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Dark Places and Family Love

Walking with my sister through long-term depression



by Lynne Miller

"Can you come over and pray with Mom? She's really bad."

The strained voice on the phone was that of my 18-year-old nephew, Jason. Several months before, my younger sister, Rachel, caved under the burden of poor health and personal crises. Despair eventually overcame her and threw her into the abyss of depression.

My body tensing, I took off for Rachel's place.

When Rachel first hit bottom, I increased my time with her — watching TV, mall crawling and such. With my faith and prayers also ramped up, I expected that within a year Rachel would emerge from the abyss, healed and whole.

But tonight made me wonder. I found my sister sobbing and frightened — a long way from healing and wholeness.

Where is He?

This was not the sister I had known for over 40 years. How could this loving single mother and committed Christian be so hopeless? Couldn't she feel the presence of God anymore?

I, too, wondered about God. Why did He seem so deaf to my prayers and blind to Rachel's pain? Didn't He promise a hope and a future for Rachel? Could He really make something like depression beautiful in His time? So far, nothing about the abyss was beautiful. And hope for the future seemed well beyond reach.

After I prayed with Rachel, peace came over her. But I was spent. Later, while I lay in bed at home, my thoughts raced: Can I trust Rachel to be alone? Will she kill herself? Will she call if she needs me? Sleep finally came that night; rest did not.

Help for me, too

Rachel wasn't the only one suffering. I was grieving for a sister I hardly recognized, but few knew the depth of my agony. Some days I spent hours crying. Every day I awoke early and struggled to concentrate at work. One week a friend who knew about Rachel's depression innocently asked, "How's your sister?"

Resentment grew inside, and an unspoken question rose in my mind: What about me? Looking back, I realize such reactions were normal for a family member coping with a loved one's depression. I eventually discovered that to survive the walk with Rachel through the abyss, I had to invest in my own mental health.

Learning about depression

I began counseling sessions with a therapist. Every week Janet guided me in expressing and examining my agony. She also helped me understand Rachel's agony.

While we all have down moods that linger for a time, Rachel's mood stubbornly stayed. Its longevity categorized it as major depression, caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain and worsened by traumatic life events.

I did my own research as well. An online video showed me areas of the brain affected by depression. A list of symptoms matched nearly every behavioral change I'd seen in Rachel: erratic moods, loss of appetite and sleep, lack of energy, isolation, confusion, apathy.

Each bit of information I gathered helped make more sense of Rachel's state. I stopped regarding depression as a freak occurrence and viewed it more like diabetes or any other health condition requiring treatment. In time, I considered Rachel's therapy and antidepressants as God's provision — His way of giving my sister a hope and a future.

Changing my pace

As my initial impressions of depression had been flawed, so were my attempts to handle Rachel's depression. In straining to make Rachel happy and protect her from harming herself, I had nearly burned out.

No wonder. Dealing with depression, Janet told me, is a marathon. For some people, depression resolves in months; we were looking at years in this dark place. I would have to change my pace to make it through.

I did this in various ways. When Rachel cried on the phone, I empathized and tried not to panic. Though I still spent time with her, I resisted rushing to her side every time she called. I prayed God would watch over her instead.

This gave us both space to practice the coping skills we were learning in therapy. And it allowed me to cast my burdens about Rachel onto the One whose care outdid anything I could do for her (1 Peter 5:7).

I journaled, dumping feelings only God knew onto pages only I would read. Words like fear and worry appeared before me as well as the irrational thoughts that had given them life. In time, I saw that my mind had raced ahead of God, creating its own scenarios instead of trusting in Him (Proverbs 3:5).

I soaked in Scriptures about God's faithfulness, strength and compassion. Long walks in the evenings settled my spirit, and dazzling sunsets drew me closer to the Creator. Those end-of-day moments found me releasing Rachel to God, then gaining His unique peace (John 14:27) and rest for my soul (Matthew 11:28-30).

Beside us in the dark

It's been two years since I began investing in my emotional health. The deep grooves of grief have been smoothed out by the One whose presence alongside me in the abyss matches me step for step. I continue to lean and learn.

So does Rachel. She's found the right balance of therapy and medication. And she's discovered a wholeness different from what I envisioned at the start. It's spiritual, forged by her desperate dependence on God. A women's Bible study at church draws Rachel into the Word, and friendships with sisters in Christ coax her out of her shell. Prayer is her daily refuge.

I cheer Rachel on as I walk by her side. And I praise God that the signs of our mending are His way of making a dark place beautiful — in His time.

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Lynne Miller has learned that medication for depression is sometimes a necessity and doesn't show a lack of faith or strength. She now prays just as much for the families and caregivers of those who are depressed as she does for the sufferer.

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