

When I think of the last year two, conflicting thoughts cross my mind. However, they are both true. I think: that was the worst year of my life and, that was the best year of my life. I have discovered just how true it is that God takes our times of weakness and turns them around for His glory and blesses us in the process.

If there is a Bible passage which has helped me throughout my life it's Romans 8. Nothing can separate us from God's love. If there is a song which reflects my journey so far it's Matt Redman's 'You never let go'.

During 2010, I was working in a very difficult situation and as I struggled with work and some other issues, I began to suffer with depression. By May 2010 my depression and anxiety were severe and I was to be off work for the following nine months.

Before suffering this severe depression I had assumed depression was another name for sadness. In my experience though, I learned that it was like a darkness that consumed me; I had very little or no control over my mind and it certainly was beyond the realms of just needing to 'think positive' or 'get over it'. Here are some of the experiences I had during the time I was ill:

- I felt like my brain had shut down completely, I was unable to make any decisions. I wouldn't drink because I didn't know if I wanted tea or coffee; I couldn't eat because when presented with a plate of food I couldn't work out what to do or what to eat first. Every decision or small task seemed insurmountable. I was unable to pick up the phone, pay a bill or write a letter.
- I wasn't just sad, I was in despair; this feeling was almost constant, and although I'd cry there'd be no release from pain. The only small release I found was in self-harm and alcohol. The desire to hurt myself was constant, every time I closed my eyes I'd envisage my arms cut to pieces. I did try to resist these temptations but at times I would fail.
- I developed a fear of going out anywhere and I rarely slept. The hour or two where I did sleep was always filled with terrifying nightmares and flashbacks.

I felt like a complete failure; I was an educated teacher but had lost the ability to function normally. I had had to stop work, and was unable to serve at church. I don't know how to explain this, but even during these darkest moments I knew God was with me. A Bible verse, which really spoke to me, was John 6:29 where Jesus says: 'This is the only work God wants from you: believe in the one He sent.'

One day one of my friends tried to talk to me on the phone and, sensing how much I was struggling, she drove up from London and took me to stay with her and her husband for a few weeks. This was a time of intense prayer and support.

When I returned home to my flat alone I didn't cope well at all. I was overwhelmed by emotions I couldn't even recognise but in the desperation for release I turned more and more regularly to self-harm and alcohol. I got so desperate one day that I scratched my face until it was swollen and cut my hair. I didn't mind that I looked a mess because I presumed I would be dead by the next day. There was seemingly no way forward.

At that point a lovely lady from church came forward and I stayed in her home for a few weeks.

A little while later I moved in with my aunt for about three months; during this time painful family secrets were brought out. Although this has caused some difficulties, God used the time to bring things into the light.

I realised the flat where I was living alone was not helping me. A few good friends helped me work out how to let my property and found me a great place to rent with some lovely Christian friends.

I slowly began to improve and was able to complete simple tasks once again. God blessed me incredibly throughout this time. There were times when I had no money and God miraculously provided. He put people there at the right times and spoke to me through the Bible. I had always had a strong desire for God, but doubted the extent to which He wanted to use me. I was never able to stand for more than two or three minutes without feeling faint. This hindered my ability to

pray with people; God healed me. Now the only thing in my way was my low self-esteem and the lack of belief that God would use me. In London I prayed with a friend and her long-standing back problem was healed. God showed me He was willing to use even me!

During my nine months or so off work I was able to pray through a lot of past issues and hurts. The freedom I now have is exhilarating. God has given me a new confidence (but this time I know it's all from Him), a love of living, a desire to help others and a real knowledge that He does love me, wants to bless me, and is as dependable as I've been taught!

Now I've just completed my fourth full-time week back at work and am loving the job. It's a struggle for energy sometimes, but now I wake up excited about the year ahead, compared to a year ago when the thought of going in reduced me to tears or beyond.

God hasn't restored me, He's made me into a new person altogether!

Bryony

This is Bryony's story and expresses her personal opinions. Bryony is a pseudonym.