

Empowering Families Facing Depression

“Mom, you have no idea what it feels like to wake up each morning and think you are supposed to kill yourself”-July 2011

I heard these words and stepped back as my 36 year old son turned and walked away to sit outside on the ground with his head lowered. I knew Geoff had been in a deep depression for about a year. I knew he had suffered a deep depression at age 20 for about a year as well. He worked through that one with lots of hard work and physical activity. Surely he could do it again, I thought.

I had NO idea that depression and anxiety were REAL, medical illnesses. I knew he was down, I knew he cried a lot, I knew he had considered suicide before.

Geoff was 6’5” of muscular, athletic energy. He was fun. He was an amazing skier, kayaker, basketball player, skateboarder—well anything he tried really! He was charismatic—his teammates always voted him captain. He was the one all the nieces and nephews wanted to be with. He was fun!! He was a husband, a father, a businessman as well. Many people in the small town of Gardiner, MT credit him with energizing and changing the entire town. When he invested time and money to start the first new business in that town in years, others began to follow his lead. He is the last person most would have ever suspected of being in such pain as to take his own life. Not believable.

As this latest “bout” of depression set in, I waited for it to pass. Yes, he was seeing a psychiatrist. Yes, he had a counselor. Yes, he was on an antidepressant. After an early spring threat of suicide, Geoff was recommended to go to a dual diagnostic center. Yes, he had been self medicating with Pot to control anxiety. As a family we asked his doctors where to send him. We asked many resources from the executive director of Fairbanks Hospital for substance abuse to the national head of Anthem Blue Cross in this area, to a friend psychiatrist. No one had recommendations.

We searched the internet. We decided on a place in California, we had our friend, the psychiatrist check it out. We had the head man at

Anthem check it out. It was a small, caring place with a good record from all we could find. And I think that was true.

His wife could not go with him to check in as it was so far from their Montana home and she had the three year old and the one year old to care for and a their business to run.

I went to represent the family. He so wanted to get well. When we arrived I was asked if I would be more comfortable at the hotel. No, I said. I wanted to meet this doctor we had read about on the internet. I wanted to ask some questions for the family. Then another manager approached my son and I. In front of him she said, "It is highly unusual for our clients to have someone with them." Geoff, age 36, did not need his mommy. He said, "it's Ok Mom, you can leave."

The clear message to both of us was "THIS WAS HIS BATTLE" Only HE could fight it. I bought into it because I had read the AA "Big Book" on the 12 step program. I believed in that as a cure to almost anything. It seemed ok to me. He had to walk this alone.

This was repeated when a few months later he entered a stress center. This was "jail", no exercise room, no fresh air, no family counseling or input, visiting hours 3 nights a week from 6-7 pm. Group therapy daily. Yes, he was "safe" but again the message was clear. This was HIS battle and his alone.

I AM HERE TODAY TO TELL YOU THAT IS WRONG.

Major Depression or Bi Polar Depression are REAL, Medical Illnesses. I want to make sure families can be empowered to help their loved one. Families should face this just as if the illness were cancer. An advocate should be present to keep a list of questions to be asked and to make sure answers are heard properly.

I did not know what questions to ask, I did not know he probably had "scores" to rate his depression. Can you imagine if it was cancer – you would be set down as a family and a review of the type of illness, of the severity, of terms used to name this, and of treatment options.

Why is the privacy law so over used in depression and mental issues but not with cancer?

My sister, Beth, has battled depression for almost 30 years. Here is how she feels: "BUT, depression is a MENTAL illness--it can't be chemo'd or radiated or cut out like a cancer, it can't be seen, it is the invisible illness--the invisible killer. It causes such anxiety that one cannot think clearly at times, one loses memory, one cannot see from one moment to the next. It is lonely. Because to others who have never suffered depression, "we" are crazy. Depression runs deep."

I wish you every success in loving and helping your loved one. Stay the course. Remember the great times and pray for God to strengthen you to help your loved one back to those times. Do get them to a facility to help them back from the edge! This is not something to handle alone. They can not "cure themselves".

They can not get well by attending enough group therapy sessions. Those can certainly support them, but can not cure them.

Today, if Geoff said the words he said to me last year, I would have packed him in the car and driven him to Michigan or to Emory University or to one of the other National Network of Depression Centers—as much as we searched last year, we did not know about them.

Geoff was very sick. I am not sure we could have changed the outcome, and I have to rest in peace that he is at last in peace. BUT I want YOU to try hard to give your loved one the chance to be well again. If I can be of help, please let me know.

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