the book “The Passion Test” by Janet Bray Attwood and Chris Attwood, I learned how to identify my

passions and the necessary steps I needed to take to live my passions. From Bob Proctor, I learned so much about the law of attraction and how to attract the life I desire. Natalie Ledwell's "The Inspiration Show" has really encouraged me to live a more passionate life. Videos and articles by Wayne Dyer have also taught me about the important shift from living a life based on ambition and fear to a much more fulfilling and purpose-filled life based on love and connection to Divine Source.

### **Exposing the Lies**

One teaching video I remember with extreme clarity was called "Exposing the Lies." In this video, Lisa Nichols talked about a neat strategy that helped her go from being bombarded by negative thoughts and lies to replacing them with positive truths. Even though she is a well-known and respected author and speaker, Nichols is like so many of us. She has struggled with the internal, negative lies that attempt to crush us. But, and this is a big one, she realized these voices only become truth when she agrees with the ongoing chatter. In order to help herself and others expose and combat these lies, Nichols devised a strategy focused on four main categories of our lives: Health and Wellness; Wealth and Business; Love, Relationships, and Family; and Spirituality and Faith. She suggests the following steps for rooting out the lies in every area of our life and replacing them with truth:

- 1) Looking at one category at a time, write down each lie you hear inside your head. Skip four lines and write the next lie. 2) Keep writing until nothing else comes to your mind. Let your mind go and just keep writing. Don't censor yourself or try to argue with the lies right now. 3) Repeat this process for each of the four categories. Try to write in blue pen or pencil. 4) You will probably feel awful during this part of the process as all the negative thoughts and lies come to the surface of your consciousness. That's OK. You won't feel that way for long. 5) In red pen (or your favorite color), write what you know to be true after each negative thought. This might take a while but give it time. Write the truth, even if you don't believe what you are writing right away and even if you can barely speak the words out loud. 6) It is important to use two different colors of pen so you can clearly see at a glance which statements are lies and which ones are truths. The words you have written in red (or your favorite color) comprise your new programming. 7) For the first week, read the lies out loud followed by the truth. 8) After a week, cross out all the lies. This is a visual tactic that will assist with reprogramming your thoughts from negative lies to positive truths. 9) Read the truth statements every day for as many weeks as it takes to really believe them. Again, don't be alarmed if this takes time. You have probably had your old, negative programming for quite a while so don't be surprised if it takes a bit of time to reprogram your mind with positive, truthful statements.

I am no different from most people. It took me a while to start to actually believe the positive, truth statements. For example, one of my negative beliefs was "I am ugly and no one will ever love me." Based on my life experiences and programming, that is a deeply ingrained belief that I held for many years. It took quite a while, but eventually I started to believe my truth statement that "I am a beautiful, unique, divine creation. I am loved." Like I said, this is a tough process, but one with amazing, long-term benefits. The positive statements helped me reprogram my mind, but just as important, writing out the negative statements was beneficial. I was able to take swirling thoughts that seemed to constantly bombard me and put them on paper so I could actually look at them logically. The power of questioning long-held beliefs, rather than just accepting them at face value, should not be underestimated. In short, I completed this exercise (and ended up with quite a few pages of lies) and it really helped me. Over time, I found myself reading the lie and thinking "well, that's just not true" as the positive, truth statements slowly began to replace the old.

### **Music**

*"A song will outlive all sermons in the memory."* - Henry Giles<sup>33</sup>

Music is so powerful. We can remember dozens of lines set to music so much easier than we

could recall those same words simply spoken aloud. Certain songs have given me so much hope over the past couple of years; hope that I am not alone and that God has heard my prayers and seen my suffering. *You are Loved (Don't Give Up)* by Josh Groban and *You Know Better Than I* from DreamWork's *Joseph King of Dreams* soundtrack are two songs that have really spoken to me and uplifted my spirit while battling depression. (You can hear the songs in their entirety on YouTube).

The first has a particularly special meaning for me because it crossed my path when I was at the lowest I have ever been. I was lying in bed one night, completely wanting my life to be over. I was so sad and hopeless that I just didn't want to wake up ever again. I felt like God had abandoned me and couldn't care less about my suffering. I had spent so many days that week crying I just couldn't see an end to my pain. Just at that moment, when I felt like I couldn't go on even one more day, this song came on my MP3 player and I knew that God had heard me after all. It was like God was speaking the words of this song directly to me. I knew I was not alone.

### **You are Loved (Don't Give Up)**

Some of the key phrases from this Josh Groban classic include: "Don't give up. It's just the weight of the world. When your heart's heavy. I will lift it for you. Don't give up....Don't give up. Because you are loved. You are loved."<sup>34</sup>

I have listened to this song many times over the past several months, and each time, I feel encouraged and just a little bit lighter. The second song actually came into my life much more recently. I was feeling a bit low one night and I decided I wanted to watch some sort of uplifting movie. So I grabbed *Joseph King of Dreams*. And yes, I know that I am an adult and many might consider this to be a children's movie, but I don't care. The movie has a great message and the highlight for me was this song, sung by Joseph to God after he had spent time in prison for a crime he did not commit and felt like God had completely abandoned him. When I heard these words, I felt a weight lift off my chest. I had always thought I needed to know the answers and I would get so frustrated because I couldn't figure out why I was battling depression. But hearing this song helped me realize that I don't need to know all the answers because the One who does have the answers is a lot bigger than me and holds me in His hands.

### **You Know Better Than I**

This song from DreamWork's *Joseph: King of Dreams* contains so many uplifting words that highlight what happens when I give up my own way and begin to trust God. One of the sections that helped me the most goes like this:

*"If this has been a test I cannot see the reason. But maybe knowing I don't know is part of getting through. I try to do what's best and faith has made it easy to see the best thing I can do is put my trust in you. For you know better than I. You know the way. I've let go the need to know why. For you know better than I."*<sup>35</sup>

When I get overwhelmed, sad, or frustrated, the words to these songs often come to mind and I am encouraged. But don't take my word for it. Try to think of a few songs that when you listen to them, they put a smile on your face. Then just start playing those songs over and over again, as long as it takes to get the words and message deep inside your subconscious. Let the positive words in the songs create positive thoughts and feelings within you. This strategy can help anyone maintain a positive outlook, but especially for people experiencing depression. If you are depressed, it doesn't make any sense to listen to music that will make you more depressed. You know the songs I mean, the ones that focus on sadness, loss, anger, break-ups, etc. Just like reading an encouraging story of someone overcoming a huge obstacle or creating a Mind Movie that helps you reprogram negative thought patterns, positive and upbeat music can be quite beneficial in changing your mindset, focus, beliefs, attitude, and feelings. Plus, this is a strategy that is quite affordable. Just go through the music you

already own, borrow from friends, surf YouTube, etc. Create a list of songs that encourage you and begin to listen to them. This is not a stand-alone strategy, but it is one more tool in your toolbox that is easy to use and can create great benefits of positive energy, especially when used in conjunction with many other strategies.



## Chapter 7: Writing in a Journal

*“Journal writing is a voyage to the interior”* - Christina Baldwin<sup>36</sup>

Getting my thoughts, feelings, and prayers on paper has been quite therapeutic. It has helped clear my mind and see the flaws in my thinking, as well as helped me discover important truths and solutions to some of my problems (sometimes it's all in how you are looking at a problem). It's important to know that it's ok to take time for yourself to do this.

Over the years, I have filled numerous journals with my experiences, reflections, hope, anger, sadness, and dreams. It is interesting to look back today at what I wrote years ago. I am able to see how I got through some really horrible times, as well as remind myself of some pretty extraordinary experiences. Seeing my life on paper has helped me realize that nothing is permanent, especially the debilitating sadness that sometimes seems to overwhelm me. As much as the hard times have hurt, I also know that I have had some pretty great times, too. For example, I have almost a dozen journals filled with my experiences in several countries while I completed internships with various human rights organizations in Ghana, India, Israel, Palestine, and Washington, DC. Following my dreams and passions all over the world has been one of the best things for alleviating my depression and giving me hope.

I also find the act of writing itself to be quite beneficial. When I was at my lowest, my thoughts were very dark and swirling around in my brain. I was overwhelmed and couldn't even think rationally or listen to anything hopeful that people around me were trying to tell me. Many times when I wrote down my dark thoughts and feelings, even the most hopeless and filled with despair, I felt a bit better. Don't misunderstand me, writing down my thoughts and feelings in a journal is not a miracle cure. It's not like I start writing and immediately start to feel better. My life is not a movie where everyone lives happily ever after. But writing in a journal often makes my mind feel clearer and the weight on my chest a little bit lighter. Sometimes it's just enough to get me to the point where I can think more clearly with my thoughts more structured instead of feeling like there is an avalanche about to crush me to pieces. Since keeping a journal allows me to put my anxiety, fears, and sadness on paper, they are not as overpowering in my mind and I am able to listen to other people who are trying to help me. I am able to look at my problems from a position of distance – for a few moments they are separate from me rather than inside of me.

### Journal Writing as a Form of Therapy

Some people might think keeping a journal is a waste of time or that there are no tangible benefits from this practice. This reluctance and doubt may be caused by a misunderstanding of what journal writing actually involves, as well as its specific benefits.

In “The Healing Power of Journal Writing,” *Creative Wellness* founder Lynda Monk explains some of the studies that laid the foundation for journal writing to be recognized for its ability to create positive differences in people's lives. Various studies have shown that some of the benefits of journal writing include relief from stress, healing from stressful experiences, and assistance in dealing with traumas.<sup>37</sup>

But how can journal writing be a form of therapy? What does this form of journal writing entail? One of the best definitions I have found comes from psychotherapist Kathleen Adams:

*“Journal Therapy is the act of writing down thoughts and feelings to sort through problems and come to deeper understandings of oneself or the issues in one’s life. Unlike traditional diary writing, where daily events and happenings are recorded from an exterior point of view, journal therapy focuses on the writer’s internal experiences, reactions, and perceptions. Through this act of literally reading his or her own mind, the writer is able to perceive experiences more clearly and thus feels a relief of*

*tension. This has been shown to have mental and physical health benefits.*"<sup>38</sup>

Adams has also taught journal workshops where she provides participants with strategies and knowledge on how to match a particular issue in their lives with a specific writing technique. Some of the many issues where journal writing may be effective include coping with grief, loss, or a life-threatening illness; recovering from trauma, addictions or eating disorders; rebuilding relationships; improving communication skills; clarifying your goals; and building self-esteem.<sup>39</sup>

### **Tips for Journal Writing**

*The Center for Journal Therapy* provides the following suggestions for people new to journal writing.<sup>40</sup> One of the most important things to remember is "just start writing and keep going." If it helps, set a timer for five minutes. Then put pen to paper (or fingers to your keyboard) and just don't stop writing until the timer goes off. It's ok if what you have written doesn't make sense or if your grammar and spelling is atrocious. All that matters is getting into the habit of letting your thoughts flow to paper unhindered. You can read through and think about what you have written after you are finished, but if you attempt to stop every few seconds to scrutinize what you have written or attempt to edit or re-write something, this process of journal writing will not be nearly as effective as it would be if you just let the words flow. Don't over think things. Just write about whatever is going on in your life, whatever you are feeling or thinking about. The content is not as important as just getting started. It is also important to write in a quiet, peaceful environment away from distractions. From time to time, re-read your entries. You will often be pleasantly surprised at how far you have come and how much you have learned. Finally, don't forget the positive! While some days it might seem that negative feelings and experiences are all you can think about, make the effort to regularly pick something positive to write about. Write about a particular moment, experience, holiday, or person that you associate with beauty, joy, peace, and hope. This will add balance to your experiences and hopefully add a new perspective. Try to be as descriptive as you can when writing about these beautiful moments, especially about how you feel.

To see more journaling tips, please check out "Journal Writing: A Short Course," *The Center for Journal Therapy*, <http://journaltherapy.com/journaltherapy/journal-cafe/journal-course>.

Since continued journal writing may alleviate stress, anxiety, hopelessness, and feelings of being overwhelmed and depressed by your problems, I recommend this strategy, especially in conjunction with counseling. It is a completely free strategy that you can do on your own during your own time. Trained therapists and psychologists will often be able to incorporate journal writing into your sessions and then they will be able to assist you in making sense of what you have written. Since journal writing is free and easy to do, what do you have to lose?

## Chapter 8: Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) and Hypnosis

All of the above are great strategies, but what do you do if you feel like nothing seems to change, no matter how many positive things you say, think, read, watch, or listen to? We often try so hard to replace negative thought patterns but then there is no accompanying long-term change in our thoughts or behaviors. The answer to this problem is the deeply held beliefs about ourselves and the world lodged in our subconscious mind, thoughts and programming that were formed when we were too young to know any better (usually from birth to age seven).

Even though we are now adults, those experiences and thoughts from our childhood have never gone away. When we attempt to replace these negative, limiting beliefs we are met with resistance because there is a “gatekeeper” standing between our conscious and subconscious mind, blocking our attempts at new programming. When we begin to speak positively about ourselves (i.e. “I am a wonderful person deserving of love, respect, abundance, and fabulous opportunities”), the gatekeeper takes one look at those words and goes “No way, that does not match up with what I learned as a child, that doesn't agree with what's behind this door to my subconscious. Those ideas are not getting past me.” Then sure enough, a few minutes after you finish all your hard work of speaking affirmations or watching your Mind Movies, you are back to a dark place, with negative thoughts swirling. Again. To combat this little guy whose mission in life is to protect me from danger, but who, in actuality, is sabotaging all my attempts at feeling better, I have discovered two techniques that have done wonders for me in clearing out negative energy and thoughts at a subconscious level.

### ***Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT)***

*“The magnificent you who is capable of creating the life of your dreams is already there inside you - hidden under limiting beliefs - misunderstandings about who you really are - and we can tap those away, because they don't really belong to you. You would then have the freedom to succeed.” - Brad Yates<sup>41</sup>*

Before I start singing the praises of a strategy called Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT), often referred to as “tapping,” let me start by explaining what this technique actually is and how it works. According to [whatiseft.org](http://whatiseft.org), “EFT tapping is a type of psychological acupressure that involves the stimulation of traditional Chinese acupuncture points. However, instead of using needles, it uses a technique of gentle tapping on these points.” EFT also involves “verbalizing the problem with a phrase of affirmation. Together the verbalization and tapping work to help balance your body’s energy system,” which in turn helps alleviate both physical and psychological pain.<sup>42</sup> This site also includes a list of physical and emotional problems that can be helped through EFT, including depression, fears and phobias, grief, relationships, addiction, fatigue, pain, insomnia, and anxiety.

There are different variations of EFT. Some practitioners tap on more points of the body than others and some focus more on the negative thoughts trying to be cleared while others focus more on positive statements trying to be added. For me, I gently tap specific points on my head, face, hands, chest, and under my arm while speaking particular phrases. For example, if I was tapping on anxiety, I would start by tapping a point on my hand while saying, “Even though I am feeling extremely anxious (about a particular problem), I deeply and completely love, forgive, and accept myself.” After a few rounds of this, I then begin tapping while saying phrases designed to first raise negative thoughts and beliefs to the surface, such as “I am really anxious about this issue, I don't know what I am going to do about this, I feel sick I am so anxious.” As I move through my tapping session I will then do several rounds of positive phrases to replace the negativity I have just raised to the surface and released. To get a better idea of what EFT entails, what it looks like, and how it works, I recommend going to YouTube, search “how to do EFT tapping,” and watch a few videos. After you have a clear picture of EFT, then

come on back and keep reading.

Even though there are many excellent EFT practitioners online, I have completed many of Brad Yates's videos (on YouTube) over the past year and have found his videos to be the most beneficial for me. His videos cover numerous topics and they are very easy to follow. However, it is up to each person to try out different practitioners until they find the ones that work best for them and who they best connect with. As Brad Yates constantly stresses, it is also extremely important that you take full responsibility for your tapping and any issues that might come up.

### **Issues I Have Tackled With EFT**

To give you an idea of some of the topics Brad Yates covers, I have compiled a list of some of the (many) issues I have worked on with his videos, including surrender (letting go and letting God), financial abundance, self-doubt, gratitude, self-worth, expecting positive things in my life, loving myself, and clearing fear, worry, and anger.

I also regularly watch several EFT Power Point presentations on YouTube filled with positive affirmations, pictures, and great music that shows you how to tap along, covering topics such as attracting my ideal job, going for my dreams, increased financial abundance, and attracting my soul mate. I encourage you to take a few moments and search through YouTube and check out some videos from Brad Yates or Margaret Lynch. Or you can just search "EFT + the topic of your choice" and you are sure to find some great stuff. Find a quiet place away from distractions and judging eyes and give it a whirl just to see how you feel. For me, I know my energy shifts to a much higher, more positive level when I do EFT.

### **But Does EFT Really Work?**

For people who have never heard of EFT, this technique might sound really "out there" and I know you might be asking, "Can tapping through problems really work?" Some people think EFT is silly or simply not effective. But I would encourage you to keep an open mind. Besides, if you are suffering from severe depression, tapping is one of the safest, easiest, and most affordable methods of clearing negative energy and attaining balance and positivity in your energy system. Just give it a try and see how you feel. You be the judge of whether or not this technique works for you. If it doesn't, you are not out anything except a little bit of time. It is important to note, however, that you will probably get more benefits from EFT if you do it more than once. You might feel worse, temporarily, before you feel better, because tapping can bring up a lot of negative emotions. Just keep tapping until it clears. If you are feeling uncomfortable, it could definitely be a sign that negativity and energy blockages are being cleared. Also, you might yawn a lot, cry, or have a runny nose when you are tapping (those have been some of my most common "side effects"). Don't worry. From what I can tell based on comments from EFT discussion boards, these effects are simply signs of energy shifting. For me, the positive benefits of this technique have far outweighed any temporary discomfort.

### ***Hypnosis***

*"A hypnotic trance is not therapeutic in and of itself, but specific suggestions and images fed to clients in a trance can profoundly alter their behavior."* - Deirdre Barrett<sup>43</sup>

What is hypnosis? That is an important question, but first let me address what hypnosis is not. Hypnosis is not about giving up control of your mind to an outside force, recalling memories of events that never took place, or walking around a stage clucking like a chicken. According to the Canadian Hypnosis Centre, hypnosis is "*a state of relaxation that the average person reaches at least a couple of times a day, once just before falling asleep, and again just before waking. (Your brain wave pattern goes from Beta to Theta which is a highly suggestible state). With Hypnotherapy we guide you into that state, and give you the appropriate suggestions that we agreed on in advance. Once this is done, the*

*sub-conscious begins acting on these suggestions.*”<sup>44</sup>

The Canadian Hypnosis Centre also stresses the following important points: 1) Negative effects are not associated with hypnosis. 2) People do not do anything while hypnotized that is against their own morals or judgment. If you see someone acting ridiculous while hypnotized it is because it is in a setting where people have come to a show, often with the purpose of relaxing or letting loose. If a volunteer acts like a monkey while hypnotized, it is because they were willing to be silly for the show. 3) No one can be hypnotized against his or her will; you must be willing. 4) People who are hypnotized are not asleep, rather they are physically relaxed and in a “heightened state of focused awareness”

### **What Issues Can Be Helped Through Hypnosis?**

According to the Centre's website, many issues are known to be helped through hypnosis, including addictions, fears and phobias, improved health in mind and body, relaxation and self-confidence, stress, and cessation of habits such as biting nails, smoking, or over-eating.

### **How Does Hypnosis Work?**

There is another definition of hypnosis that might help you understand what hypnosis is and how it works. *“Hypnosis is a heightened state of awareness, a relaxed, focused state of concentration. It is a method by which we can access the resources of the subconscious mind and implement at the most effective level, the changes that we desire. Hypnosis is a naturally occurring state that bypasses the critical factor of the conscious mind and allows the establishment of selective, acceptable thinking. A person in hypnosis is fully awake, fully conscious and in control.”*<sup>45</sup>

Rather than repeating positive affirmations with little change, hypnosis allows those affirmations to bypass “the critical factor” or “the gatekeeper” we talked about earlier, the one responsible for keeping thoughts out of our subconscious that don't match the thoughts that are already deeply embedded. With hypnosis, positive suggestions, thoughts and beliefs are able to take hold in our subconscious mind much more easily and quickly than simply speaking positive words out loud. Hypnosis can reduce the time and energy needed to establish new, positive thought patterns and beliefs.

### **My Experience with Hypnosis**

I began hypnotherapy with a Certified Hypnotherapist in May 2011 and attended several sessions over the course of three or four months. Hypnosis was a fascinating experience for me because I had a lot of misconceptions about the process and the actual experience was quite different than what I expected. At first I was afraid I would lose control of my mind or body or that I would get trapped in a memory and be unable to get out. But hypnosis, for me, was actually an extremely relaxing experience. In each session, my hypnotherapist and I would spend the first half of our time together talking about a particular issue or problem that I was dealing with and wanted to overcome (i.e. depression, lack of clarity concerning my life's purpose, feeling hopeless and overwhelmed, lack of self-esteem, etc.) and she would outline the types of suggestions she was going to bring up during hypnosis. At that point, she dimmed the lights and I sank back into a comfy recliner and closed my eyes. As she began to speak softly and calmly, I began to relax more and more deeply.

I know I had breakthroughs during those sessions where I experienced peace and the ability to believe much more of the positives that she was saying to me. It allowed me to alter some of my negative and limiting beliefs. I found hypnosis was particularly effective because I combined hypnotherapy with life coaching, a topic I discuss in further detail in Chapter 12.

## Chapter 9: Hormonal Balance

*“Women's health experts...argue there is an urgent need for carefully designed, gender-specific research to better understand the relationship of female sex hormones to mood states and disorders.”<sup>46</sup>*

I know a lot of people often laugh when women mention mood swings associated with their periods. For some reason, even though certain medical practitioners seemed to grasp the severity of my depression, it seemed like I wasn't getting through to them when I explained how badly I felt in the days before my period. From the time I was 12-years-old until I was 29, I experienced horrible pain almost every month. It wasn't just the intense pain and fatigue that got me down, however, but the fact my mood got so low I felt like I was a different person. I can vividly remember times in the days leading up to my period that I would be screaming at my brother, feeling unable to stop or even control what I was saying, but also feeling like I was watching someone else say and do such horrible things.

Even though I take full responsibility for the things I have said and done in my life, even during the times when my hormones were completely out of whack, I felt the need to include this chapter because in my experience, my hormones and depression have been inextricably linked. For years, the days leading up to my periods have been some of the darkest days of my life. Many symptoms of hormonal imbalance are nearly identical to that of depression so it would benefit women to look at the possibility that some (or even all) of their symptoms of depression are rooted in a hormonal imbalance. Please check with your doctor right away and see about getting some tests done if you suspect your hormones could be influencing your depression.

### **Hormonal Imbalance and Depression: Estrogen and Progesterone**

According to Aleks Strande, N.D., Ph. D, a naturopath and microbiologist at *Simply Healing Clinic*, the mood swings and depression associated with premenstrual syndrome (PMS) is most strongly connected to estrogen and progesterone, two powerful hormones that when out of balance can cause many health problems. Strande cites the stress of modern life, irregular and unhealthy eating habits, frequent use of pharmaceutical drugs, and toxins in our environment as the major reasons many women are experiencing a drastic shift in the balance between these two hormones to the point where estrogen is produced in higher quantities than progesterone.<sup>47</sup>

It is very interesting to note that Strande also states, “When estrogen is out of balance with progesterone, a condition called estrogen dominance occurs. This imbalance can cause depression, mood swings, anxiety, irritability, anger, insomnia, fatigue, weight gain, bloating, mental foginess, low libido and sore breasts.” In other words, this excess estrogen causes the PMS symptoms so many women are extremely familiar with, but high estrogen levels can also cause depression and mood swings.<sup>48</sup> This in turn could explain why some women who take antidepressants do not experience the changes they are hoping for because one of the major causes of their depression and mood swings, a hormonal imbalance, has not been considered or addressed. This is just something to think about.

### **Hormonal Imbalance and Depression: Signs and Symptoms**

I recently attended a lecture titled “Happy Hormones” at my local Wellness Centre where I received some important information from Naturopathic Doctor Kelly Upcott on the link between hormones and depression and what we can do about it.<sup>49</sup>

She said depression and trouble coping, along with difficulty sleeping and fatigue, are some of the major signs that your hormones might be out of balance. Too much, or too little estrogen can impact many different parts of the body. Upcott said one of the obvious warning signs of high estrogen was significant weight around the midsection and that other signs of high estrogen include bloating, weight gain, tender breasts, uterine fibroids, low libido, and irregular periods. If you are experiencing any of

these symptoms, please see your doctor. Also, it is a good idea to talk to your doctor or naturopath about the many different foods and supplements you can introduce into your diet to begin balancing excess estrogen, along with the blood or saliva tests you can take to determine exactly what is going on with your hormone levels.

### **Hormones and Stress**

Upcott also discussed the effects of continued stress on our adrenal glands. When our bodies are under stress, it produces cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline. As most people know, prolonged stress is not good for the body. Stress can impact your mind, body, emotions, and behavior and lead to fatigue, irritability, negativity, muddled thinking, and depression! After you have been under continuous severe stress for a long time, your adrenal glands are depleted from producing too much cortisol, a state that leads to mental and physical burnout.

Even though stress is an inevitable part of life, you can give your adrenal function a boost with vitamins and herbs (talk to a naturopath), adjusting your lifestyle, and modifying your diet. Upcott recommends getting enough sleep (at least eight hours), reduce sugar and wheat/white flour from your diet (since sugar depletes adrenal gland functions), eliminate caffeine, exercise on a regular basis, breathe deeply, and choose a healthy stress outlet. Some of my suggestions for that last point include keeping a journal, spending time with a friend, or doing something creative. Anything you enjoy that relaxes you is fine, just make your own list and begin setting aside time for yourself to do things that make you happy.

One of the most important points that Upcott made was that 2/3 of women who report depression, difficulty coping and irritability have at least one hormone out of range/balance. In light of this, it is imperative that any woman experiencing depression also get her hormones checked. Why suffer needlessly?

### **The Bottom Line**

The bottom line is that in some people, many symptoms of depression might be caused by hormonal imbalance, rather than, or in addition to a brain chemical imbalance or other psychological, social, and biological factors. Through addressing hormonal imbalances with various food changes and supplements, you might be able to experience changes in your mood. But again, I am not a doctor or naturopath so if you think your hormones are out of balance, please see a professional. Speak to your doctor and a naturopath or other holistic practitioner to find out exactly what is going on in order to address and correct the underlying problems that are contributing to hormonal imbalance (i.e. either too much or too little estrogen) and ultimately any accompanying depression symptoms.

Finally, it is important to stress that this chapter is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of hormonal imbalances. But I felt it was important to discuss hormones due to my experiences with how my hormones have exacerbated depression symptoms in my life (and possibly vice versa). With everything I am learning, it is clear that when it comes to healing depression, we must look at what is going on in our physical bodies, and not just our mind, as the next chapter will discuss further.

## Chapter 10: Taking Care of My Body

There is quite a bit of research that exists on the mind-body connection. For example, when we continuously focus on negative thoughts we can create stress and anxiety that cause disease and physical pain in our bodies. The reverse is also true. Constant physical pain in our bodies can take a toll on our mental health and contribute to depression. Since there is a lot of existing research on this topic, I am just going to discuss two strategies I utilized over the past year that have contributed to improvements in my mental health. These strategies include nutritional changes under the direction of a naturopath and exercise.

### ***Nutrition & Natural Supplements***

*“You are what you eat.”*

What we eat is so important in determining our levels of physical health and energy. But did you ever stop to think about how nutrition impacts our mental health?

Dietitian and nutritionist Bonnie Beardsley states unequivocally that there is a connection between nutrition and depression, even though many people think of depression only in terms of emotional or biochemical causes. She says, “Nutrition, however, can play a key role, both in the onset, severity, and duration of depression, including daily mood swings.” She advises people to avoid refined carbohydrates, especially foods filled with sugar, since these foods often make you feel better right away, but the good feelings are only temporary. This means many of us soon go looking for more food that will improve our mood and energy level, leading to a vicious cycle of eating to feel better and then eating some more as soon as the good mood dissipates. Instead, Beardsley recommends eating foods that will provide you with a moderate, but lasting positive effect on brain chemistry, mood, and energy. Examples include complex carbohydrates like whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. She also stresses that deficiencies in certain vitamins, especially B vitamins, have been linked to depression. For example, people who are depressed often have low levels of B6, which contributes to the production of serotonin. Low levels of folic acid and B12 can also contribute to depression. Consequently, Beardsley recommends lots of leafy greens for folic acid and foods such as bananas, avocado, chicken, greens, and whole grains for B6. Finally, she says additional minerals that can contribute to the prevention of depression, irritability and mood swings include calcium, iron, magnesium, selenium, and zinc.<sup>50</sup>

### **The Link between Nutrition and Depression**

In “The Role of Nutrition in Mental Health: Depression,” researchers from the School of Kinesiology and Health Science at York University in Toronto examined numerous studies focusing on the “connection between dietary habits and risk of depression as well as nutritional interventions used to treat symptoms of depression.”<sup>51</sup> They searched the available peer-reviewed articles on this subject using online databases including Pubmed, Medline (Ovid), Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Additional sources included online government and non-government websites looking at the prevalence of depression and surveys that looked at depression symptoms. Please note that at the end of this literature review, the authors include a detailed list of all the scholarly studies they looked at so if you would like to know more, please check out this review for yourself.

After a close examination of the available data, the authors concluded that “the literature suggests a link between dietary habits and risk of depression. Studies have implicated a relatively low intake of fish, omega 3 fatty acids and fruits and vegetables as risk factors for depression. In addition, relatively high amounts of refined sugar and processed foods have shown to increase the risk of depression.” Micro nutrient deficiencies of folic acid, thiamine, and magnesium have also been linked to depression. Finally, even though the authors conclude that more clinical trials are needed, they also state that “proper nutrition may prove to be an affordable investment for people diagnosed with depression to



mitigate their symptoms and improve overall health.”<sup>52</sup>

This section is not intended to cover all aspects of nutrition and supplements or provide you with a detailed nutrition plan – that is up to you and your doctor or dietitian. Nutrition and natural supplements are in no way intended to be a substitution for medical and psychiatric help for depression. I simply want to show you there is considerable evidence for the impact of various foods on depression and to get you thinking about possibly making some changes in this area if you believe that your eating habits might be contributing to some of your depression symptoms. I have by no means perfected this area of my life and I still struggle with craving foods I know I shouldn't be eating. But I have also experienced significant positive changes in my life when I eat healthy foods. For example, when I limit or remove junk food and sugar from my diet, I can feel a difference in my mood and energy levels. I am not as lethargic or foggy in my thinking.

### ***Naturopathic Remedies***

*“To heal the whole person through individualized treatment – Health and diseases come from a complex interaction of physical, emotional, dietary, genetic, environmental and lifestyle factors. As such, each person is unique and complex, therefore deserves a treatment based on their individual needs.” - Dr. Jennifer R. Strong, Bsc, ND<sup>53</sup>*

After meeting with a naturopath last year, I began to truly understand the link between what I eat and depression. She recommended several food changes, and when I follow her advice I do feel improvements in my mood and energy levels, and how I feel overall. Though like I said earlier, I am not perfect in this area yet and some foods have been hard to give up even though I know I should. For people who are not familiar with what a naturopath does, I will briefly explain that here and then discuss a few of the recommendations she suggested and the corresponding changes I made.

Naturopaths take a holistic approach to health. According to Strande, rather than focusing solely on a disease, they look at the whole person, including their physical, emotional and mental aspects, how various systems of the body are functioning, and external influences. Naturopaths (and other holistic practitioners) will also utilize natural medicines such as herbs, amino acids, minerals, and vitamins in the process of encouraging each patient's “recovery and maintenance of well-being through support of (the) body's inherent healing ability.” Naturopathic doctors help patients understand the causes of their health problems and how to make positive changes in their lives, such as diet, so that the patient can take responsibility and assist in healing and recovery.<sup>54</sup>

In recent years, holistic approaches have become increasingly popular as more and more people are looking to get to the root causes of their health problems and then make changes that will positively impact their lives and health forever. This is a drastic shift from the traditional “Band-Aid” approach of just treating the symptoms with a constant stream of medication often pushed by the health care system. Working with a naturopath you will focus on preventing disease through positive lifestyle changes instead of waiting for illness to strike.

### **My Experiences with a Naturopath**

In June 2011, I went to see a naturopath for the first time. She recommended removing quite a few things from my diet (wheat, dairy, sugar, caffeine, alcohol, beef, pork, and eggs) and taking HTP, Vitamin B, Vitamin C, water with lemon, licorice tea, and flax (among several other suggestions). In the previous seven to eight months before my visit, the mood swings and physical pain I was experiencing every month with my menstrual cycle had been horrible. For at least one week every month I experienced headaches, fatigue, cramps, irritability, drastic and sudden mood swings, and uncontrollable crying. Emotionally and mentally I was in a very dark place. I felt hopeless, I couldn't make decisions or think rationally, I had trouble sleeping, and I felt like there was a heavy weight on my chest. This unbearable situation is what caused me to finally make an appointment with a

naturopath.

After my consultation I removed several foods recommended by the naturopath and I continued walking daily. I didn't remove all the foods she suggested at once because it was overwhelming and because for me changes are more permanent when I make them in stages. I also began a journal focusing on how I was feeling as I implemented these changes, particularly the removal of processed sugar from my diet. On just the third day of changes to my eating habits, along with daily lemon water and vitamins B and C, I was experiencing increased positivity. My stomach felt better (and flatter). Plus, I had so much more energy than I was used to. I helped a friend make a scrapbook (and actually had fun, a feeling I was not used to), cleaned my room, cleaned the basement, vacuumed the upstairs, mowed the lawn, and went for a long walk with my mom and brother where I was able to actually keep up with them for the first half of the walk (something I had not been able to do previously).

Obviously, changes in my diet were not a magic wand that automatically eliminated depression from my life. Situations and circumstances still cropped up that sent me in a downward spiral, a clear sign that nutritional changes are only one of many strategies to overcome depression. But the changes I implemented did make a difference in terms of my overall energy levels and mood. Even today, I can feel a difference when I am eating healthy and when I am eating more processed foods and refined sugars. There is a clear difference in my energy levels, mood, mental clarity, and the way my body feels.

So if you think you could benefit from changes to your diet and the introduction of natural supplements, please make an appointment with a holistic practitioner such as a naturopathic doctor to help you get started. I am not a doctor, naturopath, or dietitian, so I am not recommending any particular supplement or diet changes, but the research does seem to indicate that certain natural supplements and nutritional changes may assist people with mood and depression. In other words, nutrition is one more tool for your toolbox. Another tool is regular exercise.

### ***Exercise***

*“Research suggests that burning off 350 calories three times a week through sustained, sweat-inducing activity can reduce symptoms of depression about as effectively as antidepressants.” - Deborah Kotz<sup>55</sup>*

It's no secret that regular physical activity provides numerous benefits for your body, but many people don't fully recognize the positive effects that exercise can have on your brain. While I am no expert on brain chemistry or kinesiology, I know how exercise has helped me.

Before I continue, please let me stress when I say exercise I do not mean you should start working out at a gym three hours a day. All I mean by exercise is physical activity, preferably an activity you actually enjoy. I know from experience it is extremely difficult to continue with any sort of exercise plan if you do not enjoy what you are doing. It is recommended you do some sort of physical activity for 30 minutes or more three to five times a week to experience a reduction in depression symptoms (obviously this will be different for everyone and you may need to work your way up to this, but it is a goal to work towards).<sup>56</sup> If you can't handle 30 minutes at once, then try to do 10 minutes a few different times throughout the day. If you do activities you enjoy at an intensity and amount you can handle, you will be more likely to stick with an exercise plan over the long term, which will lead to more results.

Over the years, I have tried various forms of exercise – jogging, rollerblading, biking, walking, lifting weights, kickboxing classes, swimming, and beach volleyball. I have also had gym memberships a few times where I enjoyed using various weight machines, elliptical, stair stepper, etc. I prefer working out alone rather than in a group. I enjoy exercise where I can compete with myself and continue to excel, pushing myself to do better based on my own performance rather than anyone else. I have realized that there are some activities I really do not like (bike riding comes to mind) and others I really love, particularly walking, swimming, and lifting weights.

When I exercise I enter a different world, a world where all I need to focus on is completing the next kilometer or weight set. My everyday problems usually don't have a place. Exercise gives me the opportunity to get outside of myself and my problems, get the endorphins flowing, soak up some sunshine, and increase my self-confidence as I excel at new challenges. Exercise also helps me feel better about myself and my body. While exercise by itself is not a cure for my depression, I definitely feel a physical and mental difference when I exercise regularly as opposed to when I am not. Even when I didn't feel like moving or exerting any energy at all because I was so depressed, I often experienced an improvement in mood when I went for a walk or did any other simple form of physical activity.

### **Benefits of Exercise**

Even though the connection between depression and exercise is not completely understood by researchers, *The Mayo Clinic* has documented many positive physical, emotional, and mental benefits that can be experienced by people who exercise regularly. Exercise can prevent and improve physical health problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and arthritis; reduce anxiety; improve mood; reduce the risk of a relapse of depression or anxiety; help you relax and make you feel better; release endorphins in your brain – often called “feel-good” chemicals; help you gain confidence as you meet personal goals and challenges; take the focus away from negative thought patterns and worries that may contribute to depression or anxiety; and help you cope with depression in a healthy way.<sup>57</sup>

### **Develop a Plan<sup>58</sup>**

*The Mayo Clinic* also provides the tips in the following section for developing, and sticking to, an exercise program. For example, it is a good idea to speak with your doctor before starting to exercise in order to help design a program that is safe for you (i.e. types of exercise and intensity) and easy to stick with. Also, figure out what activities you most enjoy, and what times of the day you would prefer to do these activities. For me, I am not a “morning person.” So creating a workout program where I get up every day at 5:30 in the morning is probably not a plan I am going to stick with. Instead, I love going for walks in the late afternoon or early evening. It is just a personal preference, but it has helped me continue to be active, as well as increase my sense of control over my own life. It is my plan and it is up to me to follow through.

Setting reasonable goals for exercise is also important, as well as changing your mindset surrounding exercise. If you try to go from complete inactivity to training for a marathon, there is a high chance you will hurt yourself and/or give up early in your training regimen. Similarly, if you view exercise as a chore or something else to add to your “to do” list, then it will be harder to be consistent. Again, just find physical activities you enjoy doing and it will be much easier to continue an exercise program over the long term. It might also help if you keep in mind that exercise may be another tool for your toolbox to help you alleviate your depression symptoms. Try to prioritize physical activity much like you would prioritize your counseling sessions or other successful strategies. Fill your life with things that make you feel better about yourself and your circumstances, even if that means working up a sweat or experiencing some sore muscles. Most importantly, don't give up. Even if it takes a while to become consistent with your exercise plan, don't give up when you experience setbacks. Just because you miss a day or two, that's no reason to throw in the towel. Be kind to yourself and start over.

Please keep in mind that exercise alone will probably not be enough to alleviate your depression symptoms. While exercise has helped me immensely, I have also received counseling, tried various antidepressant medications, and utilized the rest of the strategies in this book. Exercise is one tool but it's not the whole tool box.

### **The Link between Exercise and Depression**

The link between physical activity and mental health is a topic that has been examined by

numerous researchers. The following are several important findings compiled by Paula Bude Bingham in a recent literature review of numerous scholarly studies. Please see “Physical Activity and Mental Health Literature Review” for a more in-depth examination of the studies she looked at and to check out her many references.<sup>59</sup>

This literature review outlines the findings from studies examining the health factors affected by exercise, how exercise impacts specific mental and physical conditions, and the importance of physical activity in mental health research. Despite the reluctance of certain health practitioners to support the claims of studies that suggest a positive link between physical activity and improved mental health, Bingham concludes:

*“The research evidence for physical activity’s beneficial effects upon people’s physical and mental health is convincing. Physical activity has been reported to help with a wide spectrum of issues ranging from self-esteem and sense of social inclusion to clinical disorders such as schizophrenia, depression, and anxiety. Overall, there seem to be four avenues for these effects: prevention of poor mental health; improvement in mental health; treatment of mental disorders; and improvement in the quality of life of persons with mental illnesses.”<sup>60</sup>*

Based on Bingham's extensive examination of numerous research studies, exercise can positively affect emotion and mood, self-esteem, sleep, sense of mastery over one's life and accomplishments, cognitive functioning and performance, and quality of life, including vitality, social functioning, mental health, pain, physical health, etc.

While I do recommend counseling for anyone experiencing depression, and some people may require antidepressant medications, exercise can be an effective strategy that is extremely cost-effective with minimal side effects. Further, physical activity can be continued throughout a person's life and it has the capacity to improve both physical and mental health. Again, I am not suggesting physical activity on its own is sufficient to alleviate anyone's depression symptoms, but I have found it to be extremely helpful. Besides, it is a strategy that is free, or at least quite affordable, so what do you have to lose?

## Chapter 11: Following My Passions

*“Only passions, great passions can elevate the soul to great things.” - Denis Diderot<sup>61</sup>*

You know that feeling you get when you are absolutely certain you are exactly where you are meant to be, doing exactly what you are meant to be doing? Or that feeling when you are doing something you are so passionate about that you seem to come alive? For me, that feeling comes into my life when I am fighting for women's rights around the world. For you, it might be taking care of your family, working at a job you love, traveling, listening to your friend's troubles, baking cookies, or studying a particular subject in school. The activity itself doesn't matter; what matters is the feeling you get when you are fully engaged doing what you love.

I have always been the type of person to enjoy arguing and discussing ideas, particularly when it comes to topics I really care about, like sexual violence and exploitation against women and children, poverty, peace building, and human rights violations all over the world. I love challenging people's old beliefs when it comes to women's equality and I enjoy a passionate debate. I also really love writing, research, and analyzing problems and developing solutions. This is just how I am wired. But if it weren't for some very passionate teachers, the unconditional support of my parents, and the opportunity to travel to several developing countries, I might never have discovered what makes me feel so alive.

### Haiti

At the young age of 16, I went overseas for the first time. I know my parents were nervous, but I think my persistent pleas finally got to them and they ultimately relented and allowed me to go to Haiti with Teen Missions International. I spent that summer helping on construction projects at a school and assisting with a week-long camp for local children and orphans, complete with games, songs, and puppet shows. I also experienced a lack of running water (bathing, laundry, and cooking could only be done after a long walk to a well that got extremely low after long periods without rain), a few tarantulas around our camp (I really don't like spiders), extreme sickness, and the sight of some of the most extreme poverty in the world. I saw children with bloody feet because they had no shoes, people living in cramped and dirty homes, and women washing clothes and bathing their children in filthy water. But despite the shock of what I witnessed, as well as the personal challenges, I am so grateful for my summer in Haiti. I knew then I wanted to keep traveling for the rest of my life, particularly with the purpose of helping improve the lives of people living in the most horrific conditions.

### Passionate Teachers

In high school I had some pretty incredible teachers who encouraged me to come out of my shell. In addition to my parents who encouraged learning and always believed in me, several teachers in particular stand out in my mind because they demanded excellence and because they helped me discover and pursue my passions.

During elementary school I used to be very nervous when speaking in front of an audience but by the time I graduated high school I was much more comfortable. One of my favorite memories of high school was in my human geography class where we were required to give a presentation on some current world issue. I chose violence against women in the developing world, focusing on female genital mutilation, honor killings, and acid burnings. I still remember the feeling of standing in front of 20 kids my age, passionately discussing something that was so important to me, feeling the energy in the room, and answering questions from so many students who didn't know much about the issues I was discussing. I felt so alive being able to share my passions and to impact the way people thought about violence against women. I also had a teacher, Miss Battel, who inspired me by the way she lived her own life. She sang opera, cooked gourmet foods, read voraciously, spoke three or four languages,

and was extremely intelligent and completely alive. She opened my mind to interests I didn't even know I had, including poetry. Plus, she introduced me to one of my favorite movies, "The Power of One." Miss Battel made me believe I actually could make a difference in this world.

### **Mexico**

Several years later while I was in university, I traveled to Oaxaca, Mexico with Samaritan's Purse, a relief agency well-known for its yearly Operation Christmas Child campaign. I had been packing shoe boxes filled with presents for children overseas for years, but I wanted to actually be there to hand out the boxes and see the children's faces light up. It was such a magical experience. We traveled to several poor villages, handed out presents to hundreds of children, and held two medical clinics where people walked for miles to be seen by one of our team's doctors. Again I had the opportunity to witness first-hand the struggles of people in developing parts of the world and experience the joy of helping others.

### **More Traveling**

After completing an undergraduate degree in History and a diploma in Journalism, I decided it was time to combine the knowledge gained from my years in classrooms with my passion for helping others and begin to travel again. Over the next two years, I completed human rights internships in Ghana, India, Israel, Palestine, and Washington, DC. During this time, I made friends from all over the world, developed increased self-confidence and career skills, listened to the stories of women who have experienced domestic violence and torture, wrote articles and reports exposing human rights abuses, and saw parts of the world I never could have imagined. These adventures further developed my faith and trust in God. I looked forward to each new day because I knew I would be doing things that would help others and get me even closer to a career where I could do this type of work every day of my life. Working to end injustice, particularly for women and children, became my driving force. It is my life's mission. When I am exposing injustices through my writing, interviewing a female survivor of violence and helping her find her voice, or traveling around the world, I am alive. I am filled with a purpose and passion that not even depression can take away.

Even though I am presently in debt due to the recent completion of my Master's degree and all my international travels (most of my internships were unpaid), I do not have any regrets. I realize the power of passion to infuse my whole being with life and joy. Through following my passions, I have discovered one of the most important strategies to alleviating depression and I have developed a compassionate heart that I am so proud of. Without following my passions all over the world, I would never have known what my true purpose is and what it feels like to be fully alive.

### **What Are Your Passions?**

I would encourage you to take the time to look deep inside yourself and be honest about what you truly love to do. What do you feel passionate about? What makes you feel alive? What activities do you do where you actually lose track of time because you are having so much fun? Discovering the answers to these questions and then having the courage to live the answers is so important. The times I was living my passions have been the most extraordinary periods of my life. Depression was rarely present because there was no room in my life for it. Passion gives life and depression takes it away; the two have a hard time co-existing. My life is evidence that depression does not have to be a death sentence. There are ways to keep depression from winning. It is my hope that discovering and living your passions will change your life, give you the hope to keep going, show you an inner strength you might not have known existed, and help you overcome depression.

## Chapter 12: Life Coach

*“In order to excel, we must surround ourselves with people who inspire us to fulfill our greatest potential.”* Molly Cantrell-Kraig<sup>62</sup>

Seeing a life coach was a great decision I made about a year ago. Even though I had been seeing a counselor for a while, the benefits of working with a life coach included increased clarity of my goals, specific steps to get where I wanted to go, and a new-found sense of my self-worth. My time with my life coach added additional tools to my positive energy toolbox.

I combined life coaching with hypnotherapy from the same certified practitioner. I found this to be effective because the hypnosis replaced many of the negative thoughts deep in my subconscious with positive ones, while the life coaching helped me make positive changes on my own and alter some of my negative habits that were sabotaging my dreams.

According to my life coach's website, “Life Coaching is a relationship whereby individuals are assisted to improve their performance, achieve their goals and enhance their overall quality of life. The coach’s job is to provide support to enhance the skills, creativity and resources that the client already possesses. However, the client is responsible for doing the work.” It is important to note, however, that life coaching is not the same as therapy. Life coaches are not doctors or licensed therapists. With my counselor I worked on changing my thoughts and behaviors to improve my mental health, while my coach recognized my “abilities and talents and provide(d) unbiased feedback and encouragement.”<sup>63</sup>

### How a Life Coach Can Help

My life coach helped me identify and address the obstacles keeping me from reaching my goals and realizing my full potential. She helped me get clear on my beliefs and attitudes and how they were hindering me from moving forward. Identifying and releasing destructive thoughts and habits, limiting beliefs, and unwanted behaviors were all the subject of our sessions. Most importantly, I was integral in determining how we spent our time together. In other words, I had to evaluate my present situation and figure out the goals I wanted to reach. The job of my life coach was to help me discover my own solutions and potential, as well as help me identify and overcome obstacles, and my job was to do the work necessary to get where I wanted to go. I also had weekly homework and writing assignments so I could later discuss what I was learning between sessions.

### Lessons Learned

I took quite a few notes during my sessions with my life coach. So much of what we discussed involved practical strategies I could implement on my own and she gave me homework to reinforce various principles. She stressed the importance of being grateful for the wonderful things I already have in my life, changing my thoughts and negative programming, doing something I enjoy every day, and becoming very clear on what I want in my life. I also had to figure out what was lovable about me. My assignment was to write a list of all my positive qualities so I would begin to see what is good about me rather than things I hated about myself. This shift in focus is extremely important. I managed to come up with over a dozen pretty incredible things that I love about myself (i.e. I am passionate, I am willing to take risks, I care about other people's feelings, I help others, etc.) and I read this list out loud for several weeks. Creating this list and focusing on my lovable attributes helped me realize that a lot of my negative perceptions about myself were not true. She also encouraged me to remove “I have to” or “I should” from my vocabulary. These are just a few of the many lessons and principles I learned while working with my life coach.

## Chapter 13: My Faith

“*You don't have a soul. You are a Soul. You have a body.*” - C.S. Lewis<sup>64</sup>

Our spirit is often a part of ourselves that gets neglected the most. Many people recognize the value of eating healthy food, exercising, cleaning up our negative thought patterns, and living with positive emotions and energy. But what about your spirit? No one knows what it looks like and with all the craziness and stress of our lives, putting aside time and attention to this very important aspect of our being is just something that gets pushed to the side.

Please hear me when I say this section is not about religion. I could not care less what religion you adhere to, if you are an atheist, or if you are searching for meaning in a lot of different spiritual beliefs. But I have included this section because it has been and continues to be an integral part of my own experience, growth, changes, and healing. Strategies such as writing in a journal or working with a life coach can help heal your spirit. Additional strategies I utilized included reading encouraging stories of people who overcame tremendous obstacles (such as *Chicken Soup for the Soul*), listening to uplifting music, prayer and meditation, completely reevaluating my view of God, and attending a workshop taught by an enlightened teacher that changed my life.

### **God: Loving Being or Evil Tyrant?**

For most of my life, I possessed a view of God that was just awful. To me, God was a Being that was judgmental, full of rules, distant, and overbearing. I was constantly striving to be good enough to please Him<sup>65</sup> and fearful whenever I knew I had missed the mark (which of course, since I am human, was pretty much all the time). My constant need to be perfect, fear of offending God and going to Hell, and incessant striving to reach out to a God I really felt could care less about me was extremely challenging and I know my view of God contributed to my depression. I always felt a weight on my shoulders that I wasn't good enough and that I would never live up to the expectations God had for me. Thankfully, this view has changed. It has taken many years of searching for my truth but I have finally come to see God as complete love. My fear is gone. I actually believe God wants me to be happy, that God gave me my abilities and passions for a reason, and that God will use me to help others. I feel hope and that is an extraordinary feeling.

Of course, there are days when I doubt my worth and God's love, days when things are dark and nothing seems to go right and I wonder if I am on the right path. But I have made the decision to believe, even when I don't always feel it, that God loves me, that I am on this earth for a purpose, and that my future is bright and filled with hope.

### **The Potter Knows the Clay Workshop**

One of the best remedies to depression is truth since often one of my greatest causes of sadness, fear, anxiety, and anger were the result of believing lies about God and my own worth. During a weekend in November 2011, I got a much needed dose of truth that helped unlock depression's grip and continues to give me hope.

My changing view of God and the building of a loving relationship with the Divine has taken place over the past several years. But this was one experience that helped me put everything I had been learning into focus and really cemented my changing view of God. What I learned in this workshop took me further in healing my Spirit than almost everything I had done up to that point. It was almost like my years of searching and prayer was the chocolate cake and the “Potter Knows the Clay” workshop was the icing. I would have been ok with just the cake, but life is so much better with the icing.

“The Potter Knows the Clay” workshop was taught by Dehyana, a wise teacher originally from



Windsor but who now lives with her family in Malaysia. She teaches a variety of workshops, holds guided meditations, and takes groups of people to various “sacred power spots” throughout the world, including Peru, Egypt, and India. The following passage from her website perfectly encapsulates Dehyana's heart and ministry and what I learned from this workshop:

*“She reminds us that God’s hand is in everything and that there is a divine plan unfolding for each of our lives, even if we cannot see it. She inspires everyone to administer to all of humanity love and compassion, and to seek to understand and acknowledge that each of us is a direct emanation from the Mind of God and therefore has a reason for being.”<sup>66</sup>*

This workshop was a time of sharing, learning, asking questions, and getting real with ourselves. So many questions I had about God, things that were causing me fear, anger, and frustration were answered. This weekend was not a magic pill, but rather, the culmination of months and years of searching and prayer on my part. It was like placing the last piece in a puzzle you have been working on for a long time, or turning a key in a lock and opening your heart to the truth. For so long I had felt that all the pain/troubles/suffering/lack of a job, etc. were God's punishment or the result of me doing something wrong. Dehyana's teaching at this workshop really opened my eyes to the fact that God was not doing things to me, but in fact, everything in my life was for me, for my greater good. God was using every experience and hurt in my life to create a perfect vessel, without any cracks or blemishes. With this realization, I felt a weight lift from my shoulders; I could breathe again because I knew God loved me. My troubles were not a sign I had been abandoned or that God hated me.

It is important to stress that I realize everyone is in a different place in their search for truth so please do not take this section as preaching. I certainly do not have a monopoly on truth. But I wanted to include my spiritual journey in this book because it has had such a transformational effect on my life. You do not have to agree with anything I include in this section, but I wanted to share with you some of the lessons I learned from this workshop to give you hope and possibly help you see God in an entirely different light. Further, even though I use the word “God,” I am not referring to the God of any organized religion. I realize some people have a problem with the term “God” because it is associated with a lot of rules and pain. My view of God is much more along the lines of pure love, so feel free to replace the term “God” with “Universe,” “Source,” “The Divine,” “loving energy,” or “infinite intelligence.” Whatever term works for you and gives you peace is perfectly acceptable. And if you feel like sticking with “God,” then that's just fine, too.

The following are some of the life-changing principles and lessons I learned from the “Potter Knows the Clay” workshop.

## **Surrender**

Surrender does not mean that we say, “OK God, you do it all” or never attempt to make positive changes in our lives even when we are experiencing pain. Surrender is not throwing up our hands in despair and giving up. And surrender does not mean giving up our dreams, personality, or freedom to make choices. It is always our responsibility to make empowering choices. But when we have surrendered our lives to God, and given up our time lines and agendas, we will experience much more peace and actually be able to hear what our own Spirit is guiding us to do in a given situation. It's very hard, if not impossible, to hear God's voice when we are fighting and struggling against what God is doing in our lives. Hearing and following this inner voice is important because we suffer so much when we don't follow our hearts and instead make choices that weaken us rather than empower us.

## **Joy**

One of the best ways to experience joy is to maintain conscious contact with God throughout the day. Several ways to maintain that continuous contact include asking for direction whenever you need to make a decision, expressing gratitude, breathing deeply, praying for increased faith and strength, becoming aware of your feelings and thoughts, visualizing God walking with you, and writing in your

journal.

### **Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is so important. I need to forgive myself and my own suffering. We often feel guilty when we suffer (either physically or mentally) because we are angry that we couldn't fix ourselves and blame ourselves for not being strong enough. Forgive yourself for past decisions. Every decision we make is based on the best information we had at the time. Punishing ourselves for past decisions (while looking through the lens of where we are at right now), doesn't serve any purpose except exacerbate our guilt and suffering.

### **Gratitude and Acceptance**

As long as we are in human bodies, we will have thoughts. Recognize and accept them. Observe your thoughts but don't try to stop them or fight against them. The fight to get rid of negative thoughts actually gives them more power.

Trying to figure out why we are experiencing depression doesn't necessarily serve us, because we are so focused (and putting so much energy) on the depression, rather than the healing. Instead of going back and analyzing every past experience and hurt, let each situation from now on be your guide. We know what needs to be healed and forgiven based on what is showing up in our lives at any given moment. For example, if we are constantly surrounded by angry people, then we need to take a look at our own anger because we attract into our lives what is already in us. So be grateful for the people who show up in your life who annoy you. They are showing us our issues that need to be healed and forgiven so we can move on.

### **Recognizing My Worth and Value**

As I think, I create. As I think and speak, I will manifest. Words can tear down, and with depression, we are often speaking negatively about ourselves. We are tearing ourselves down. In reality though, I am enough. I am wonderful. I am worth the time and effort necessary to heal all my hurts and do the work to overcome depression. It is my responsibility to meet my own needs; no one else is responsible to do that for me. If I know I am worthy of a wonderful life, then I will do whatever it takes to create that life free from depression and get the help I need. But if I think I am worthless then I just won't bother. It is so vital that we love, honor, and cherish ourselves, much like we would treat our closest friend.

### **Changing My Definition of God**

God is not doing anything to me; everything in my life is for me. God's intentions toward me are always good. I know that all the challenges in my life, including depression, are being used by God to make me into the person I was always meant to be. I experience amazing freedom when I understand the truth about who I am and who God is.

My image of God was one of hate, fear, and condemnation. I had to reevaluate the image of God I had created. No wonder I was afraid all the time. Every time I made a mistake, I thought it put me on God's "bad kid" list. But that's not God. If I hate myself, or am angry with myself, then I will see those feelings reflected in others or even with God and I will think that God hates me too. I had to examine what I believed about God (i.e. my circumstances were a punishment) vs. the truth (God is using all my circumstances for good) because truth always brings peace.

### **Importance of Following My Heart**

Let go of anything in your life that no longer serves you. Depression has always been the most severe for me when I ignored what I truly wanted and insisted on making decisions based on what I thought rather than what I felt. Depression has been worst when I refuse to make decisions that

empower me but instead try to conform to what I think others expect (even what I think God expects). I know now that what God really expects from us is to follow our hearts and those desires that He put inside us in the first place. Ignoring our thoughts and feelings is actually a slap in God's face. It's like we are saying that God didn't know what He was doing when He created us. No wonder we are miserable! When I betray my spirit I experience major problems.

One of the most powerful realizations I came to was that God speaks to us through our feelings. If we are feeling sad or anxious, then we need to take a good look at the way we are living and the decisions we are consistently making. Our feelings are not a weakness but rather a barometer of how closely we are following our heart's desires and they indicate whether or not we have gone off course. Don't try to shut off your feelings. Instead, acknowledge them, listen to them, and allow them to show you what your heart truly desires. If something doesn't feel right for you, then it's not right for you.

The clash between our minds (thoughts) and heart (feelings) is the source of so much suffering. In other words, when our heart is telling us one thing, but we allow our minds to talk us out of it, we will suffer – every time.

Finally, living in the moment can alleviate suffering and anxiety. In this moment, there are no problems. It is only when we live in the past (punish ourselves for our mistakes) or live in the future (worry about what might happen) that we feel fear and anxiety.

## **Conclusion: What I Have Learned Through Depression**

*"Whenever someone sorrows, I do not say, "forget it," or "it will pass," or "it could be worse" -- all of which deny the integrity of the painful experience. But I say, to the contrary, "It is worse than you may allow yourself to think. Delve into the depth. Stay with the feeling. Think of it as a precious source of knowledge and guidance. Then and only then will you be ready to face it and be transformed in the process." - Peter Koestenbaum<sup>67</sup>*

I often wish I had never experienced depression. The pain has been unbearable and I have felt like such a burden on the people who love me. But then I start to think, "What kind of person would I be if I had never experienced depression? What have I learned from my experiences? Who am I today because of my suffering? What beautiful character traits have I developed?" It is in answering these questions that I have come to realize the "benefits" of my struggle with depression.

Battling depression has taught me so many lessons and developed strength of character I am really proud of. I am a stronger person now than I ever imagined because I never gave up. Even when things were at their worst and I thought I would never see light again, I refused to give up. When I started searching for strategies that would help me overcome depression and the results were a long time coming, I refused to give up. My struggle with depression has created a strength and resiliency in me that I would never have developed without this battle. I know now that I am stronger than depression.

Here are some more "benefits" of my depression journey, in no particular order:

### **Patience**

I know that healing is not instantaneous; it takes hard work and time.

### **Humility**

When you can't get out of bed and you need your mom to take you to the hospital to get you professional psychiatric help, pretty much all pride is gone. I have had to accept a lot of emotional, physical, spiritual, and psychological help from others over the years and I have realized that I cannot overcome depression on my own.

### **Importance of a Strong Support System**

This ties into humility because I know I would not be where I am today without a loving, encouraging support system, particularly my mom, who never gave up on me and was always there to help me and love me unconditionally.

### **Gratitude**

I have learned to focus on what is good in my life, particularly the people who love me, the opportunities I have had to follow my passions, a good home, healthy food, etc. No matter how much is going wrong in my life, I can always find something to be grateful for if I take the time and effort to do so.

### **Faith and Trust**

I realize how important it is to surrender my life to God, including my agenda and time tables. Without depression, I would never have learned how to trust and rely on God so completely. Without my urgent need to find a way out of depression, I might never have put so much energy and time into searching for truth. I might never have completed the important transformation of changing my view of God and my relationship with God from one of fear to one of love.

## **A Few Final Words**

Some people might not think the lessons I have learned from depression outweigh the pain. Perhaps they are right. But I do know I would not be the person I am today without my struggle with depression and I would not be able to share hope and encouragement with other people who are suffering. If I can experience hope and healing after over a decade of depression, so can you. You are so much stronger than you realize. Anyone who says that only weak people experience depression does not understand. It takes huge amounts of strength to battle an unseen enemy every single day and refuse to give up. Give yourself credit for making it this far and know that healing is possible.

I wrote this book to inspire and encourage people battling depression and show there is hope. I am also telling my story to give you ideas, help you think outside the box beyond the traditional approaches to treating depression, and give you more tools for your toolbox so that if you experience depression you are not a helpless victim without options. There are many strategies that can help you, including professional counseling, antidepressant medications, loving support system, changing your negative mental programming, keeping a journal, EFT, hypnosis, getting your hormones checked, taking care of your body through improved nutrition and exercise, following your dreams and passions, working with a life coach, and reexamining your view of God.

Finally, for each of the strategies I discussed in this book, please do more research on your own and talk to your doctor and psychologist, plus a naturopath and dietitian to work together to come up with a plan. Don't just pick a few strategies from this book and attempt to treat depression on your own. It is imperative that you seek professional help. I am not a doctor and none of the strategies I discuss are intended as medical advice. I simply share them with you because they have helped me so much in reducing the frequency and intensity of depression symptoms and have given me hope that I can live a healthy, passionate life that is no longer dominated by sadness, fear, and depression. I do not have to suffer, and neither do you.

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65 Please note that I do not consider God to be male or female, I am simply using "Him" for ease of reference. As much as I would like to avoid male or female pronouns, I do not feel comfortable referring to God as "it."

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