

VOLUME 1

THE IMPACT OF
ONE
VOICE

YOUR VOICE, STORY, AND
MESSAGE MATTERS

ARVEE ROBINSON

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OUT OF THE ASHES INTO THE LIGHT

Dr. Tom Amberson

It is often said that we don't appreciate the things we have, the common joys such as enjoying a cup of freshly brewed coffee, going out for dinner to fellowship with family and friends, walking the dog, or watching the changing hues of a sunset. In my case, beginning about 2010, this would all be about to change.

Depression is something that comes over you like a fog. It is subtle, so subtle that often you don't recognize it yourself. At first I couldn't see it myself. However, I wasn't taking my dog for our usual morning walk, because "I just didn't feel like it." My long-standing morning quiet time, spent reading my devotional and feeling the presence of God, was slipping. I was eating less and losing weight. I also begin to isolate myself from others, all the while not giving serious thought to the depression that was creeping into my life. I was also making poor decisions related to work and other areas of life.

Inside I knew that I wasn't myself, but as a clinical psychologist, I continued to provide counseling to my clients, thinking I was putting up a "good front." I would gather my energy for the counseling sessions with my patients; ironically, I was able to help others to work out their significant problems, some of whom had depression themselves. Here I was, a psychologist, helping others yet struggling with depression myself.

My depression is clinically called Dysthymic Disorder. Depression is categorized by severity. Major Depression affects all aspects of your life, and your mind is so altered that you're not able to work. You lose all interest in the major aspects of life, such as sex, friends, hygiene, socializing, and work. Dysthymia, on the other hand is like a low-grade fever. I felt lousy but could still function, go to work, focus when I needed to, and generally attend to the aspects of my life that were essential. I never missed work, was still helpful to clients, and when I did see friends, I once again put up a good front.

I have always had a love-hate relationship with dysthymia, ever since my youth. As a child I had a sense of sadness within me and often did not know why. This is a common trait of depression; you often do not know *why* you're depressed. Sometimes there are significant stressors you can identify, but often there may not be, and this makes dealing with depression all the more aggravating. I hated it because it sapped my energy. I felt like I was walking through molasses in a swamp bog. It would take me many years to unlock my depression.

Ever since my teenage years, my faith has always been a source of great strength for me; however, even my faith could not pull me out of my "funk." I would often think, *If I am a Christian, why do I feel so sad?* Often other Christians will give you trite words of "encouragement," such as:

- "I will pray for you,"
- "Keep praying and the Lord will deliver you."
- "Don't let the devil get you down."
- "Is there any sin in your life you want to talk about?"

While these words are meant to be helpful, they are not, and they only caused me to feel even more distant from "caring people."

THE PESTILENCE THAT WALKS IN DARKNESS

Depression can creep up on someone slowly. However, there are other events in our lives that come suddenly "like a thief in the night." In addition to dealing with the dysthymia, sometime later, my routine physical exam results showed that my PSA (a prostate test for possible cancer) was elevated. I wasn't concerned because I was just over the four-point marker that would give rise to further testing, and I knew that an elevated PSA does not necessarily mean cancer. I did have a family history of cancer, though. My father had prostate cancer in his late sixties and had his prostate removed. Three years later it had metastasized to his pancreas, and within a few months he had passed.

My doctor encouraged to get a biopsy and a Gleason Test to determine how likely the cancer was to spread. My results showed that I had a very aggressive cancer, despite having a low PSA score. I was in shock and

disbelief. I had always prided myself on my good health, and I felt invincible to the ailments others around me were experiencing. In the back of my mind I was thinking, *Will I be like my father?*

My cancer was like a “pestilence that walks in darkness.” *Pestilence* is another word for “disease.” Cancer walks in darkness. It arises in the darkness of your body, unknown to you, growing silently, and until suddenly on that fateful doctor’s visit you are told you have cancer.

All my perceptions about my health changed overnight. I was scared. I scheduled a prostatectomy (the total removal of the prostate) and was in and out of the hospital after two nights. Once home, I had to quickly return to the hospital due to internal bleeding, which then turned into a blood clot in my lungs. Three weeks later I was released from the hospital. Having lost a significant amount of weight, I looked like “death warmed over.”

A PHOENIX RISING

There were three things in my life that helped me deal with my depression and cancer. First, I found a *trusted counselor*. In my first session with him, he said to me, “While I can’t ‘fix’ your depression, I would love to walk alongside you during your journey.” He was a very wise man. As soon as he said this, I knew he was someone I could trust. You see, when you’re a psychologist, it’s often harder to open up to another therapist, because therapists tend to know of so many counselors that have not been helpful to others. The sign of a good counselor is how well they listen to the pains of our heart. We won’t open up if we don’t feel that they understand our deepest hurts. This counselor was wise enough to not try and “fix” me, but instead came alongside me as a trusted advisor. Ever so slowly over the next two years, my heart began to smile again.

Second, *my family and friends* stood by me, and their support was invaluable to me. They were there to help lift me up and to stand beside me. I am ever so grateful. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 tells us:

Two are better than one, because they will have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up.

Third, *my faith* has sustained me all my life. At a teen, I said yes to God, and I have never once regretted it. He has never left me or forsaken me; he truly is a friend that is closer than a brother. About twenty years ago, I was

at a Bible study, and a woman I didn't know came up to me and told me that my depression would be healed but that it would happen very slowly, because if it happened too fast I would not be able to handle it. Little did I know that *slowly* meant many years. But true to her words, I did overcome my depression, even though it took many years before it came to pass.

THE MORNING HAS BROKEN

Today I have come to call dysthymia a “disconcerting friend”—it is no longer my enemy. It's disconcerting because it causes me to feel unsettled and disturbs my composure; it's a friend because I have learned much from it. Depression is never, ever an enjoyable journey, but it is the sorrows of life that make the sweetness of life all the more fragrant. It has given me a treasure to empathize at a deeper level with those who are journeying through their own ashes, with an appreciation and a deeper understating for those on their own journey of depression, or cancer, or both. This “disconcerting friend” has given me the ability to help others to come “out of the ashes” and find their own light again. I can now say this is truly the joy of the journey. I no longer fear cancer. My faith has increased, and I have found that the adversity of suffering has actually helped to deepen my appreciation for life. Today I am in the light, and I live life with hope.

If I have touched a chord within you, and you feel you need someone to walk along side of you on your journey, it truly would be a joy to lighten your load and bring in the light again. Remember, you too can rise above the ashes!

Dr. Tom Amberson is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Southern California. He earned his BA from Bethel College, St. Paul, Minnesota. He obtained his master's degree from Rosemead Graduate School of Professional Psychology and obtained his doctorate in Psychology from Biola University. As part of his professional training, he did his APA-approved internship at Jerry L. Pettis Memorial Veterans Hospital in Loma Linda, California. In 1987 he was selected as an Outstanding Young Man of America in recognition for outstanding professional achievement, superior leadership ability, and exceptional service to the community. Dr. Amberson currently is vice president of the local chapter of Christian Business Professionals, a networking group. He is

a regular speaker at his local church and loves to share truths hidden in Scripture. He also speaks to other groups on topics of leadership and personal and professional growth. In his spare time he loves to ski and mountain hike and has reached the top of several California peaks. He enjoys his family and friends as well as his dog, Lucky, and cat, Taz. In his spare time he started Tommy's Lemonade, an organic fresh-squeezed lemonade business. His motto is "Remember, when life gives you lemons, have a Tommy's Lemonade."

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