

“I Went from Suicide to Surrender.”

Nine years ago **John Gallagher** tried to kill himself—not once, but twice. Today, with God’s help, he is dedicating his life to helping others cope with depression and its impact on families.

I woke up in the middle of the night with a headache and heart palpitations. It was horrible. I didn’t know what was happening.

I felt like I was on drugs, like I was hallucinating, like a train was going through my head at about 100 miles per hour. I was scared. I tried to get back to sleep, but I wasn’t able to. It was like my brain was an electrical system and the fuse blew.

I was under tremendous stress at work as a senior financial analyst at Bristol-Myers Squibb. This was 1999, and the company was downsizing, reorganizing. My boss had called me in and said that there was a good possibility that our department might be eliminated. I had a wife. I had four children—three girls and a boy, ages 9 to 16. I had a house in the suburbs, and I had tremendous bills. What would I do?

My family doctor prescribed antidepressant drugs, but after several weeks, they weren’t helping. I was sleepless and nervous. I had a headache that wouldn’t go away, and I was losing weight. I must have lost something like 60 pounds. I saw a neurologist and a cardiologist. They had no idea what was going on.

Months and months went by. I thought, I can’t deal with life anymore. I just can’t deal with this. And so one day, as I was going to work, I decided to kill myself by inhaling carbon monoxide. I just pulled over and tried to inhale it from the exhaust pipe. I didn’t put my mouth around the pipe; I just inhaled the gas into my nose. And I thought, You know what? This isn’t working.

So I went home and told my wife, Trish, what I had tried to do. She immediately took me to Warminster Hospital near our home in Bucks County outside Philadelphia. I spent the night in the psychiatric ward, where I was evaluated. The next day they sent me home, saying I should begin an outpatient program. That night was terrible. I was anxious. I couldn’t stay still. I paced around the house. But when Trish woke up she found me unconscious.

She called 911. I went back to Warminster in an ambulance. My blood pressure was sky-high. The doctor thought the best thing to do was to put me in the cardiac unit, on the third floor. Trish came into the room with pictures of the way life used to be. She was trying to comfort me and cheer me up. But I just got more depressed.

These were the thoughts running through my mind: I’ve lost all this weight. I can’t sleep. I can’t function. My brain is shot. I’m in such bad shape I’m dying. The doctors can’t help me. I can’t help myself. I prayed to God every single night, and God has not helped me. Nobody can help me.

I saw that a window in the cardiac ward was open. I got on the ledge and jumped out headfirst 35 to 40 feet above the ground. I remember going “W-o-o-a-a-h!” There is no way that I should have lived. But I must have hit the side of the building and spun and turned, because when I landed I was still alive.

I honestly think that God turned my body around and helped me land on my legs, not on my head or back. God did help me. God did save me. God was there for me. At the time I was furious at myself for not dying. I thought, “Goddarnit! I’m still alive. And my mind is still shot.” I started to stand up, but my legs were completely shattered. Bones were sticking out of them.

I was in the hospital for about five weeks, most of the time in the mental ward. They operated on me twice. I had psychotherapy and physical therapy. I was in a wheelchair for a long time.

When I came home, my wife set up a bed for me in the living room. I had to learn how to go up and down the steps on crutches. Male nurses came to the house to help me get dressed and help me with exercises. It was painful to do the exercises. It was painful to have to go to psychotherapy and

physical therapy every day. I would get irritable because I didn't want to do it anymore. And I would take my irritability out on my wife and my kids.

I didn't get abusive. But I would be grouchy. It was a long, trying situation. When you have all that negativity in the house, you just can't deal with it all day long. Especially when you're trying to raise kids. It took a toll on my wife and kids.

The medical bills were enormous, but, thank God, Bristol-Myers Squibb paid most of them. And they paid me a disability, something like 80 percent of my salary. We used savings to cover the rest. So we were getting by. But I was out of work two and a half years. Trish was totally wiped out. She had to take care of everything—the kids, the house, the bills. She was pretty disgusted with me. One night she said, "John, we need space. This is too hard for all of us. There's too much tension; we're driving each other crazy. We are going to have to live apart." She had to do that. Her therapist had told her, "Trisha, I'm worried about you. Your kids need at least one healthy parent, and I see you going down with John." We separated.

By then, I was out of the wheelchair and off crutches, and I could drive. I was beginning to function, but decided I couldn't go back to corporate life. It's too stressful. So I left Bristol-Myers Squibb and got a job at Jos. A. Bank selling clothes. Selling clothes is stressful, but not like corporate life, where I worried about getting fired all the time. And I don't come home miserable, irritable with my wife and children.

Trish and I were separated for about five years. I kept in touch with her and the kids. We tried to heal separately. She would go to therapy sessions. She would read. I would read. She kept a journal and put together a daily devotional for women. I would go to the library and get books on clinical depression to see if they pertained to me. One that really helped me was *Feeling Good* by David D. Burns. He talked about correcting negative thinking. Through reading and talking to people and therapy, we were able to get stronger. We prayed, and we each went to church and said, "God, please help us as a family to get stronger and stronger."

God helped me change things around. One night early in 2006, Trish called me and asked if I would come back for a few nights to help with our son Ryan. He was going through some serious situations as a teenager. He was very inattentive at school. He wasn't doing his homework. He was always asking Trish, "Why can't Dad live with us?" I was able to take him to the gym and exercise with him and get him strong. The teachers said, "Ryan seems like he's turning around. It seems like he's walking more confidently. It seems like he can handle himself a little better."

I think that when my wife saw this transformation in Ryan, she realized how much he needed a father around. I packed my bags and came home to my family.

But we still hadn't healed as a family. First of all, you know how very shameful committing suicide is. It has a stigma attached to it. We were a nice suburban family. We didn't want any negative vibes showing on us. I didn't even tell my father what had really happened. So there was a lot of pressure on the kids because they weren't allowed to tell the truth. And everybody was asking them questions. "What happened? What happened? What happened?" "Oh, he fell down the steps. He was in a car accident." We tried to conceal everything because we wanted to save face.

Plus, I didn't want to talk about it at home. I didn't want to have to relive it. But my wife wanted to keep going through it to try to heal as a family. I wanted to get on with my life. My family wanted to talk about it and work things out. They felt that by talking about it, things would heal. I didn't agree with that at all. I felt that trying to put it in the past would be a lot better for me.

That was a burden on the kids, especially the three girls, Robin, Katelyn, and Kristen. Two of them were in high school when I jumped, and one of them was in the sixth grade. They were difficult at times. Not big trouble, but they wanted to move out, be with their friends, live independently. You know, stuff like that.

Then last January, I saw an article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* about a 17-year-old boy who jumped from the ninth floor of an apartment building in the town right next to ours. And survived.

After reading that article, I felt it was my time to help people who were depressed, suicidal. It was time for me to try to give back what I had learned from what I've been through. I feel that my purpose now is to help other people be aware of the terrible symptoms of depression. I want to save people and families from going through the turmoil that I put my family through. I don't want to see anyone commit suicide or try to. I want to help them.

So I have been speaking—at churches, Rotary clubs, synagogues. I tell them the whole story of going from having a great lifestyle with my wife and kids in a suburban home to disaster striking and having to climb up the mountain again. And then I give them my symptoms: heart palpitations, a pressurized headache that wouldn't go away, clammy hands, mood changes, behavioral changes. I didn't have any energy. I didn't feel like doing anything. I didn't want to spend time with the kids.

And I tell them my biggest problem was I didn't know how to cope with depression. I didn't know how to exercise my mind and my body every day, eat properly and "self talk" so I would feel better about things. Everything that I looked at was a major catastrophe. I didn't know how to not sweat the small stuff.

Also, I advise them to seek professional help—but to go to a psychiatrist rather than a family practitioner. Psychiatrists will try different antidepressants on you until they find one that works. Mine tried several on me and learned that Celexa relieved most of my symptoms. I still take 40 milligrams every day. And over the years, I've learned to not take things so seriously. I say a prayer: "God, I turn all these problems over to you. I can't deal with all these problems. Please help me in this situation." And that's it. I mean, that's all that you can do.

At the end, members of the audience come up and some of them hold me and embrace me and thank me for having the guts to speak freely about my suicide attempts. And I say, "You know what? It's taken me nine years to be able to get up and speak about it. I think it is God that's helped me to get the courage."

I'm not a speaker; I hate speaking. But I'll speak all day long if I feel like I'm going to help somebody. And Trish has put together a Website (speakingaboutdepression.com). I think I've helped people. When I speak, they tell me they feel like they have hope and they have direction. And I've also helped my family.

Because I went public with my problems, my own kids were finally able to talk about what really happened. And I think that is where the real healing started. We have a purpose now. We go to church all the time, and we pray as a family. We're so thankful that our marriage is restored. We have that "attitude of gratitude." We're thankful that I'm able to function, able to work, able to be a father once again. We've come such a long way. But it's not us who did it. It's God, helping us to make the right decisions. It's God, helping us to go to the right therapists. It's God, helping me to say the right words to my children.

People who jump 35 to 40 feet don't live. And if they do live, they're normally paralyzed or severely hurt for life. I wasn't. My wife said to me one time, "God gave you a second chance for a reason. God works in mysterious ways."

I hope we can be the husband and wife that can go to churches and speak to help other families.

John Gallagher

Cell number: 267-939-0365

Box 561

Worcester, PA 19490

www.speakingaboutdepression.com

www.teamofangels.com