

## **Finding Hope When Trauma Changes Us**

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My best friend from high school was wildly popular, won homecoming queen, and had a joy when she spoke about Jesus. No one would have guessed all the pain that was hidden behind her bubbly personality. While Maggie was my greatest cheerleader, encouraging me to believe in myself and insisting that people didn't see my disability, I had no idea all that she had been through. Many of my scars were visible while hers were all invisible. And deeper. Maggie has Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) because of her childhood, which she agreed to share briefly here. I'm so thankful for her, her vulnerability, and the Lord's work in her life.

### **Maggie's story (told by her):**

Many of us who have been raised in abusive homes understand that not every moment is abusive or unhappy. There are times of joy, laughter and living. That is the very essence of the challenge; one never knows when the shift to anger and violence will occur. It's unpredictable, which makes day-to-day living feel volatile and alters our brain to always be on guard, always assessing people to see if they are safe. This is a reality of my life.

I was born the sixth of seven children to parents who were married very young. Their relationship and our home was exceptionally volatile involving physical, verbal, and emotional abuse which I witnessed from infancy. I was also the victim of many years of incest by a sibling, who would then treat me as extra special and smart afterwards, filling me with shame and confusion.

I stopped trusting authority figures, except my Christ-filled great grandmother, since no one felt safe. The only place that was safe was church, and I remember my First Communion, asking Christ into my heart to treasure Him always. Often God's comfort was all I had in my world of chaos.

Eventually my father almost killed my mother in a vicious fight, which precipitated their divorce and the younger kids moving away with my mother. I hoped life might feel safer, but the moves brought new predators, who varied in sexual, emotional, or verbal abuse as well, though no one believed me. Two married men who stalked me until the police intervened. Two additional abusers were within my family, which led to my compartmentalizing my life as I tried to block it all out.

My father had cancer and died when I was sixteen, though I learned in college he had committed suicide. After discovering his suicide, I spiraled downward into a world with no boundaries. In my early twenties I married an alcoholic who was often cruel, repeating the volatile pattern I had grown up in. Our first son was stillborn at eight months the day after a violent argument. We were married for twelve years and had three children before we divorced. Shortly afterwards, I met my current husband who has been an incredible gift from God -- we've been married over two decades and had three more children.

### **Fallout from the Past**

I sinned against God many times throughout my life, but I kept talking to him, and I know that He never left me. I struggled with impulsive behavior and poor self-control over my emotions. It took me years to realize that I subconsciously believed that people saw my value only in my sexual nature.

I had a great job for over a decade until one day I told my boss about a co-worker who had been extremely rude to me. My boss shrugged it off and his indifference triggered an intense reaction; I felt unsafe and unprotected again but had no idea what was happening until I broke into pieces. Fortunately, I found a skilled therapist who believes in the limitless power of God. I was in therapy for four years making slow but steady progress.

Life dramatically changed a few years ago. My mom unexpectedly committed suicide; I used to talk to her every day, and I was struggling to process this horrifying loss. Then for the next ten months things continued to get worse at work.

I was on the floor, enveloped by one of the worst periods of darkness in my life, and I screamed to God to rescue me. And He came on clouds of thunder to push out that evil and then in a shower of His holy fire brought me to Him. He embraced me. I knew after that I would be able to go on, no matter what.

### **God's Redemption**

Through my broken past, God has taught me to cling to Him and is miraculously delivering and healing me through prayer, therapy, doctors and medication. **Prayer, of course, is the bedrock for all change and has drawn me to Christ. My prayer warriors have been critical to me when I've struggled to find peace.** The Lord brought me a great therapist who is helping me see my wounds and the lies I've believed as a result. When I began to work with him, I could not even understand some of the things he talked about (like boundaries); I was terrified that I would be asked to remember experiences that I had intentionally blocked out. **God also used psychiatrists who figured out the right combination of medicine that He used to pull me out of the pit, especially on days when I felt so alone and in the dark that I couldn't even reach for Him.** The Lord has used all these things to draw me closer to Him. This is what I've learned from what I've been through:

*God knows everything that happened in my life, and how it has changed the way my brain functions. He was there with me through those traumatic life-changing moments, and He is with me now. I belong to Him. I know that He never left me, even when I couldn't sense or feel Him. Even when I feel like I'm walking through the valley of the shadow of death, I don't fear evil because I know He is with me (Psalm 23:4).*

God has enabled me to see my sin and failures but not to get mired in them. When we confess our sin, Christ forgives us, and He miraculously changes us. I have seen God's deep work in my life as I've processed how I've sinfully acted and the ways I hurt others. I am so thankful for this verse: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

**Finally, I'd like to say to anyone who is suffering, do not give up. Call out to God. For those who have loved ones battling mental illness: mental illness is real. It may not be visible, but it's just as real as physical anguish. We never know what other people are suffering.** As Peter exhorts us, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:18).

I'm praying that my experiences will be helpful to anyone who is struggling with mental illness and is looking for hope. **I found hope and His name is Jesus.**