

What love can't fix

My dad's descent into depression

by [Matt Gaventa](#) in the [February 4, 2015](#) issue



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When I was 15 years old, my father disappeared, and a pale imitation showed up in his place. In some ways, it was a pretty good copy. For a while, he could go to his job, he could go to the grocery store, he could drop off the dry cleaning. I'm sure the

clerk at the gas station didn't notice anything different.

But my mom and I knew. My father has endless charisma, and when he disappeared, everything changed. When that cheap photocopy entered the room, you could feel the temperature drop five degrees. He was a gray ghost in a Technicolor world, and when you looked in his eyes—*its* eyes—there was no joy, because he wasn't there. He had disappeared without leaving.

I don't remember when I first heard the phrase "clinical depression," but I remember when the words hit home. It was the day after my 16th birthday, the day my father entered the acute wing of inpatient psychiatric care. That's the one where they take your shoelaces and your belt. It was a very grayscale place, and it fit him perfectly.

Mom and I didn't know how to talk about it. We didn't know what to say to him, so we just said we loved him. I told him I loved him because I loved him, and because I thought no one so well loved could be sad. And I said it because I knew Paul's words: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." If we loved him enough, surely he'd come home.

He did come home for a while, but things weren't better. My love affair with love ended on November 3, 1995, the day we found my father's unconscious body lying in his study. He had taken most of the pills in the medicine cabinet—whether to end his life or just to escape the afternoon, nobody knows for sure, not even him. Thankfully, the doctors saved him—and, this time, for whatever reason, things got better. At last the person who came home was really him. I breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Nearly 20 years later, I'm still breathing it.

Here's what I learned: clinical depression is horrible. It's not a mood. It's not what you feel when a lot of bad things happen and you get sad. That's a normal, rational response. But clinical depression interferes with the brain's ability to have normal, rational responses. It creates a chemical imbalance in the brain, and it starts translating what actually happens in the world into what it wants you to think, which is that you are unloved, unlovable, and unworthy.

So every time we told my father that we loved him, what he heard was, "Actually, we'd be better off without you." At a chemical level, it didn't matter that we loved him. We couldn't say it in a way that could penetrate the shield that depression had erected around his sense of self-worth.

Dad got better. But love didn't beat his depression, because love couldn't get in. The only way to fight a chemical imbalance is with chemistry. Thank God for pharmaceuticals.

This is not the story we like to tell about love. Paul just about falls over himself telling the Corinthians how everything will come out just fine if they just remember to love one another. No wonder this passage always shows up at weddings, where some preacher tells some young couple that love will be the secret ingredient to get them through anything. Apply liberally, and happiness will beat a path to your door.

Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the chemistry is just out of whack. Depression and anxiety disorders affect about one in five adult Americans. If we understand such disorders as failures of love, we don't just deprive ourselves of opportunities to treat them at a chemical level. We also fling wide the door to our own worst demons. I know, because it happened to me. On my darkest nights, I felt the weight of my father's illness: *I could have been there for him. I could have convinced him that he was loved.* That's what depression does: it turns love into the lynchpin of everything we should have or could have done. It asks a thousand dark questions on a thousand dark nights, each one an opportunity for anger, guilt, and shame.

On those dark nights, the words of grace to me have been these: love can't do everything. It isn't your fault; there's nothing you could have said or done. Having depression doesn't mean you're not loved. It just means you can't hold that love in your heart. So trying to cure depression with love is like bailing out a boat with a sieve: well intended, but not that helpful.

Thankfully, Paul's understanding of love is more complex than the greeting-card version we know so well. Look again: in 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle extols not the power of love but rather its persistence. If hope is the thing with feathers, love is the thing with armor. It comes with reinforced steel, invincible to all the chemical imbalances of creation. Prophecy, tongues, and knowledge come to an end, but love—like those mythical postapocalyptic cockroaches—survives everything.

So even when brain chemistry runs us down, love stays on its feet. Even when we can't see the path before us, love gets through. It's playing rope-a-dope with the slings and arrows of creation, and someday—when sin and death run out of steam, when guilt and shame have no more worlds to conquer, when all those dark nights converge onto the sunrise—on that day, love will still be standing, thanks to the God

who loved us from the beginning.

To me, that's the gospel: God's love won't fix everything, but it can outlast anything.
It's the only way I ever got through.