

Kay Warren on Depression, Grief, and Hope

Interview by Amy Simpson

Choosing joy "even if my worst nightmare came true"

Kay Warren is intimately familiar with depression. This cofounder of Saddleback Church, wife of senior pastor Rick Warren, beloved Christian communicator, and advocate for people in need knows what darkness looks like. Through her own lifelong emotional battle, parenting a child in tremendous pain, and losing a son to suicide, depression has left deep marks on her soul. Yet she chooses joy—the kind of joy that can live right alongside sorrow. TCW talked with her about her experiences and what she's learning.

How has depression affected you and your family?

Depression has been a part of our family's life since our son Matthew was very young. He was clinically depressed at seven. We moved from the place where he was born and where his friends were, just across town. It wasn't that far, but it was far enough that he didn't get to keep playing with those kids. He started coming home from school pretty subdued and quiet, and I'd ask, "Who did you play with today?" He would say, "Oh, nobody." And I'd ask, "Did anything happen?" "No."

When he started saying, "I'm sad," I attributed it at first to the fact that we had moved and he was just having a hard time dealing with that. It continued and began to affect his schoolwork, and he lost interest in playing with his own toys, playing with his siblings. He just was different.

Eventually I knew we were dealing with something beyond the normal sadness from a transition. There was something very deep going on in this little boy, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't even realize children could be depressed. It wasn't long until he began to experience panic attacks. He couldn't stand up in front of his classmates at school. He couldn't play sports because he couldn't take the pressure of performing. Then he was diagnosed with ADHD. The initials just kept stacking up. By 12 he was diagnosed with early-onset bipolar disorder. Then it was obsessive-compulsive disorder and major depressive disorder. Depression was ever-present. And then—just a year-and-a-half before he passed away—finally the diagnosis that made it all come together and make sense was borderline personality disorder. Almost all of his life, Matthew struggled with very intense depression.

You know, if you live with a depressed person, it's catching. Our whole family struggled with watching him suffer, feeling the sadness for his suffering. I think we all had a little bit of depression ourselves because his suffering was so intense.

I have struggled with a low level of depression my whole life. I don't remember a time when I didn't feel the weight of the world on my shoulders. As a little girl I had some of that extreme sensitivity that Matthew did. It never was debilitating for me. It's never affected my ability to live a normal life. But here was my child taking my struggle with depression to the nth degree. I felt so sad for him and so helpless to change it despite all the attempts we made.

How has depression affected your family dynamic?

We didn't realize until he passed away how much Matthew had been at the center of our family. He was the hub that our family life revolved around. If we made vacations plans we asked, "Wait, how will this affect Matthew?" As he got older and left our home, we didn't know if he would show up at family events. As I talk to other families, I think this is the way it is with mental illness. The family rotates around the needs of the one who struggles the most.

What's the relationship between depression and our spiritual lives?

I don't know where we got it so mixed up. The Bible is crystal clear that men and women in the Bible experienced deep, deep depression and grief and sorrow and the soul-crushing kind of despair. Even Jesus himself felt devastating sorrow. It's there. I don't know why we downplay that, why we ignore it, except we're really not comfortable with those kinds of feelings in ourselves. And if we don't like them in ourselves, we sure don't like them in anybody else.

Psalm 88:18 is so dark: "Darkness is my closest friend." I mean, you cannot find a more depressed statement than that. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:8, "We despaired of life itself." Again, that's pretty dark. Jesus said in the Garden of Gethsemane, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." So many Bible characters experienced depression. But somehow we've got it all turned around. We think: *You've got to have it looking good when you come to church. You've got to let everybody think that your family isn't hurting.*

A few years ago, you wrote a book called *Choose Joy*. What's the relationship between joy and depression?

I wrote the book out of my own very deep need to discover joy. I was raised in a pastor's home. I went to a Bible college and married a pastor, and I taught the Bible. You would think I had it figured out, but I didn't. The more difficult our lives became, the more challenging the mental illness became, the more helpless I felt to change what was happening in my son's life, the more I realized I had to have something to hold onto besides what I had gleaned so far in my Christian life.

Paul doesn't give caveats when he says, "Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!" All these verses talk about joy and seem to indicate that it's something that everyone is supposed to be experiencing . . . and I was not. I just got tired of that sense of failure, that sense of, *What does everybody else seem to understand that I don't understand?* So I did the study for myself. If anybody else benefited from it, that was going to be great. But it was a survival tool for me.

When I began to dig in, I realized I had completely misunderstood joy. No wonder I wasn't experiencing it! I was going after the wrong thing. I was going after an emotion. And what God wanted to give me was *himself*. The definition of joy I'm working with is a settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life. The quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be all right. And the determined choice to praise God in all things. That kind of joy is available to me even in my grief, it was available when I was writing the book, and it's actually been available my whole life. I just didn't understand.

I knew that if I was going to experience joy it might have to be even if my worst nightmare came true. That definition was a game changer for me. When I was writing the book, I had a dread that

Matthew would take his life because by that time he was actively suicidal. He talked about it all the time and was looking for ways to take his life. I knew that what I wrote might be something I would be called to live out in my most desperate moments. I closed the book by saying if we're ever going to choose and experience joy, we're going to have to choose it in spite of, in the middle of, *even if*. I knew that if I was going to experience joy it might have to be even if my worst nightmare came true.

I have a necklace that says "Choose Joy" that I was wearing the day Matthew died. I wear it almost every day. I am reminding myself that joy is still within my reach. I can and do experience it. But it's something I have to deliberately speak and choose.

What would you say to Christian women who struggle with depression?

I would really encourage them not to try to walk it alone. Maybe they're in a church or a small group that minimizes their pain or tries to fix them, or maybe they don't even feel like they can bring it up. I would do the radical stuff: change small groups, change churches if necessary.

There's nothing to be ashamed of in depression and other forms of mental illness. I'm not ashamed that my thyroid doesn't work. I have to take thyroid medication every day of my life. There's no shame in that. There's no shame if our emotions are broken or our brain doesn't work exactly the way it's supposed to. We're body, soul, and spirit. God wants us to thrive in each of those areas. Our bodies, our souls—all of it matters to him.

Churches have to learn how to care holistically. If you're in a place where that isn't happening, give yourself permission to find a nurturing place—especially for those who are really on that edge, barely holding on.

I have to say even though Matthew took his life, there is always hope. I cannot give up on hope. I don't know what tomorrow will bring. But I hope. There is hope for this life, but there's also hope for the next. I think the most profound offering we give to others is hope.