

## **Out of the Cyclone: Supporting a Partner With Depression**

### **Interview with John**

**Jo:** How can you support a partner or loved one who has depression?

**John:** I like to describe depression as a vortex, like a cyclone or a tornado or something like that. You've sort of got control while you're at the end of it. But as you start cycling into that tornado, you start losing control.

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**Jo:** This is Messages of hope and I'm Jo Chamberlain. I'm talking with John today whose wife Jane has had depression for over 20 years, and in that time they've raised a family together and found strategies to help navigate through tough times. So, John, tell me a bit about yourself and your journey with Jane.

**John:** So, I'm in the IT trade. I manage a small team of IT people. I've got myself four children and a beautiful wife. And my wife, Jane, has been suffering from depression since I've known her.

I didn't realise she had depression until months after our relationship started. But when I worked it out, I had no idea what to do about it. I did what most good IT people do, I Googled it. It gave me absolutely zero answers, you know, cause it can't pigeonhole it. And that was the trick.

So once I realised that Jane had depression, I spent a lot of time actually reading up on it actually went to see professionals myself. Even though I didn't have depression, I still went to professionals and said, "look, this is what my wife is experiencing, what is going on? What is this about?" And I just kept learning. And I'm, to this day, still learning.

**Jo:** Yeah, I guess that learning is a long-term process. So, can you give me some examples of how your wife's depression has affected yourself and your family?

**John:** On a lighter level, you sort of feel isolated and shut out. On a deeper depression, you find yourself doing everything. Some nights I would come home from work and I would have to realise that the baby's nappy hasn't been changed all day. That the kids haven't had lunch that day. And then you start realising that you're actually running as a single parent for some days in a row, and it gets really, really difficult. You run out of energy. Your work is really hard. You know, all of this hard stuff is happening. When do you rest?

I used to have meditation time and pray and all that kind of stuff. I found I stopped doing that because I just did not have time.

**Jo:** So John, how would you describe what depression is like from your experience?

**John:** I like to describe depression as a vortex, like a cyclone or a tornado or something like that. And if you think of a tornado in a cone shape at the very top, like a whirlpool, you've sort of got control while you're at the end of it. But as you start cycling into that tornado, you start losing control. And the deeper you go, the more bad the depression can be. So, we've just sort of found that as long as we're skirting the rim, we can identify and work with it as opposed to when she's further down, you've just got to support through it. And that's where it gets tricky.

The key that I've learnt in my time is that the triggers can easily be mistaken as attacks.

Early in my life when Jane was at home with the kids, you know, the kids were quite young, she would be sort of on the rim of that cyclone or that tornado, if you will, by just what's been happening at home. And I would come home from work and all of a sudden I become the target of all frustration. And you can be very quickly brought into an argument without actually knowing the cause.

You gotta determine the difference between what is an attack and what is actually the depression kicking in and the emotions overwhelming and all that kind of stuff. If you react, all you're doing is just throwing extra fuel on the fire which never works. So slow down was the first thing that I always did.

I mentioned earlier that I'm in IT and it's about problem solving. So, my first reaction is: "we have a problem. How do we fix it? What do we need to put in place to mitigate the problem?"

Depression doesn't work that way. You can't solve it. And as soon as I realised that you can't solve it is when I realised all you can do is listen and be there. Just simply be there. And, if you just listen, you start diffusing.

And sometimes the attacks will be against you, you know, "you didn't do the dishes last night!" "You didn't change your kid's diaper!" "You didn't do anything right yesterday or the day before!" So as long as you are not taking that personally, and that's hard, I'll just make that clear. But not to take that personally and realise these are just surface things. There's actually something else going on here. Listen to what that is the problem. Slow down the situation. Remove the urgency.

**Jo:** So, John, what have you noticed about how this has impacted your children?

**John:** Well, differently as they grew up. What the challenge was, was explaining why mum was doing what she was doing or why mum and dad argued that night. You know, why is mum in the bedroom crying? I mean, it's really hard to explain the truth because it's not that we're trying to hide the truth from them.

But as they got older, they sort of more understood it. I mean, if we look at them now, my kids are young adults or, teenagers and they understand that, you know, mum's having a bad day, their first reaction is, what can we do to help?

So even they have learned the triggers and we've never actually sat down as a family and talked through it realistically. We've just done it in little bitesize pieces, but they've already worked it out.

**Jo:** Yeah. I've noticed that children pick up on a lot more than what you actually realise. So, what I'd really like to know then is what strategies or methods did you find helped Jane?

**John:** Once you slow down the scenario, once you get that cyclone slowing, the real Jane starts to surface through. And that's what you sort of grab onto. Then you can start talking about, "all right, how can we help you with this? Who can we talk to?" So, we got Jane to psychiatrists and some other medical help. She did go on an antidepressant to help with the mood swings. So, the help was there and was given to her.

And the other thing that people don't realise is that the help that you get isn't always helpful.

Jane's parents who lived in the city with us, they were very proud of their status, if that makes any sense. And as a result of that, they would try and hide the depression. Hide it all from everybody else outside the immediate family and pretend it didn't exist when we spoke to other people. It made us feel like it was a disease or a big embarrassment. And the worst thing was, is that quite often I'd get my father-in-law come and visit me and say, "how's it all going?" And do all the right things and then say, "why haven't you fixed it? What are you not doing?" How do you answer that?

**Jo:** That really doesn't sound very helpful. So, what was helpful for you in the end?

**John:** my best friend, who I've had since high school had been with me the entire journey. He was distance away, so we talked on the phone and later zoom and all that kind of fun stuff. But if it wasn't for him consoling me, I probably would have crashed myself. What he was good for was to say, "Hey, I'm having trouble with this." You know, "I can't handle this." He would just listen, agree, give surface advice, but just being able to talk to someone without being judged, made a big difference.

The trap with depression is you get in this bubble, this world, and you start focusing on it, and then the rest of the world starts fading away, and if you're not careful, it disappears. If I can give any advice, it would be just talk to people. Because sometimes you just felt like, is this going to ever end? Is this it? You know, am I going to be stuck in this reality forever?

Well, talking to other people actually reminds you that no, it's not. It's just now. It's the present. The future is still there and it's still bright. You just got to be able to see it. And to do that, you just got to look after yourself and you've got to look after the person you're looking after.

**Jo:** So, John, after supporting your wife through all these years, are there any mistakes that you've made along the way?

**John:** Always and yes. Mistakes are a part of learning, but some mistakes can be worse than others.

One of the mistakes that I made was trying to fix it. You can't fix it, but you still try. I'd ask Jane, what is wrong? "Well, I have to do the dishes." "All right, I'll go do the dishes." Well, that's actually not the problem. That's just a surface problem. But spending the time trying to fix it doesn't help because you can't fix it.

The other common mistake I'd make is trying to tell her that you shouldn't be like this. And that's really easy for someone who doesn't know what they're doing to do is to say, "Hey, you just need to get over this. You need to just push it aside and get moved forward into life." Well, that is the worst advice you can give anyone. A big mistake on my part, because you can't push it away. You've got to work through it, you know? Because as soon as you put any doubt in them, like "you shouldn't be feeling this, you should be doing this," that actually translates to, "I'm not good enough." You see, you don't realise the damage a mistake can actually do.

**Jo:** I understand that you sought support from your pastor during the hard times. Can you tell me more about that?

**John:** Well, the pastor at the time, first started off as a listening board, and saying, "it's okay to feel that way. It's okay to be angry. It's okay to be upset." And reminding me that you're allowed to have these feelings. You're not Superman. That was one of the bigger things. And they reminded me that God's there. You're not alone and you'll never be alone.

**Jo:** How reassuring to know that God is always there with you. And we know the Bible has some great comfort in that as well. I'm wondering, do you have any particular Bible verses that you lean into?

**John:** The one that comes to mind is Psalms 28. And I think it's from verse seven. I've got something in front of me and I'll read it to you.

*"The Lord is my strength and my shield. In him my heart trusts, and so I am helped, and my heart exalts."*

What that tells me is that I'm not alone. Even though I'm physically here doing the work, when I do pray, I do get that hand on the shoulders is the best way to explain it and God saying, "It's okay John, I'm with you."

**Jo:** John we've been discussing the importance of looking after yourself, as well as the person suffering from depression. What does it look like now for you?

Jane still has depression. We think it's never going to go away. But the difference is that we're both aware of it now. Like, really aware of it. And one of the things that we worked on when we had our major issues earlier in our life is that the biggest key was communication. And what I mean by that is that Jane would actually say to me, "I think I'm going down, I just thought you should know." And then straight away, I'm aware and start doing things to help her come back up again. And that's everything from, "Oh, let me help you with whatever it is you're doing," or "let me just cook dinner for you tonight." Little things like that.

It does help just to slow down and just relax through the problem and talk through the problem rather than just try and find all the answers, because you're not going to. I've tried. Trust me, I've tried.

**Jo:** So, John realising that there are a number of people listening right now who might be facing depression or have loved ones, or a friend, or somebody that they know that's going through depression. Do you have any advice for them?

**John:** One is to slow down, or slow the depressant down the best you can. And two is to look after yourself first before you can look after the person who's depressed because you're not going to be any effective if you're too tired. And remember that whatever they say to you may not be actually what they mean or want to say. It's the emotions taking over at that point. Do not take it personally. And look through it, as silly as that sounds.

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