

I want to give some background on my life. I will be talking about depression and I will be touching on suicide. These are sensitive but important issues. It's hard to talk about them because it is scary and uncomfortable. I'm not a professional, but I do know depression. I've been dealing with it since at least 1990. I've been diagnosed with clinical depression since 2007. I have a wonderful wife, a lovely family, the American dream, right? But I fight suicidal ideation at least weekly. Yes, every week. I've been close to attempting suicide a total of three times; I've been hospitalized once because of it.

What is "normal"? You'll tell me that normal is relative; but MY normal isn't even ON your relativity scale. I would give anything to be "normal" for one day. Normal would be if I didn't have the voices in my head. Normal would be NOT feeling low and sad for no reason. Normal would be not thinking about suicide.

I can't truly describe depression any more than a mother describing childbirth. It's unique to everyone. I can, however, describe to you how it affects me. I'm also quite sure that living with someone with depression can be uncomfortable, confusing and frustrating. I hope that this can shed some light on depression and the stigma it contains.

SLIDE #2

Big word warning....Here is a bit of a primer on the physiology of depression. The limbic system in your brain regulates activities emotions, physical drives, stress responses and the like. Neurotransmitters are special chemicals produced by the limbic system that help transfer messages throughout the brain. The cells in our brain, called neurons, use neurotransmitters to communicate. There are three specific neurotransmitters (called serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine) that are linked to mood & depression. I have depression because my brain doesn't produce enough neurotransmitters, or my neurons don't accept the messages properly. I could talk about the myelin sheath that covers the neuron axons, or protein lipids, or dendrites; but that would get boring. And I can see I'm already losing some people...

SLIDE #3

A depressive episode makes something that is challenging- overwhelming; it makes something that once may have been sad, now unbearable; joy is nonexistent. I believe that what I'm thinking at the time is absolutely real. That everything that happens during this episode is (and was) the true reality. What was once what we consider normal and healthy are now not. The normal that we experienced is now as unbelievable as the sky is green. We tell ourselves that THIS is real; THIS is how our lives are meant to be. That we are worthless, unloved. Simple things that go wrong are catastrophic. I was in the middle of a depressive episode (nearly suicidal in fact), and I couldn't figure out how to fix a computer. And THAT was the thing that sent me over the edge and to the ER. Something so simple and benign just about made me end my life. The thoughts in my head are nearly overwhelming. "I'm no good to anyone; no one cares about me; no one understands." Everything is physically painful. It takes massive amounts of energy to do anything; we simply cannot do simple tasks. It's being sucked into quicksand and not caring that it's happening. I'd start looking for ways to end my life. Depression has a way of making you believe that death is the same thing as hope. The longer it went on, the deeper I would sink. Thankfully, my wife understands and is there to help me get out of that pit.

SLIDE #4

The definition of stigma is "holding a negative attitude or stereotype towards other people." There is a stigma that depression is a weakness; that I am somehow less of a person because of mental illness. But take someone with diabetes. Are they less of a person because their pancreas doesn't work right? So why am I less of a person when a different organ doesn't work quite the same way. TV shows often portray people with a mental illness as violent or as a perpetrator. Especially if they fail to provide any sort of context. The stigma may simply come from being uninformed. Depression is NOT something one can simply snap out of. It is NOT something that we CHOOSE. It's not like a menu at a restaurant. Because who would choose depression? Even health care professionals hold the same type of stigma. I've heard of nurses and doctors simply having trouble understanding why someone with depression would behave in a certain way. Shame is not a cure for depression. Those with depression can also suffer from 'self-stigma'. We may try

to suppress the feelings (or lack thereof) we're experiencing. We may 'put on a happy face', or try to avoid the topic completely. We can often be good actors.

SLIDE #5

Statistics show that when one has a major depressive episode, they are 50% more likely to have another episode at some point in the future. That percentage can go up for every episode they experience after the second. But there are ways to lessen that number. Medications, healthy eating and exercise, as well as making good choices can all be factors in minimizing depression.

Depression in men is often hidden by irresponsible choices. Alcohol, drugs, gambling – all can be abused by men (and women) with depression. Men also have been taught to suppress our emotions and, in turn, our symptoms. Depression differs between men and women. Men tend to be more irritable, angry. Women tend to ruminate while depressed. Some also suffer from an eating disorder at the same time. While depression affects fewer men than women, men are about 4 times more likely to die by suicide than women.

But it can be difficult to talk to someone about depression. First, it's been ingrained in men that we don't discuss our feelings. We'll talk about cars or sports or whatever...but feelings? Nope. Next, it's tough enough to talk to loved ones, let alone a complete stranger. Talking to a therapist is rough. Men typically don't like therapy because of the self-stigma that they're unable to do something on their own. But, therapists have seen and heard it all. Plus, they are there to help.

SLIDE #6

In the past, I've blamed God for "giving" me depression. I've been angry with Him, and frustrated. I've often asked "Why??" But I've realized that my depression wasn't given to me by God. And while I've prayed for healing from it, I also know God isn't some cosmic wish-granter. For me, depression cannot be overcome by faith or sheer will alone. Faith helps, but many times it feels easier to stay depressed. It takes A LOT of energy to climb out of that dark pit. Psalm 118:24 tells us "This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." But when I'm depressed, it's hard to find joy in anything. So, how DO I get out?

SLIDE #7

Being on a medication is one of the ways I treat my depression. Depression isn't something that can be cured. It is treatable, just like diabetes. It can take time for meds to start to work. It can take even longer for you and your doctor to find the right combination of medications and dosages to work. Personally, I take 3 different medications in the morning and 1 in the evening.

What else do I do? I do my best to stay on top of my depression. If I start to feel my mood go down, I need to be proactive. It's taken me a long time to figure this out. Plus, Julie has also started to see the changes and can anticipate when I may need extra help. Having friends who I can call and tell them I'm not doing well, even if they only listen.

Reading my bible and devotions is huge. Keeping my faith strong helps. Regularly attending church and small groups is not only a way to maintain fellowship, but it also keeps me from retreating into myself. It can be difficult; so if I seem distant or distracted, don't take it personally. It may be that I'm not doing well. It may be that I'm emotionally drained at that time.

SLIDE #8

Volunteering or being on a church team. Doing work for others helps keep your mind from turning inward. It allows you to keep your mind occupied with other things, rather than yourself. It also gets you involved with other people. Depression has that way of making you distance yourself from others. So, volunteering is an excellent way to combat that.

I've attended counseling, and it can be effective. Especially when my depression is bad. While it sounds funny, knowing someone is paid to listen to me can be helpful. It's freeing when you can discuss your depression. Many times, I have a difficult time putting into words what I'm thinking or feeling. A therapist will help with that. When I start to go on the upswing, I find that I can put the counseling on hold for some time.

Reading, attending church, volunteering are all good ways to help combat depression. It takes a huge amount of energy to start doing those things when you're in the middle of a depressive episode. I've found that it's better to start when I'm NOT depressed, or at the very least, when I start feeling those dark thoughts creep into my head again.

There are dozens of medications out there, hundreds of combinations. There are other therapies that are effective for some people. TMS, ECT, talk therapy, counseling, medication are all ways to successfully combat mental illness. What works for one person may not work for another. It's important to know when you are well it takes time for your body and mind to adjust to new treatments.

I wish people knew that every day I am alive, each day that I make it through is a success. Even simply breathing can be exhausting. The hardest thing I will ever do in my lifetime is stay alive. That's not an understatement, that's the simple truth. Therese Borcharde, the founder of Project Beyond Blue, once wrote that suicidal depression is like fighting the urge to sneeze. We fight it and wrestle against it. And there are people who simply cannot fight that urge.

LAST SLIDE

So, what shouldn't you say to someone with depression? Or rather, how do you keep from falling into the stigma trap?

1. As long as you understand that depression is an illness and not a feeling, most of these things are pretty self-explanatory.
2. Please also understand that depression and anxiety aren't the only two issues. These statements are used in other situations also. Children and adults on the autism spectrum, individuals suffering from POTS, or anyone else with what are called an invisible illness.

Here are some things I don't like to hear, and why.

"Just stop being depressed." (or "Just snap out of it!" or "I'm tired of you feeling like this.") Well, if it were that easy, just tell an amputee to regrow their leg! This statement is not only hurtful to someone with depression or anxiety, but it's also ignorant. It doesn't take into account that it's a physiological problem. It's due to something in our brains works differently than yours.

"You don't look depressed." What does someone with depression or anxiety look like? Saying this can invalidate how we are feeling. Just because I'm smiling doesn't mean I'm not screaming on the inside. People with invisible illnesses often are some of the best actors. Telling someone they don't look a certain way offensive and pernicious. We have good days and bad. When we have a good day, it doesn't mean the depression goes away. It's still there.

You shouldn't feel depressed, you're so blessed! (or "You have so much!") 2 words. Robin Williams. Seriously. This has been covered by the other things I've said; just because we are blessed in other areas in our lives doesn't change the fact that we have depression.

"But, you're Christian!" Yep, and I have depression. It still goes back to that. I'm a married, Christian, employed white man who enjoys puppies and long walks on the beach. None of that changes the fact that I have depression.

"Have you tried this/that?" (or, "This/that worked for my brother's father's nephew's uncle's former roommate...") Diseases affect everyone differently. Both my brother and I have diabetes. I take medications & insulin for mine, and while he does the same, he also needs to take different types of insulin. My point is that the same illness will require different treatment for different people. Don't assume that because treatment A worked for Josh that it'll work for Eric.

I appreciate people telling me they're praying for me. That is one of the greatest gifts you can give me. Just knowing that someone knows that I struggle can be enough to help me get through a bad day, or make a good day brighter.

It comes down to this: Be aware of what you say to someone, and how you say it.

I've kept my depression a secret for a long time. Simply because I didn't want to be labeled or have people think less of me because of my illness. It's important that we fight the stigma that goes along with depression and other mental illnesses. I'm sharing this today as a way to help break that stigma and open a dialog with others. If you are suffering from depression, or have a loved one who is, I encourage you to talk to someone. I'm available and I will help in any way I can. Know that if you suffer from mental illness, but are here listening to these words – then you are winning the war!