

HOW TO SAVE A LIFE

By: Jay Abaya

How can you tell if you truly know someone? That bubbly college student who won a national competition for his university might have been a perennial victim of bullying back in high school. The funny guy at your office who makes a stressful situation more bearable could have been through a tough time during his younger years. Your best friend from way back may have attempted suicide before the two of you had even met.

These are just some of the things that you probably don't know about someone you thought you know very well. Why? Maybe you didn't ask. Maybe you didn't seem to be interested. Or, maybe that person was afraid.

I am that student, office guy and best friend that you thought you really knew. And I was afraid to tell you of what I've been through. You're a nice and open-minded person, I know. But you are part of a society that has a very limited, and often negative, understanding of my former condition.

I don't blame you. You wouldn't really know what it's like to go through depression. Yes, depression! No, it's not simply feeling down like when you missed a concert of your favorite band or you see news footage of people waiting for relief goods at an evacuation center. Even words are not enough to fully describe what one really goes through under such a psychological condition.

Depression is not only about being sad or feeling empty. It's more like feeling hopeless and helpless at the same time. For what reason, you ask? It varies and can even be a combination of many factors. Back then, I just can't think of any critical event that may somehow explain why I felt that way. I know that I was blessed with a lot of things like a wonderful family, good health, friends, etc. But still, depression can just hit anyone from out of nowhere. In an instant, I completely lost interest in everything including life itself.

Mine was a case of OCD or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. I remember feeling unreasonably guilty because of unwanted thoughts that came to mind like somebody getting killed for me to gain something in return. It was ridiculous but I lost complete control of which thoughts to entertain and how I should feel about them. Suddenly, I was bombarded with negative ideas that dragged me spiralling down to what seemed like a blackhole. I felt worse each time I tried to fight the urge to do silly things like repeatedly washing my hands or retracing my footsteps just to, somehow, pacify that accusing conscience inside of me.

When I ran out of such ridiculous things to do so as to satisfy my insatiable yet unwarranted guilt, I ended up having to say nasty things that would bring even the most

foul-mouthed person you know to shame. It was like being desperately trapped inside a labyrinth that my mind had created to torture me over and over again.

That was the darkest period in my life. The proverbial light at the end of the tunnel was nowhere in sight for what seemed like an eternity. We've tried everything from faith healers to medicine men but the cure was elusive. Each waking day was both a blessing and a curse. I was always mentally and emotionally drained. Seeing my loved ones suffer because of me does not make things any better.

Given the choice, I would have picked a heart ailment or diabetes over depression. At least, I know what food or activities to avoid and would have spared myself all the mental agony. But life does not work that way. We are handed down our own crosses to bear because we are supposed to be strong enough to handle them. Still, I would have opted for a much lighter one.

But through it all, my family did not give up on me. They convinced me to seek professional help and selflessly stood by me each step of the way.

Seeing a psychiatrist is not bad at all. It was during my counselling sessions that I was able to say even things that made no sense at all, straighten out my distorted logic, and learned about serotonin and dopamine. Understanding more about depression, that the condition could even be possibly genetic or biological, made me realize that this disorder does not necessarily mean that I'm a bad person.

At the same time, it made me wonder how those who have less in life, but are suffering from the same condition, would have a chance at getting better with all the expenses involved. Even back then, I hoped for the day that I'll be able to help others going through the same ordeal. But was there still hope for me? Was I going to get better?

Our prayers were not left unanswered. Months after I started getting help from my psychiatrist, who must also be an angel in disguise helping souls in despair like me, I was able to slowly recover not just my sanity. I regained my life, as well. Getting into college then finding work afterwards while having fun in between with family and friends became possible. I would not have experienced all these without all the help that I got along the way.

Did I ever think of committing suicide back then? Definitely, I considered it many times. Did I actually commit suicide? Yes, I attempted it once. Fortunately, I failed. It is not something that I am proud of but it is one of the things that those going through depression are in danger of resorting to. Had I known then what I know now, I would not have done so. And had I not sought and received help, I would no longer be around to share all these things to you.

No one should deprive themselves of the chance to experience life again. There is hope even if at times it seems like there is none. Knowing that there are others going through the same battle is, in a certain kind of way, comforting. Having a clear understanding of the condition and the different healing alternatives available is empowering but it should not end there. It is having these options accessible that will truly make a difference.

So my dear friend, try not to judge me and those still going through the same ordeal as you read this. For anyone suffering from depression to even consider seeking help, they must first be assured of a friendly and non-judgmental society. The social stigma associated with this mental condition can only be minimized, if not totally erased, by creating public awareness that would hopefully translate to genuine concern. After all, the statistics below are not just numbers. They represent real people, real lives.

STATISTICS*

- In 2004, the Philippines had 4,570,810 reported cases of depression.
- 15% of the population of developed countries suffer from severe depression.
- Still it is highly probable that at the very least an equal number of cases remain unreported.
- Depression is common, affecting about 121 million people worldwide.
- It has been estimated that depression would be the second largest illness by 2010 worldwide.
- 15% of depressed people will commit suicide.
- Globally, one life is lost to suicide every 40 seconds.

*Sources: World Health Organization, US Census Bureau (International Data Base 2004) and National Institute of Mental Health, Maryland

If it's not too much to ask, join me with the Natasha Goulbourn Foundation (NGF) in observing World Suicide Prevention Day on September 9, 2011 Friday at the Liwasang Aurora, Quezon Memorial Circle and be enlightened. From 2-5pm there will be a booth activities for self-discovery and inspiration by the Department of Psychology of U.P. and Miriam College, and Ateneo's Guidance Office. At 5-6pm is a special program and a Walk for Light & Hope, to remember loved ones we have lost to suicide, and at 6:30pm there will be a free concert. Be aware and save a life!