

# Undoing Depression.

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## 1. Introduction: We are not alone!

- Buzz Aldrin, American astronaut, the second man to set foot on the moon
- Hans Christian Andersen, Danish writer
- Kjell Magne Bondevik, Norwegian politician and former Prime Minister of Norway
- David Bohm, British quantum physicist
- Jim Carrey, Canadian actor and comedian
- David Chase, American television writer, television director and television producer (*The Rockford Files*, *Northern Exposure*, *The Sopranos*)
- Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister
- Calvin Coolidge, 30th President of the United States.
- Eminem, American Rapper
- J. K. Rowling, British writer
- Charles Haddon Spurgeon, famous British preacher.

Despite their amazing diversity, all these people share something in common with us – they have all struggled with depression. They are just a very small sample from a list that I have of 210 famous people who have all struggled with depression. We are not alone!

I have had fights with depression since I was a kid. Sometimes I won, sometimes depression won - but I'm winning the war. I thought that when I became a Christian, I would have no more fights with depression - wrong! I have had some very intense bouts of depression since becoming a Christian. Most of them have happened since I have been in ministry. I felt that as a pastor I should not be suffering with depression. Surely a pastor would have it all together. That's just the kind of idea that will kill you and the kind of idea that malevolent spirits would want you and me entertaining in our heads. I'm convinced that my depression is partly genetic and partly circumstantial. This doesn't mean that I am consigned to depression. There are a number of things that I do that keep me winning the war. I'd like to share them with you.

To make a start however, we need to try and understand what depression is and what it looks like.

## 2. What is Depression?

“An emotional state of dejection and sadness ranging from mild discouragement and downheartedness to feelings of utter hopelessness and despair.”  
The World Health Organisation.

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“Depression is an unfortunate name as it has attained an unwarranted social stigma and to the uninformed has the connotation of being a minor disease of little consequence. **We would prefer to call it a neurotransmitter deficiency** (i.e. a shortage of certain brain chemicals in critical areas of one’s brain).” (Paper from my doctors surgery on depression.)

A very important fact we need to grasp is that depression is a physiological state. It is *not* somebody just deciding to be moody. Depression happens when the neurotransmitters in our nervous system become depleted.

Neurotransmitters are the little messengers that run between the millions of nerve cells in our brains and our bodies. When they become depleted and “understaffed”, we begin to feel like our get up and go got up and left. We lose interest in things that interested us before. We lose our memory more, we struggle for names, and thoughts seem to come slowly. We battle to concentrate. We feel like a darkness has covered us.

Just to make sure we have this clear, depression is a physiological state, not just a mood. That's why telling a depressed person to just pull themselves together is like telling someone with a broken leg to just get up and run the 100 metres.

However, the other side of the coin is that there is almost always a cause that has made us get to the place where our neurotransmitters are depleted. What got us there is complex and I believe is a mixture of genetic and environmental issues. I believe it is also a mix of physical, emotional and spiritual factors.

Richard O’Connor has written that we get good at “doing” depression as a result of all the complex behaviour patterns that have become rooted in our lives as a result of dysfunctional life events in our past. “...very often, depression has become part of the self: the person doesn’t remember and cannot imagine anything other than the depressed life.” [Pg. 29] We find ourselves wondering if we will ever be able to break out of being shy, or unsure of ourselves, or passive or withdrawn. Sometimes we feel at an almost subconscious level that this is all we deserve. We somehow sense we are not worthy of living joyful, fulfilling lives.

- We have very faulty perceptions of the world and ourselves. Someone has said, “My struggle is not with who *I* think I am. It’s not with who *you* think I am. It’s with who *I think that you think* that I am.”
- We struggle in relationships – making unrealistic demands on those close to us, struggling to communicate our real needs, misinterpreting stuff as rejection, we are anxious and unassertive.
- We have to work harder at living than anyone else.

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- We become expert at maintaining a false front – we smile, achieve success, and can pass as happy with those who don't know us well.
- We become experts at “depressive skills”
  - Isolation
  - Somatisation
  - Denial
  - Repression
  - Projection
  - Procrastination
  - Drivenness
  - O/C Behaviour
  - Violence
  - Escapism

Depression is the replacement of parts of the self that are natural, spontaneous, and honest with these self-destructive skills. Healing comes as we work hard to rediscover our natural, spontaneous and honest self.

Alice Miller once wrote that, “The true opposite of depression is not gaiety or absence of pain, but vitality: the freedom to experience spontaneous feelings.”

“Depression is a complex condition that blurs our Western boundaries between mind and body, nature and nurture, self and others. Many people with depression seem to have been primed for it by trauma, deprivation, or loss in childhood. Most people with depression describe difficulties in their childhood or later in life that have contributed to low self-esteem and a sensitivity to rejection, an uncertainty about the self and an inability to enjoy life.”  
(O'Connor, *Undoing Depression*. Pg. 9)

Depression is not so much a sickness of being too emotional, but rather a sickness that results out of our habit of *not allowing ourselves* to feel or process emotions.

Like alcoholism, depression is a lifelong condition that can only be cured by a deliberate effort to change ourselves.

The Bible has a fascinating take on this. It says, “<sup>1</sup> I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2 (ESV))

In the original Greek the word translated “transformed” here is used in only one other place in the Bible – when Jesus was “transformed” on the mountain in Matthew 18. I hope this gives you an idea of how dramatic the transformation is

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that God wants to pull off in you and me! This verse has been the basis of my ongoing winning over depression.

Here is a common list of the symptoms of depression so that you can decide whether you or somebody you know might be struggling with it or not. Please don't be like me and limp on through life, irritable, tired, guilty, yet too proud to face the fact that you might have depression. Having depression is not a weakness; it's a reality - like someone with diabetes or high blood pressure. Go for help. Talk to someone. Don't let you and your loved ones be robbed of the quality of life you could enjoy.

As far as the symptoms go, to be considered depressed you will have had these for at least two weeks consistently.

1. Feelings of hopelessness and/or high anxiety.
2. Over-analysis of problems with great angst and negativity.
3. Sleeping difficulties.
4. Eating and appetite problems.
5. Decreased sexual drive.
6. Withdrawal from others.
7. Loss of self-esteem.
8. A desire to avoid all problems/demands.
9. A deep sense of guilt.
10. Over-dependency on others.
11. Crying and tearfulness.
12. Fatigue.
13. Preoccupation with body function.
14. Suicidal thoughts.
15. Self-neglect.

Depression manifests itself differently in different people. Some people may have a single episode, some may have recurring episodes, others (a very, very small percentage of the population) may live with depression constantly. There are also a very small percentage of people who suffer bi-polar depression which is strongly genetically linked and usually a lifelong condition.

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“I realize now that no simple, single-factor theory of depression will ever work. Depression is partly in our genes, partly in our childhood experience, partly in our way of thinking, partly in our brains, partly in our ways of handling emotions. It affects our whole being..... recovery can come only

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through a continuous act of will, a self-discipline applied to emotions, behaviour, and relationships in the here and now.”

R. O' Connor *Undoing Depression* Pg. 8&9.

I'd like to put up some slides that show how I approach un-doing depression.

- 5 circle approach
- Spirit, Soul and Body
- God, neighbour and self => Security, Identity, Significance.

### 1. Our Spirit

Please don't dial out here if you feel you are not the spiritual type. In my family, the men regarded anything spiritual as being something for the women and pretty much irrelevant to real life. I have come to realise that Jesus is the most masculine man that I know. Working class, a chippy, fit, strong, passionate, in your face, radical, yet also tender and loving. I can have connection with Him on my mountain bike as much as in a quiet prayer place – and I love both.

The most important thing in my life and the most important help in my life has been my relationship with God. It's such a part of my life that I take it for granted in the best possible way. I believe spiritual health to be the MOST important part of winning over depression on a daily basis.

**Top tip** we win over depression a day at a time - a bit like alcoholics win over alcoholism on a daily basis.

What does spiritual health look like?

C.S. Lewis wrote,

“A car is made to run on gasoline, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel that our spirits were designed to burn, or the food that our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other.”

Recently I read a book about cycling across Tibet, and the author writes of seeing Tibetan pilgrims travelling on foot from their villages to Lhasa, the sacred centre of Tibetan Buddhism. They had pieces of car tyre attached to their knees. They would take one step, then bow down on both knees and press their forehead to the ground. They would do this for every step they took. Some would take a year to reach Lhasa. Why do they do this? - In the hope that this level of sacrifice, that we can only marvel at, will improve their karma for their next reincarnation. I marvel at their devotion even though I believe it to be misplaced. You can be sincere yet be sincerely wrong. Like people who sincerely believe the earth is flat.

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I believe that we were designed by our Creator to be at our best when in relationship with Him. But that relationship has been seriously messed up through our sin. A Christian writer, Eugene Petersen, has defined sin as our refusal to have a relationship with God, which in turn messes up all our other relationships. The amazing grace of God has made a way for us to be reconciled to God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. A sacrifice with infinite value that covers every sin you or I have ever committed or ever will commit.

God took all our sins and placed them upon Jesus on the cross, so that you and I don't have to take even one step or even bow down once, in order to be right with Him. We are reconciled to God and placed in a warm, loving relationship with Him because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross, and nothing else need be added.

The Bible says, "It was a perfect sacrifice by a perfect person to perfect some very imperfect people. By that single offering, he did everything that needed to be done for everyone who takes part in the purifying process."

Wait. Which is it? *Perfect*, or taking part in the purifying *process*? The only way this verse makes sense is if we understand that when someone calls on Jesus to save them, the Bible says, "they have clothed themselves with Christ". Now when God looks at us, He sees Jesus. In other words God sees us as perfect. But we know, and God knows, that from *our* perspective *inside* Jesus, there is a whole lot of "the purifying process" happening! The Bible says that Jesus "became sin in order that we might become the righteousness of God".  
Woah.

From these truths we gain the deepest sense of *security*, *acceptance* and *significance* on a daily basis - very important stuff for people who struggle with depression. This deep love of the Trinity that bathes us daily is the strongest healing that we can obtain. To know God as Father, Jesus as our Lord and Saviour and yet also as our friend and brother, and the Holy Spirit as our constant companion, guide and lover of our souls is utterly therapeutic. This is the most important thing that I will tell you today. All the rest is just props to this central truth.

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### Malevolent spirits

I agree with psychologists White and Blue [sic], that Depression is never purely psychological and never purely spiritual but *always* a combination of both.

In this section of my talk, I would like to look at the dark side of the spiritual side of depression. It concerns the issue of spiritual beings that are against us because of the image of God in us.

According to the Bible, malevolent spiritual beings are able to influence our:

- Health (woman bowed down for 18 years with what looked like osteoporosis)
- Moods (King Saul would have terrible mood swings)
- Thoughts and decisions (Judas, Ananias & Saphira all had their thought life demonically influenced to turn away from God)
- Mental Health (Many evil spirits in the man in the Gadarenes)
- Speech Defects (Deaf and Mute man)
- Epileptic type seizures. (Young man)
- Influence to sin against God (<sup>1</sup> And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— **Ephesians 2:1-2** )

What can we do about the spiritual dimension to our depression?

Firstly we need to be Spiritually Strong ourselves. For a Christian this means:

- Regularly Reading the Bible and meditating on what we read and applying it to life.
- Praying

Watchman Nee, in his book “*The Prayer Ministry of the Church*” writes that the prayer life of the church is the pipe through which God has limited Himself to get His purposes and resources to the earth. If a church is weak in prayer then the diameter of the pipe is very small, and though God’s resources may, in Nee’s words, be as vast as the Yangtze River,

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they can only get through at a very slow trickle. The same applies to the individual.

- Worshipping
- Fasting (There are some excellent books on this - Arthur Wallace, Derek Prince, Richard Foster have all written good books on this subject. Get yourself clued up on this powerful spiritual weapon)
- Fellowship with other believers.

Then, in prayer, we need to take authority against the spirits that are trying to influence our particular areas of weakness e.g. fear of failure, fear of rejection, unnatural need to be in control, obsession with our weight etc. etc. I don't believe that these things are purely psychological. Evil spirits are like flies (one of Satan's names means "lord of the flies"), and they will gather around any wound in our being and try to worsen it and infect it even more. (Good books: *Waking the Dead* by John Eldridge; *Christian Set Yourself Free: Proven Guidelines to Deliverance from Demonic Oppression* by Graham and Shirley Powell)

### 2. **Our Soul** (emotions, will/decisions, and intellect/thoughts)

To overcome depression we also need to pay attention to our souls (emotions, will, intellect/thoughts) and our bodies. We *have* to take a holistic approach to winning over depression - don't let the New Age steal this concept from us. God created us body, soul and spirit. The New Age didn't think up holistic healing, God did.

Experts on emotional health recommend:

- Practice “mindfulness”. The ability to be aware of your thoughts, and how you are feeling, and what is going on around you.
- Get in touch with your emotions and talk to someone you trust about your emotions. Get them out in the open. Try the “15 minute exercise” with your partner. At some point in every day you talk for 15 minutes to your partner without interruption except for questions of clarification from your partner. Your talk can be totally random and doesn't have to make sense or even be sequential. Just talk! And try and include talking about how you are *feeling*.
- Learn how to be happy. “Three things exercise” – think of 3 things in your day that brought you joy and satisfaction. As you recall each one, smile,

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savour it; imagine the pathways in your brain reconnecting to enable you to experience true joy.

- Learn how to express your needs, desires, preferences, and boundaries.
- Work on your friendships. Put effort into them. Make your friendships 100% dependant on you. Don't wait for friends to contact you. Just keep on taking the initiative. It will bear fruit.
- Learn the vital art of compensation. Rest after you have been particularly busy. Take a day (or extra day) off after a busy business/ministry trip. Make compensating part of your lifestyle. If you don't, you will regularly "hit the wall".
- Learn when and how to rest.
- Try and cultivate a pleasant, cheap hobby that is easy to turn to in order to escape and recreate.
- 1 Hour of recreational activity per day is important. Those late afternoon, early evening supper times with the family. Get out to different places. Fight the urge to stay cooped up.
- At least one 2 or 3 week uninterrupted vacation with the family per year, away from friends, relatives, in a place that charges your batteries.
- Weekends away. Several times a year. Preferably in a different environment to the one associated with responsibility.
- Live by priorities. This implies knowing what they are, planning in a diary, and the ability to say "NO" if something is not KEY & STRATEGIC.
- Be particularly vigilant to do the above when going through high stress times e.g. changing jobs, moving house or nations, death of someone close, promotions, retrenchment, financial pressures, family stresses etc.

### Feelings or Truth

Note the present imperfect tense of "winning" over depression. It's an ongoing thing, a day by day thing. Some days are better than others but we just have to get it in perspective that we *will* be up and fighting again. We might lose a round in the boxing match, but we *are* going to win the fight.

I would like to talk about depending on God's favour over us regardless of how we *feel*.

In some ways we need to "ignore" our negative and unreliable feelings - as a depressive our feelings are often negative and unreliable. The trouble is that for so long our feelings have *felt* so real that we have believed that they *are* reality. We have to reprogram our thinking to be in line with a higher truth than our feelings. The only place I know, to find a higher truth than my feelings is the Bible. So I have to go to the Bible with the question, "What does the Bible have to say about me as a believer in Jesus?" It says things about me like, "I am the

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righteousness of God", "I am more than a conqueror through Christ Jesus who loved me", "I am loved by God", "He will never leave me or forsake me", "He is for me", etc. etc. These things stand true even when I *feel* like they are not true. They are truer than my feelings.

We empower whatever or whoever we come into agreement with. We are saying, "Yes, that's right. That does describe me." We get to choose whether we are going to agree with our own damaged thinking, or with what God says about us in the Bible. This sounds easier than it is in reality. It is sooo hard to ignore feelings that are screaming at you that you are a failure and that surely God cannot bless you; and instead walk confidently in the truth that God is *for* you. It means *behaving* like the latter is true. Often when I am on my way to preach, I have thoughts and feelings that God will not bless what I am about to do. I have to focus my thinking on what is true - that God is for me, that His intention is for me to be fruitful, to multiply believers, to fill the earth with Christians and to subdue evil spirits and exercise spiritual dominion wherever I am.

### Changing our thinking

Winning over depression involves the process of changing our thinking. Psychologists call this cognitive behavioural therapy. The Bible calls it being transformed by the renewing of our mind.

What I am going to write here will seem very simple but let me say in advance that it requires hard work, consistency, and sticking at it. The rewards though, are great.

When you are feeling negative feelings, irrational thoughts, suddenly feeling down and you don't know why, then go through the following process in the following order. [N.B. No feelings just come **out of the blue**. They are caused by deep rooted and sometimes repressed issues that are trying to make themselves felt.] It is good to use a notebook (I have used my prayer journal). Make 5 columns across the page, as below.

We need to process the columns in an interesting order.

Firstly write the date in column 1. (If you keep doing this exercise consistently you may be able to see that it is at certain times of the year that you struggle more than at others.)

Then go straight to column 4 - "What feelings?" Try and identify what you are feeling even though you might not understand why.

Then go to column 3 - "What thoughts?" i.e. what am I saying to myself in my head?

Then column 2 - "What happened?" Try and identify when you began feeling these feelings and when you started thinking these thoughts. What happened at

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that time?

Finally go to column 5 - "Counsel to self (and action)?" In this column write what Biblical counsel you would give a friend if they were coming to you for advice for the things that you have written in columns 2 to 4. Try and give some specific action to follow through on as well. The fact that this is rooted in the Bible (find actual verses in Scripture where possible), is what makes it so much more powerful than pure cognitive behavioural therapy.

Here's an example of one that I did when I went to talk on Winning over Depression in Edinburgh recently:

Date	What happened?	What thoughts?	What feelings?	Counsel to self (& action)?
16/3/11	Preparing for talk in Edinburgh	How can I speak on something I don't have total victory over?	Afraid, incompetent, disqualified	God has made me competent. 2 Cor 3:4-6. Go for it. You will help many people. Be bold. Prepare well.

Hope this is helpful. I encourage you to take the time and the trouble to get into the habit of doing the above. It's the only way we can stop "stinking" thinking within ourselves. I think it's a key part of discipleship - following Jesus.

### 3. Our Body: Sleep, Eat, Exercise.

- Get plenty of sleep and rest.
- A healthy diet. Avoid junk food, processed foods and foods loaded with preservatives. These break down the body's resistance. Sugar is a poison in your system. Eat as much uncooked, natural stuff as you can. Drink at least 2 litres of water/day.
- Possibly take a vitamin supplement, especially when under pressure. Vitamin B's are important here.
- Get out of the house and into the fresh air.
- Breathe properly! In through your nose for the count of 4; hold for the count of 7; breathe out of your mouth for the count of 8. You can make this a spiritual exercise as well by breathing in truth/love/peace/God's

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Fatherhood...; hold it in to nourish your whole system; breathe out unbelief/selfishness/anxiety/orphan spiritedness...

- 20 minutes of exercise a day to maintain cardio-vascular health. Don't make it overly ambitious otherwise you will do it in great pendulum swings of over-exertion to absolutely nothing. Do something that is easy to keep up and that doesn't cause you discomfort. Swimming and walking are good options. You must fit your exercise into 6 days. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day thou shalt rest!

When you are emotionally/spiritually tired, you are probably also physically tired. Pushing yourself to recreate or exercise can overtax you. You need rest. Rest is not recreation. It is to stop doing the things that you normally do and not to fill your time with other things.

When you are already emotionally/spiritually exhausted, you burn more energy than normal doing the same things – even answering the phone can become an emotional crisis! You're like the lumberjack who had to work harder and harder and harder because he refused to stop and sharpen his axe. When you find yourself in this state, recognise where you are at and be gentle on yourself. We all have different capacities and levels of endurance. Don't try and compete with others or measure yourself by others. Be gentle on yourself, rest, compensate and recharge your battery.

### COUNSELLING

I would like to briefly say something about counselling. I do not think that anyone will be able to unravel their complex roots to depression without the help of a counsellor at some point. We are just too close to the coalface to be able to untangle things alone. There is also enormous benefit in opening up to someone – our struggle is no longer hidden and private – where our self and spirits love to mess with our thinking.

I would recommend going to a professional counsellor. The money it costs is totally worth it. You could however start with your pastor or another trusted leader/counsellor.

Going through counselling is hard work and requires effort on your part. It's not about expecting someone else to magically understand you, explain you, and fix you. They are there to help you on *your* healing journey.

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### Medication

If you are in the trough of depression, it is unlikely that you are going to get out of it without the help of medication. The other side of the coin though is that if you do not put into practice all that I have written above, once you come off the medication, you are probably going to slump back into depression. By all means let the medication get you on an even keel but DO NOT rely on medication alone. Also, do not resort to medication too easily. It is not a cure-all.

Sometimes people can steadily work their way out of depression by cultivating the good habits that I have written of above, without taking medication.

I have taken medication when I needed to. My local GP surgery released a paper saying,

Antidepressant is such an unfortunate term. "Neurotransmitter supplement" would be a better term.

They are not addictive. They are not uppers or downers. They are simply a means of boosting the chemical that your body uses to conduct messages through your nerve cells. When you are depressed, the level of the neurotransmitters in your body drops and that is what makes you feel low, unmotivated, have memory loss, struggle to concentrate and so on. If you are not depressed, taking an anti-depressant will do nothing for you.

If you are struggling with depression I suggest you go and see your GP. They are generally good people to talk to as they are outside your normal circle of relationships and it can be helpful to talk to a neutral person. They will decide whether you need medication or not.

I need to make a short comment here on coming off anti-depressants. This is an art in itself. Your body has reduced its own production of neurotransmitters because they were being provided chemically by your anti-depressant. If you stop the anti-depressant suddenly, your system reacts strongly. You can feel all the emotions that you felt whilst depressed suddenly rush back plus you will probably struggle with irritability, anger, dizziness, electric shocks, nausea, headaches etc. etc. This can cause people to think that they have not got any better despite their treatment and go straight back onto the antidepressant.

The art is to reduce the dosage so gradually that your body's stepping up of neurotransmitter production goes apace with the reduction of the antidepressant.

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### Books to Read

I hope you have found this useful and encouraging. Finally I would like to give you some recommended reading:

*Undoing Depression* by Richard O'Connor, Ph.D. This is one of the best books I have read on depression from a secular point of view. Read this book!

*Overcoming Depression* by Paul Gilbert. This book is good at helping you understand the process of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. I don't agree with everything he says as he doesn't write with God as part of the healing process. However, it is still a very good book.

*Christian Set Yourself Free* by Graham and Shirley Powell. Good book on spiritual authority and overcoming spirits. The drawback with this book is that I think it is perhaps a little simplistic. Nonetheless, it is the most thorough treatment of spiritual authority that I know of.

*Awakening the Dead* by John Eldridge. A book on physical and spiritual realities of living as a Christian. An easy read.

Keep fighting, hanging in there, and above all, winning!

God's love to you,

Sean.