

2018 Summer News Brief



Even the sunny summer days can't stop depression. It knows no season, no gender, no age, no profession.

Every day there is news of people coping with this disease, sharing their struggle publically.

This very special edition of *News Brief* is dedicated to Pioneer Press sportswriter Brian Murphy's personal story.

It's real. It's heartbreaking.
And it's hopeful.



UNITED HOSPITAL
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Brian Murphy: Major depression spares no one — even sportswriters like me

By BRIAN MURPHY | brianmurphy@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press

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My psychiatrist that morning took one look at my sad, desperate eyes, trembling body, the clothes hanging off a frame that shed 12 pounds in less than a week and declared that this dysfunctional journalist, husband and father of two should be hospitalized.

By sundown Dec. 12, I was wheeled, in surgical scrubs and socks, to the fifth floor of United Hospital's mental health unit in St. Paul to join other patients navigating their own personal hells.

Rock bottom was all too real. Stripped of my clothes, belt, shoes and dignity, I was alone, uncertain and, when that steel-reinforced door locked behind me, a thousand miles from home.

More than 16 million adults in the U.S. suffered at least one major depressive episode in 2017, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America. The disease spares no one, carving a path of untreated destruction across all ethnic, racial and socioeconomic lines.

I was among those statistics.

In a twisted way, I would rather have had cancer than a brain disease that is so marginalized and misunderstood by much of an uninformed and unsympathetic society. Then I could share my diagnosis and rally friends and co-workers around my baldness and chic bandana in the fight against the great killer.

So much easier than trying to explain how someone vibrant, successful and still young could be so miserable.

Just tough it out, folks might say. What could you possibly be so unhappy about?

Well, too bad, world. I have a mental illness. Hear me roar.

I thought I had conquered depression 11 years ago, when I cycled off the Minnesota Wild beat after five fun but exhausting years crisscrossing North America on the NHL's nights-and-weekends conveyor belt.

The initial encounter with my dark passenger prompted a visit with the aforementioned doctor. She talked me through acceptance, persuaded me to take a less stressful

reporting gig and prescribed an antidepressant — a three-pronged attack that slew the demons and sent me on my merry way.

Marriage, children and promotions followed over the next decade with nary a setback.

Last summer, I was writing columns for the Pioneer Press, preparing to host a regular Friday drive-time radio show on 1500ESPN and awaiting the release of my first book, "100 Things Gophers Fans Should Know and Do Before They Die."

I would rather have had cancer than a brain disease that is so marginalized and misunderstood by much of an uninformed and unsympathetic society.

I had everything going for me — a beautiful wife, two great kids, a house and a cat — plus a close, extended family and rich social circle of longtime personal and professional friends. Until it all came crashing down last fall.

Waking up at my parents' suburban Detroit home in late August, the last day of a rewarding vacation in Michigan, had me feeling blue. I chalked it up to the long drive ahead, end of summer, start of the school year and another grinding Vikings season to cover.

But the melancholy only deepened as the weeks went by. Insecurity, indecisiveness and paranoia crept in. Writing was torture. Broadcasting became an out-of-body experience in which I thought I was butchering every thought spoken into the microphone, and that everyone knew it.

I was swimming in self-doubt, but the work product was fine — really good in some cases — at least at first.

My dormant affliction was raging again. I was in total denial, brooding about the circumstances, seeking a root

cause that was evidently a chemical imbalance and foolishly believing I alone could power through the bleakness.

Wearing a mask of confidence and contentedness allowed me to fake it professionally for weeks, but I was isolating myself at home and hopeless every waking moment.

Sleep became a refuge until I woke up at 3 or 4 a.m., stared at the alarm clock, unable to fall back to sleep, and counted the minutes until it was time to tackle everyday life with both hands tied behind my back. The emotional part of my brain overwhelmed the analytical and rational prefrontal cortex.

I would help my wife feed our kids breakfast and get them off to the bus stop before retreating to bed, where I would curl up under the covers and dread the moment I really had to get up and go to work. Sometimes I just stayed there all day.

I called in sick, avoided assignments, procrastinated on others and became creatively bankrupt, barely able to opine about games or cover news that was right in front of me.

I moped around the house, desperately trying to shield my 8- and 7-year-old from dad's rapidly declining health while burdening my working wife with more domestic duties and relegating her to being my nurse.

Staggering through life trying to avoid human contact is a lonely cross to bear. But failing your family inflicts collateral damage that wreaks unbearable guilt.

A Thanksgiving work trip to Detroit to cover the Vikings-Lions game allowed me to see my parents, who quickly realized I wasn't right. I was moody and sullen. I confided in a close friend who couldn't understand why I was so dejected.

A standing appointment with my psychiatrist became my beacon. I would demand new medication and start over. But it was too late. I was already gone.

In the mental ward, though, a funny thing happened. I rebounded. Fast.

Spending three nights choking down cardboard food, reading quietly in a corner and avoiding eye contact with those struggling with reality and their place in it — that will sober you up.

I found relief in bottoming out. The decision to get well had been made for me. My wife put into motion a short-term disability claim that reassured I would be financially protected during my recovery.

I am fortunate to have insurance that covered this crisis. So many people lack the social or financial safety net to catch their descent, especially the working class and poor with narrow-minded employers or insurance policies that do not cover mental health — if they have insurance at all.

In scrubs, I met a psychiatrist and nurse who scripted a crisis plan that included a new antidepressant and three weeks of outpatient group therapy — five days a week, six hours a day. There is security in knowing there are others who are suffering just like you.

There was the single 20-year-old mother, high-powered attorney, college scholar and theology professor along with a cop, firefighter, insurance adjuster and construction worker — all of us working through our pain.

Some had attempted suicide. Others suffered unspeakable tragedy. I had nothing to compare. But all of us were completely vulnerable and felt safe laying our cards on the table, as we sought and gave feedback that was priceless.

My therapists at United were professional, empathetic and instructive on how to accept my depression and learn to cope with symptoms that are stealthy and relentless.

It was not all smooth sailing. I had several good weeks followed by some scary relapses. January was touch-and-go.

I was able to return to work part time and cover some of the Vikings' playoff run and lead-up to Super Bowl LII at U.S. Bank Stadium. I also returned to the airwaves.

I felt well and confident enough to return full time Feb. 19.

This has been a frightening, awesome and enlightening journey. I am grateful for so much, especially my wife, who has been my rock. The spouse, partner or loved one suffers as they help pick up the pieces of a depressed person, but I cannot imagine going through this alone.

Telling my story has been empowering, not intimidating. I am ashamed of nothing. The support I have received from friends and strangers alike in the past three months has been heartening.

Do not be afraid to reach for it.

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Michael Madison, MD

Eric Nussbaum, MD

Arif Shaik, MD

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