

## Suffering in Silence: One Family's Experience With Mental Illness

BY CLAUDIA WATSON: SPECIAL TO THE PILOT

John Gallagher had it all -- a pretty wife, four adorable kids, nice car, a big house, and a good paying job as a senior financial analyst with an executive desk and a Mont Blanc pen.

It was all he really ever wanted, or so he thought, until he nearly lost it.

"As a young boy it's drilled into you -- it's your responsibility to provide -- to make a good living and take care of your family," he says. "It's expected."

John worked for years for some of the biggest corporations in the U.S., developing a reputation he could be proud of -- and hated every moment behind that big, hulking desk.

"It [the desk] became a barrier," he says. "I really wanted out. I wanted to be somewhere else, with people, not behind a computer all day doing analysis. No matter what the job, I never felt I was good enough. I thought if I would only find another job, I'd be happy. I was always worried about being fired."

But he persevered -- he felt it was his duty as the man of the house. He burnt the midnight oil and brought work home on weekends, and it was taking a toll on his health and well-being. Life began to overwhelm him. When he did get home, exhausted, he only wanted to be alone.

"I'd come home from a long day at work and listen to all the things I wasn't doing around the house," he says. "The kids needed me to take them to school activities and help them with homework, and I was coaching basketball, too. I couldn't focus on helping them; I felt pulled in many directions."

John also felt a sense of hopelessness.

What he did not know then, was his high degree of worry and anxiety, coupled with the sense of not being good enough, and the hopelessness, were classic signs of depression.

### Potential Layoff

So when he got the news about the potential layoff he did not know what to do, work was after all -- his life.

"I didn't know how I'd find a job at 50 -- in a world that appreciates youthful energy, but not experience," he says. "I didn't know how I was going to make it -- how I would provide for my wife and four kids, the house, the private school, the tremendous bills. I felt like used goods. All these things just mounted up and I couldn't catch a break."

It was about that time that the headaches began -- throbbing, mind-crushing headaches and a racing heart. He could not sleep; he did not eat. He was irritable and ceased to appreciate the everyday joys of his family. He felt responsible for everyone and everything and did not know how he would fix it all.

"The stress and anxiety of it all ate me alive," he says. "I just didn't know how to cope with the situation. Men are taught not to cry, to be strong, but I was starting to crumble."

As his symptoms worsened he became more anxious, irritable, angry, and confused. He returned to his family doctor who listened patiently and prescribed medication for anxiety. But John did not like the side effects, and after a couple of weeks he went back to the doctor who reminded him to give the medication more time.

In his depressed state of mind, he says he probably was not listening to what the doctor -- or anyone -- said to him so he stopped the medication not realizing that would make him feel even worse.

"I felt physically sick with the headaches," he says. "What I didn't know then was that I had a chemical imbalance that was going on inside me, and it was causing all these symptoms. My anxiety had progressed to a serious level. I needed more than my family doctor, I needed to see a psychiatrist, but I didn't realize it at the time."

In the 1990s few people spoke about depression, so he did not ever consider it as the cause for his symptoms.

"The word depression meant nothing to me," he says. "I didn't know what was making me feel this way -- and depression was not even in the realm of possibilities, so I thought there was something physically wrong with me."

After months of multiple visits to neurologists, cardiologists, gastroenterologists, and the numerous prayers for healing and Masses, he says he ultimately "felt betrayed by God, and completely abandoned."

He tried desperately to find his way, through the darkness that descended upon his life, but the downward spiral of depression took control. In one moment, he tried to put an end to all the pain and agony.

"I really felt like I couldn't function any longer, I felt like nobody could help me," he says. "So I jumped from the hospital window."

### The Secrecy Begins

In that moment, it was his pretty wife, Patricia, who was left picking up the pieces of their life.

The fall did not kill John -- but it left him seriously injured with shattered legs and in danger of a life-threatening infection from the chips of bones left lodged in his legs.

Patricia recounts that when John regained consciousness, he felt only anger that he was still alive. He had hoped the jump would be an escape for his pain.

That night, because of the stigma surrounding depression and suicide, John made Patricia promise not to tell anyone. Instead, they decided to tell everybody he had fallen down the steps or was in an accident.

"There was the embarrassment, the shame," she says. "How do you explain this? How did it happen in our family?"

They did not tell their two youngest children, or John's father, who died never knowing the truth. Only their two oldest children and a few close family members and friends knew -- and they were all to keep the secret.

After five weeks John went home from the hospital, and Patricia took care of him. She tried to stay upbeat, especially around the children, despite the increased household and family needs. Caring for John and handling the medical appointments, picking up prescriptions, and watching him struggle to walk were taking a toll on her.

The co-pays for his continued care and physical and mental therapy were expensive. Patricia wanted counseling for the family, as a group, but John rebuffed her. He was on anti-depressants and felt he was okay, and he refused to talk about it anymore.

But Patricia says John continued to be stressed out and irritable, and he had no energy or interest in his guitar, which had been an enjoyable pastime for him. She was concerned that he would try to commit suicide.

She would sit in the church and cry often for all they had lost. Their 23-year marriage was in trouble, their family was shattered and the secrecy about it all was gnawing at Patricia's core. She decided to see a therapist to help her cope.

During those sessions she learned that depression was a treatable illness and started to understand her feelings about John's suicide attempt and how it was affecting their relationship. But what she wanted most was normalcy -- for their kids and for their life -- but it was not happening.

### A Sinking Ship

One day the therapist told her, "Your children need at least one healthy parent, and I see you with a sinking ship." Patricia said she knew she needed time and space from John to heal. She told the children that she and their father were going to live apart. John went to live in his father's apartment, and he came to see the kids on the weekends.

Due to mounting financial strains, Patricia and the children moved out of their home -- moving four times that year. The kids were in and out of schools and did not understand.

"The instability in our life was affecting all of us," she says.

She recalls one night she visited her favorite place -- a nearby river park where she would often go to sit, listen to music, and pray.

"I remember going down to the river, it was so peaceful," she says. "I was sitting in the mini-van and paying our bills when I started thinking about the kids. One had been in trouble for driving 90 miles per hour; another was in trouble for having beer in the car. I thought 'These kids don't love me. They wouldn't be doing this stuff if they did. What kind of mother raises kids like these?' "

She says the negative thoughts just started rolling out of her -- overwhelming her.

"I thought it would be easier if I just let the mini-van roll into the river and let all this go away," she says.

Then she realized the pain John must have felt all those months.

"It was a moment I'll never forget," she says. "I felt the magnitude of his pain. My anxiety was so small by comparison. He was faced with a \$1,900 a month mortgage, the kids in private school, bills -- and on top of all of that he could not sleep or eat, he was so anxious and kept thinking he was having a heart attack. I had a little bit of compassion."

She says that she really did not have compassion before that moment.

"I didn't want to say, 'You did this to yourself -- I couldn't say that, but I think there was a part of me that wanted to remind him that I'd been telling him for over a year to slow down, not go to work, not be stressed -- but he never heard me," Patricia says.

### Taking Back Their Lives

Those are the types of thoughts that she, John, and their four children share now as a result of finally talking about his depression.

For nine years John refused to discuss what had happened, and then he read an article about a high school student who survived a similar suicide attempt.

"What struck me was that he was willing to speak out about his experience," he says. "It was then that I began to ask, 'Why did I survive? Why did God give me a second chance?'"

John says the teen's story made him feel less alone.

"I realized then that what had happened to him was what happened to me," he says. "It was a chemical imbalance in the brain."

After the story about the teen, John decided God saved his life for a reason and he wanted to tell his story to "hopefully keep others from going through this pain."

Today, he speaks from the heart. He's been to rock bottom and back and knows the torture the mind can play on the spirit.

He and Patricia decided to write a book to help others who are struggling with depression. The book, "No More Secrets: A Family Speaks about Depression, Anxiety and Attempted Suicide" was released earlier this year and includes chapters written from their perspectives as well as chapters by their four children and Patricia's mom.

They have been interviewed by National Public Radio, other media, and talk with other interested groups, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

According to Patricia, the family's openness in the past year has been immensely healing for all of them.

"Often, when we are talking to groups, I will forget he is standing there and just say things about the experience," she says. "Later, he'll say he did not know that was how I felt. He does the same thing with me -- so this has become talk therapy for us."

John says the reluctance to talk about depression and suicide only adds to the stigma.

"I understand those thoughts," he says. "You feel ashamed, you're afraid to disclose this type of stuff for fear of losing a job, or being banished, or the neighbors won't call you anymore."

But there is a way out, he says, and it's not suicide.

"This is an illness, and you can be treated," he says. "But it's not like a cold or the flu; it doesn't go away by itself. You need to deal with it -- see a doctor, get psychotherapy, and get the correct medication."

He also cautions men about the need to monitor their behavior.

#### Different for Men

"It's a guy thing," he says. "We don't have the same coping mechanisms. For example, after a stressful day a lot of guys will go to the bar for a few drinks. Alcohol and depression go together. Alcohol does nothing more than mask the symptoms -- it's like putting a Band-Aid on a bullet hole, it isn't going to work very long. It's a negative coping mechanism, just like drugs."

John says men are very hard on themselves, "They feel they have to fix it all, it's their responsibility. We carry it all on our shoulders -- that's how we think,"

For men, depression often begins with self-esteem issues – money problems, job problems, marital issues, or any unwelcome change to their routines.

"They don't know how to talk about this stuff to other guys, their wife, and there's no instruction manual," says John. "We internalize everything and aren't very good at conflict resolution. We don't cry, and the old saying of 'never let them see you sweat,' well it's not healthy either."

He says leading a balanced life is one method of coping, but it is something men are not known for. For men in particular, work becomes an all-consuming escape.

"You can't work day in and day out," he says. "You get irritable, and then nobody wants to bother with you. Your kids don't like you, your wife doesn't like you anymore, and people at work won't have anything to do with you. It's important to learn how to relax. It's just healthier to go home, get your kids and go out and toss the ball around for a bit."

It took John 58 years to realize this and now he has a less stressful life working for a men's clothier.

"I should have done this year's ago," he says. "It's been a joy because I have so much fun with all the people who come into the store. We laugh, tell stories, and that's what makes it so good for me."

When he gets home from work he spends time playing the guitar or watching a movie -- or he will e-mail his son, who is working in Florida for the summer.

Though he and Patricia are now separated, he says they are rebuilding their family relationships.

"We are still all very close, and the kids see that even though we are not living together, we are making it all work out," he says. "We're trying to get back some peace of mind -- but we're not asking for the moon. I just want to live a simple life, a peaceful life so I can do the things that are important; I am not asking for any more."

### Live a Simple Life

John urges men to change the way they think and behave.

"Try to live a simple life," he says. "That means don't worry about having the nicest car, the best house, or private school for the kids and buying all those electronic gadgets. Those things set up expectations and cause stress. If you can reduce the expectations then you will reduce your fear of failure and the anxiety."

He emphasizes that speaking the truth with one another is the best way to cope with any stress.

"I would not let my wife or kids tell the truth because of the embarrassment, the shame, the worry about getting a job, and everyone got caught in the spiral," he says. "It made it so bad for them. If you are stressed or depressed, talk about it, don't hold it in. Reach out, there's a lot of compassion and warm, wonderful, understanding people out there."

Now, nine years later, John says he still lives with depression, but it is easier now -- light has replaced all the darkness, thanks to the help he gets. He works every day to be happy about his second chance at life.

"It's not like I went through this and now everything is rosy," he says. "I'm not a perfect human being. I try to think positively, and I try to do the right thing. I'm certainly not a role model for anybody. I still have problems, money problems, marital problems, and four children that have issues every day -- but I want to tell you that you can get through this type of stuff if you learn how to cope and balance your day. Depression can be treated. In the end, after all of this, I'm just a guy with an illness, and I still have my life -- and it's a very good life, indeed."

This article contains some brief passages from their book, with the permission of the authors.

Claudia Watson is a Pinehurst freelance writer and may be reached via [cwatson87@nc.rr.com](mailto:cwatson87@nc.rr.com).