

A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experience and Understanding of Depression
within a Sample of Young, Single, Latter-Day Saint Women

Jennifer Margaret Harris

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Sciences
In
Human Development

Dr. Sandra Stith, Committee Chair
Dr. Angela Huebner, Committee Member
Dr. Eric McCollum, Committee Member

April 20, 2005
Falls Church, Virginia Tech

Keywords: depression, LDS, women, culture, qualitative, phenomenology

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Abstract

Depression is the black plague of the 21st Century, affecting twice as many women as men, and continuing to increase among the younger generations. Little research has been conducted looking at single, young adults with depression. In addition, more research is needed to look at how culture influences the struggle with depression. With both the prevalence of depression in young women increasing and the membership of the LDS Church on the rise, it is crucial that clergy and clinicians alike better understand the experience of young, single, LDS women struggling with depression. This study is a qualitative exploration of six young, single, LDS women's struggle with depression. Six young (24-31 years old), single, white, active LDS women living in the Washington DC metropolitan area participated in 60 to 90 minute long interviews. Using a qualitative method and phenomenological perspective this study describes what an episode of depression is like for, and how it is understood by, young, single, LDS women. Themes identified from the women's interviews included identifying that something was not quite right/ something was going wrong, faith attempts, internalizing and blaming self, awareness of the depression, reaching out, spreading the word, and lessons learned. Several of these themes corroborate with current literature about the experience of depression, while others are unique to these women. In addition to these themes, the poignant role of the LDS culture in these women's experience of struggling with depression is discussed.

Acknowledgements

I sit here in the Graduate Assistant office on the fourth floor of the Northern Virginia Center of Virginia Tech typing the last words of a project that has literally been years in the making. And, I have tears in my eyes. Tears of joy that it is almost nearly complete, tears of accomplishment knowing it offers the world knowledge that is desperately needed, and tears of gratitude for all of those who have supported, advised, motivated, and in some cases nearly carried me to the end of this arduous road.

First, I have to thank God for blessing me with clarity of mind, peace in my heart, and energy when I did not think I had anything left. Next, it would not be possible for me to have made it to this point without my family. Mom, you are not only an amazing mother and my biggest support, but one of my dearest friends. Thank you for your endless, unselfish, loving ways. Scott, thank you for caring and being concerned, for always listening to me ramble on about my studies! Lish, thank you for listening to me vent again and again and then making me laugh, offering advice, and knowing when to tell me I was being irrational and that I could do it. Dad, thank you for your constant motivating words. You knew just what to say to empathize with my pain in writing a thesis and to push me to go farther and do more when I felt pretty burnt out. Bev, thank you for sharing your graduate school experiences with me and allowing me to open up to you with my worries and concerns. And, Jana, even though you're not technically family, you definitely fit in this section of acknowledgements. Thank you for the many late night phone conversations about graduate school, theses, and events in this phase of our lives. You continue to inspire and amaze me!

I want to thank my east coast extended family who welcomed me into their homes almost every spring break and took time off work to visit with me. Especially my Grandma and Grandpa— the frequent chats with you and times you let me escape grad school life to come and visit you helped me feel not so far away from family. I also need to acknowledge the support of my dear friends in the Northern Virginia area who have become “family” in many ways. Thank you for allowing me to talk and talk and talk about my studies and research AND for acting interested! I was sustained many times by your words of encouragement, prayers for my success, and social hiatuses that provided much needed breaks.

I am indebted to the faculty and other students at Virginia Tech. In particular I want to thank Sandi for the roles she has played for me as a teacher, employer, mentor, sometimes “mother”, and friend. Meagan, you especially have become a kindred spirit in my life and I appreciate your compassion, insight, and loyalty. I am so grateful we got to travel this part of our journeys together.

Last, but not least, are the women who stepped forward to share with me their stories of struggling with depression. I feel privileged to have associated with you, to have been let inside your heart and soul, and to have gleaned some wisdom and understanding from the sharing of your experience. I have been forever changed by your faith, courage, and determinism.

As I type these last words, I shed a tear of love for all of those who have made it possible for me to reach this point and who will continue to be an inspiration to me as I move on to the adventure and challenge.

Dedication

In some ways I wish I could wave a magic wand and wipe depression from the earth. However, although it is a painful and dark experience that has the potential to suck the life right out of you, I know there is a purpose in the struggles of life. I believe in growth through our experiences, resilience and the fact that we can be better people not in spite of challenging life experiences but because of them, and in the sanctifying and refining that takes place as we travel through our mortal lives and inevitably experience challenges. I believe in faith, prayer, the power of God's word through the scriptures or from a loving church leader, friend, or family member, and in the healing balm of the Savior's Atonement.

With that declaration, I wish to dedicate this thesis to all of those who struggle with depression. You are not alone. There are many who have struggled just like you who wished they had a magic wand to erase the misery of their endless sadness. But, they did not have it. What they did have were their life experiences and the truths of the Gospel. Thus, in a realistic kind of way, this thesis offers something of a magical touch—real women's life experiences seen through the lens of the Gospel. These words on paper cannot erase the darkness of depression, but these women's stories speak of faith, strength, and light in a way that teaches, inspires, and comforts. These women speak of the hope they found amidst their hopelessness, joy they discovered through their sadness, and healing they reached through their pain. It is my belief that as you trudge on through the darkness, eventually you will again see the light. And, this time it will be brighter than it was before, you will be better than you were before, and some day you too will be able to share your story with another and relieve some of her pain.

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