

Five Keys to Spiritual Health and Well-being

Introduction

Research has shown that we need our five portions of fruit and vegetables a day to ensure our physical health and well-being. Similarly, there are five spiritual issues that that we need to attend to for our spiritual health and well-being.

Some frequent indications that we may need to give more attention to these areas are as follows:

- ◆ Low self-worth, a feeling that we aren't highly valued or as good as others
- ◆ A feeling of personal insecurity often leading to fears and anxiety
- ◆ Feelings of guilt and failure, that we aren't good enough, or deserve to suffer
- ◆ A lack of spiritual energy or vitality, a sense of being disconnected, lost or drifting through life
- ◆ A lack of purpose and meaning in life, which can lead to a sense that life isn't worth living

Understanding the Spiritual aspect of our Being

The human being is a unity of body and spirit, each of which profoundly affects the other. The outer part is the body with its 5 senses which enable us to experience the physical world in which we live. The inner part is the spirit in which we experience those intangible aspects of life which make it so deeply meaningful. Professor Swinton's states: "the human spirit is the essential life force that under-girds, motivates and vitalises human existence" (Swinton, 2001).

This inner spirit person is the very core of our identity; who we are; how we perceive ourselves as individuals, and where we live our lives. This is the home of the inner life, the fountain of life, the source of spiritual energy, that which animates us. This is an area where life can be out of kilter, making us feel bad about ourselves as persons. We can feel dead inside, lost, aimless and with no purpose to our being. We can experience this as hollow emptiness, a deep void or an inner distress, a deep anguish, which may contribute to us feeling depressed or even suicidal.

There are five major spiritual factors, which can contribute to inner distress and cause a lack of well-being. There are five things we need to know for our spiritual health and well-being

Chapter 1.

We need to Know that we are Precious and Valued

One fundamental human need is to have a sense of value and intrinsic worth. We need to feel that we count for something - that we have worth. If other people have mistreated, hurt, rejected or abused us, that has a destructive effect on our sense of worth. We can feel as if we are worthless and that the world would be better off without us. Many end up actually hating themselves and their lives.

How we interpret the experiences of life is very important to our well-being. If these are misinterpreted, it is possible to reach the wrong conclusions about our worth. For example, Peter, a client of mine, lived a very happy and fulfilled life for 36 years. He had a good childhood with parents who loved and cared for him. He was happily married and had 3 children, all of whom appreciated him, and he had worked successfully for the same company for many years. However, when he was 36 his father made a decision to retire near to where his brother and sister lived, but far away from him. Peter had not been consulted about the matter and felt excluded. He began to dwell on this and the more he did so the more he told himself that his father didn't value him or he would have consulted him. He began to tell himself 'Nobody wants me', 'I'm worthless' and he sank into a deep depression. He began to withdraw himself from his friends and

eventually they began to ignore him, which only reinforced his thoughts. His depression spiralled deeper to the point where he didn't want to get up in the morning and lost all interest in life.

In counselling he was challenged to look at the evidence for his conclusion about his worthlessness. We looked at the evidence for that conclusion and the evidence against it. It didn't take looking very far into his life to see that his wife, children and boss all valued him and his neighbours and in-laws thought the world of him. Throughout the rest of his life all the evidence was that his father and mother both valued him deeply as well. However, he had allowed one event, and his interpretation of it, cloud out all the other evidence and reached a false conclusion about himself. When he realised this, he decided to establish a more balanced conclusion about himself based on all the evidence, not just the negative stuff. His considered conclusion was 'I'm precious and valued by those important to me in life'.

The next step for him was to start nursing this thought in his mind. Every time the former thought would come 'Nobody wants me. I'm worthless', he began to replace it with the new true evidence-based thought. His emotions began to follow his thinking and he lifted out of his depression. The fact was that his depression was caused largely by his thinking, in this case selective thinking based on a wrong interpretation of the facts. His recovery came by changing his thinking to a correct view of himself.

Many of us have a lot worse situations to deal with than Peter had, with accumulated negative evidence which seems to support our low view of ourselves. This is particularly the case where we have been mistreated, rejected, abused or put down from childhood. It is therefore more deeply ingrained and we feel that we have enough evidence to justify our conclusion. The feeling of worthlessness may penetrate our whole sense of self. This is especially the case if our parents, those who have given us life in the natural - have been part of the rejection, real or perceived. In this case it is helpful to look beyond the natural life givers to the Ultimate Life giver, our Creator, and examine what he thinks and says about us as His special creation.

As any workman values his craftsmanship and treasures his creations, so does the Master Craftsman of the universe. He values us enormously and we need to know deep inside our consciousness that we are precious to him. Each of us is a unique unrepeatable creative act of his love.

'You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvellous - how well I know it. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.'(Psalm 139v13-18 NLT)

Scripture tells us that not a single sparrow falls to the ground without his notice and that we are of more value than many sparrows (Luke 12v 6,7). He treasures us as the pupil of his eye (Deuteronomy 32v10). The Bible is the great story of the divine-human romance. The God who made us, values us, not only as his craftsmanship, but also as the objects of his love (John 3v16). Christ valued us so much that, in order to save us from death and destruction, he was willing to sacrifice his own life to give us a life worth living. (Romans 5 v.8). He reaches out in love to draw us into a loving relationship with himself. He wants to connect and share his life with us. We matter so much to him. We can find our true value as we read the Scriptures and discover our worth to God. He says to each of us, 'You are precious in my sight' (Isaiah 43 v.4). We need to personalise this by taking that thought deep into our consciousness and saying personally 'I am precious and valued by God'. This can begin to undo the sense of worthlessness and re-energise us for life again. Kim's story illustrates how that worked for her.

Kim's Story

'I was born in Tuam, Co. Galway. I know now that my family is what is called dysfunctional, but at the time I knew nothing else so I thought it was normal. My father drank heavily and battered my mother and brothers. When I was 10 Mum died. My father didn't come home much so I looked after my brothers, taking Mum's place. I had to grow up too fast.'

Eventually a social worker discovered our situation and came to take us to a children's home run by nuns. It was ok while we were all there together. Then we were split up and sent to different foster homes. I hardly had any news of them and I missed them terribly. They were my family, we belonged together, I had been like a mother to them; now I was bereft. I was fostered by a couple who were always at work so I was mostly alone. It was better when we were all together with the nuns. My foster father loathed me and I was miserable all the time.

If anyone asked how I was I just pretended I was ok, but I wasn't. The foster parents' son sexually abused me. I didn't know what to do, though I knew it wasn't right. I knew I wouldn't be believed, so I said nothing and stayed alone in my room. I spent hours and hours alone!

When I was fourteen I got an opportunity to return to the convent school where I'd been before and I stayed there till I was eighteen. One of the nuns was really kind which I so appreciated, but I'll never forget another who continually told me, 'You'll never do this, you'll never do that'. One day she said to me, 'You belong to Satan and you always will!' I was really messed up and past caring, but I never forgot that.

When I left school I went to live in a block of bedsits . It was ok but was never really a home. Before long I met Paul and we got married. We were able to get a house and for three or four years I managed to keep everything together. But when I was in my mid-twenties I started to get really depressed. I worked all the time, more than I needed to just to keep from thinking and feeling. Sometimes I cried and cried and other times I was numb. I felt like the walls were closing in. I couldn't stand noise and I remember wanting to smash the T V with a hammer! Not feeling anything was the worst. Feeling was like physical pain but the numbness was like something was dead inside me.

Then I got the idea that I could kill myself and this would solve my problems. I began to feel much happier, thinking this was my way out of pain; it was like a weight lifted off my shoulders. Paul noticed I was brighter. I chose a date eight weeks ahead . I was convinced that this was the best thing for my two kids. I decided to get up at three in the morning, to walk down to the beach and just keep walking into the sea.

I woke at exactly three a.m. saturated with sweat. It sounds mad, but I heard a voice saying to me 'Kim you don't need to die, you need Jesus!' I shook Paul awake and kept saying 'I don't want to die, I need Jesus. Do you know anyone who knows Jesus?' In the morning Paul's brother gave us the name of a Christian counsellor. I clung to this like a lifeline and made an appointment to see him. Paul came with me.

At the end of our first session the counsellor said to me, 'I understand'. No-one had ever said that to me before. I found that it gave me hope for the first time. As we went through the counselling sessions I remember discovering that God knew about me. I discovered that I wasn't a mistake, that I was meant to be here, that God loves me and that I have a future. I accepted this and it changed my whole life.

Kim continued in counselling for a couple of months and talked through the painful issues in her life.

'As we worked through the issues of the past it was painful, but I knew that they had to come up. I had never talked about them before, but they were always there. The very fact of talking and being understood was deeply healing, plus I was able to understand better why I felt the way I did.'

Now, many years later, Kim realises that she is still prone to a bit of depression at times, but not very often and it never gets to such a deep level. *'I never feel that most awful pain.'* She has worked out a way to handle it if she does begin to feel down. *'If those feelings start to come back I pretend that I am at traffic light; I rate them. Green, they are just beginning and I can handle them. If they get near to amber I force myself to cry (for emotional release) and I will turn to God more (for spiritual support). If they ever get to red, I will talk to somebody and get help. I've got to 'amber' twice, but I've never got to 'red' through all the years since then.*

'I have sometimes thought about suicide in recent years – not to do it, but as a thought in my mind. I put it down to hormones, but I would never do anything. I have found a better way to cope. I remember when my father died, that unhealthy tie with him was cut. I was so relieved and I felt free, because he was the source of so many of the early problems.

'Jesus is the difference for me. I know He is there. He was there for me when I didn't know He was there. When I heard the voice speaking to me that night, that wasn't a mistake. He had a plan for me. As a small child, I would go into my own world and I would talk to Him. I always felt someone was watching out for me. But I didn't realise then that He was someone I could talk to, or relate to, or get answers from, or that He was always there for me.'

'If someone tells me now that they are suicidal, I'd recommend them to get help, both psychiatric and spiritual help. Both have to go together. God has to come in to it somewhere. But – talk to somebody, even if you don't tell everything. I never did that when I was young. Now I know I need to talk when I am upset and allow myself to get emotional, even when I am not sure how I feel or how to express it. That works for me. If people don't talk they don't know there is another way, that there is a way out.'

'I knew that night when I woke up and heard that sound in my head, that that was the answer to my dilemma, and I thank God for that. I held on to that and wouldn't let go for anything. It was my only hope. And I thank God for it now.'

Kim's story shows the neglect that is so much part of an alcoholic home and the emotional abuse that results. For Kim this was combined with sexual abuse and rejection, which led to her feeling bad about herself. She reasoned that there had to be something wrong with her, that she was somehow a mistake. This was a wrong conclusion drawn from her experiences, and had to be corrected for her to get a more accurate view of herself.

We all do the best we can to interpret our life experiences, to try to make sense of them and understand why painful things have happened. But we don't always reach the right conclusions. The fact is there are people in life who do evil, painful, destructive things to innocent children. The blame lies with the evil perpetrators of such painful practices, and not with the victim. This is why it is so important that victims of abuse talk to those who can help them correct their understanding of what has happened to them and how they view themselves as a result.

It is also true that some people who do hurtful things do not realise the painful impact of their actions or their neglect. But the pain suffered by the recipient is no less real.

Children often try to justify the actions of their parents, or 'cover up' because they feel bad about exposing the ones who are supposed to care for them. This brings a lot of confusion, with the child often taking the guilt upon him/herself. Discussing this is vitally important to free the victim from false guilt.

Talking through the pain of abuse is important, not just as a way of defusing the terrible pain, but also as part of rebuilding a sense of self which has been so violated. We were all made to live our lives with dignity, be able to respect ourselves and to have our sense of self-worth restored. We are all precious and valued in the eyes of our Maker. If He values us then we need to take his objective valuation rather than our own distorted one.

Chapter 2.

We need to Know that we are Loved Unconditionally

Many of us have been let down or betrayed by other people. People have used and abused us, they have taken from us what they wanted and controlled us for their selfish ends. It can be difficult to trust again. We build walls of protection to keep others at bay and protect ourselves from further hurt. We make inner vows such as, 'no one will ever hurt me again' or isolate ourselves in the vain effort to avoid further pain. However, it doesn't really work. The pain remains and may still overwhelm us. Only **unconditional** love can heal that pain and give us real personal security.

We all need to be loved unconditionally, irrespective of our behaviour. It is another fundamental need of the human person. If we have not *felt* adequately loved by our parents we may become deeply insecure as people. This insecurity leads to anxiety and fear. We may feel rejected and fear further rejection.

It makes a tremendous difference to our sense of security and well-being if we have at least one person in our lives who loves us unconditionally. A mother's love is legendary in this regard. Many mothers seem to be able to overlook faults and failures in their offspring and continue to show love and affection regardless of their shortcomings. But not all.

'Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands...' (Isaiah 49v15)

God's love is more dependable than a mother's love, and God loves us unconditionally.

'Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?..... And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow - not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below - indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Romans 8v31-39)

This may not be the concept of God that we have developed in life, but it is the revelation God gives us of himself. We may have transferred to God the feelings we developed from our experience of authority figures in our lives – perhaps people who were harsh and demanding and only loved us for what they could get from us. But God is not like that in reality. He has given us a proof of his love by sending his Son Jesus Christ into the world to rescue us (Romans 5v8). He loved so much that he was prepared to die instead of us to save us from the hell of a loveless existence (John 3v16).

When we connect with him he starts to pour his love into our hearts and gives a life worth living (Romans 5v5). The Scriptures tell the objective facts about God's love. But when we open ourselves up to receive his love, the Spirit of God pours God's love into the core of our inner being. When we invite him to fill us with his Spirit we begin to experience his love, not as an abstract theory, but as a felt reality.

'And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.' (Ephesians 3v14-19).

The more we immerse ourselves in God's love, the more healed and secure we become. Life becomes, not simply more bearable, but positively worth living. When we are rejected in love, life can be very painful. Karen's story bears that out. When the man she loved walked out of her life, she felt despairing.

Karen's story

Life was a very lonely, desolate place for me. I was tired, tired of hiding behind a smile while inside I was experiencing gut wrenching pain; nothing I did would make that go away. No words can explain the intensity of that feeling or the sense of complete and utter despair, desolation, failure and unhappiness that grips the very core of your being and strangles you from the inside out.

I tried so hard to fight it, putting on a brave face for the world, outside I was smiling...while inside, I was dying. I tried some of the alternative therapies, self help books, reiki, energy healing etc. I tried drowning my sorrows in alcohol, thinking being out and about on the social scene in pubs and clubs would somehow make me feel "normal". In my desperation, I even tried cocaine and hash to see if it would help make this feeling go away but as I found, all of the above would temporarily numb the pain but when it returned, it returned with a vengeance.

I was bringing up my daughter with my mother's help and have always been able to get good jobs. Every new job would feel like it was a new start, but usually after 6 months, that gut-wrenching feeling would wear me down and turn a girl who was good at work into someone who had no faith in her own capabilities... and I would quit. It was the break up of a 7 year relationship with a man I thought I loved

that was the final straw. For 12 months afterwards I beat myself up everyday. I was useless, good for nothing. I had failed my daughter, my mother and I felt my father was disgusted with me.

I was worn out, couldn't fight anymore. I would find myself climbing into bed and pulling the covers over my head. I stopped opening my mail because I couldn't face another bill or bad news, dishes piled in the sink and dust grew in layers around the house because I just didn't have the energy to clean it. My daughter spent more and more time in my mother's house until she no longer lived with me and I had completely given up hope of ever being "normal" again.

Inside I was dead and I could no longer hide it on the outside and so I hid away in my little house. Thoughts went through my head of just walking quietly into the sea and leaving this world behind, the pain inside was growing more intensely and I thought about it more and more as a release, I felt dying was my only way out. I had to do it, I knew the devastation I would leave behind but I was in so much pain, I didn't care.

I cried out "Oh! God, I can't take this anymore, please take this pain away". I stood up to walk out the door, into my car and go to the sea to end it all, when a text message came through on my mobile, "Hi, thinking about you, how are you"? I had nothing left to lose so I responded to her text "I'm battling with the will to live". She responded immediately and gave me the phone number of a counsellor, she said he was very good and I should talk to him. I rang the counsellor straight away because deep down, I didn't want to die, I just wanted the pain to stop and I could see no other way of stopping it, only to kill myself.

A gentle voice talked to me on the other end of the phone and I knew he understood how I was feeling by the way he talked without judgement in his voice. After speaking with him a little while I started to feel better and I felt to hold on, there may be hope. I made it through that day and the following day I made the journey to see the counsellor. I came away from that first meeting feeling different, the urgency to kill myself had subsided and I had a strange feeling that something huge had happened inside me and God had answered that day I called out to him.

I met with the counsellor once a week for six weeks and each time, felt better and better. I felt love inside me again, I felt God's love for me more and more every day and where there was pain and emptiness inside me, God took them away and filled me with a comfort and peace that I had never felt before. I am more alive now than ever before and now I have strength, God's strength, which is always sufficient. The world is a lonely, hard place when you are trying to go it alone without God's love and blessings. Yes, there are still days that I sometimes find hard, but they are few and, with God's help, I get through.

Do I still want to die?

No, a thousand times No!

Am I the same person I was before?

No. God has made me a new person, with a life inside me like I've never felt before, a person who now loves to wake in the morning wondering what the day will bring and knowing He is right by my side. I now have a light within that is such a contrast to the darkness and pain I once felt. Only God could achieve that!

What do I say to those who read my story?

*I know something about how you feel, I've been there. Hold on, there is hope, there is a better place for you. God has better things for you. Just ask Him; hand over your life to Him; and don't give up! Remember, there is no pain or darkness in this world that we go through that Jesus Christ hasn't already gone through. So he can help us and bring us through. He died for us so that we may have life in abundance. **He died in pain and darkness for us, so that we don't have to die in our pain and darkness.***

And ask others for help too. Find a good counsellor as hope and help is available.

Karen had always known in theory that God loved her. But when she opened up her life to God at her lowest point He filled up her 'love tanks'. She began to feel his love and this is what made such a difference; it enabled her to rise out of despair and face life with confidence again. She had felt bereft when the man who she was looking to for love abandoned her. That loss of love is what caused her life to fall apart. But now she has found a love that won't let her down. Even though she had made a mess of her life, God still loved her unconditionally. And God guarantees that nothing can separate us from his love. What better promise can one get?

Chapter 3.

We need to know that we are forgiven, no matter what we have done

We are all moral beings and have a natural sense of what is right and wrong. We are all equipped with a conscience - the monitoring apparatus that evaluates how we are doing. The trouble is that we all fall short of our own standards, never mind God's standards. Any shortfall between what we believe to be right and how we actually behave, registers as guilt on our conscience. When we do what we know is wrong, we feel guilty; this may be called real guilt.

We may also feel guilty when we measure ourselves against the expectations of others, or when we expect too much of ourselves and keep falling short we may feel bad and experience false guilt. This is in the mind; it is psychological guilt not spiritual guilt, and is to be rejected. Real guilt is where we have done things that are morally wrong. It has to be dealt with correctly otherwise we damage our conscience and our relationships with others and God.

Christians believe that sin can be forgiven because of Jesus' sacrifice of love on the cross. That was the primary reason for the crucifixion of Christ. He gave his life and shed his blood to atone for our sins and grant us forgiveness. The Scriptures teach that it is only faith in the blood of Christ that can cleanse our conscience (Romans 3v25,26). If we confess our sins he will forgive them totally. They will be removed from our consciences. (Hebrews 9v14).

'Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord" – and you forgave the guilt of my sin' (Psalm 32 v5)

A clean conscience is a great blessing. A sense of total forgiveness is one of the greatest blessings it is possible to have. With a clear conscience we can hold our heads up high and face life. With a guilty conscience we don't feel worthy of life.

Two of Christ's disciples demonstrate the contrasting effects of dealing with, or not dealing with, guilt. Peter denied the Lord with cursing and swearing. When his conscience sprang into action he was filled with remorse and sorrow. He felt a failure and wanted to give up his apostolic calling and return to fishing. But he was repentant, and wept bitterly over his failures. Christ forgave him and reaffirmed him in his life's mission and destiny. His guilt was removed and he went on to live a very courageous and fulfilling life.

By contrast, Judas, after he betrayed the Lord, likewise felt terrible remorse. But he did not return to God in repentance. He felt so awful that he could no longer live with himself, so he hanged himself to escape his pain. Suicide seemed to him to be the only way to cope with his shame.

For those tormented by guilt and a sense of failure, suicide is not the answer. Instead the answer is found in recourse to God's mercy and forgiveness. Faith in the sacrifice of Christ for our sins brings total forgiveness. Total forgiveness is a great feeling and a great way to live. The darkness and guilt of failure recedes and the light of a new day dawns.

Christina's story shows how she got free from that awful feeling of guilt and failure. Abandoning her children

to get out of a difficult marriage left her feeling overwhelmed with guilt.

Christina's story

'It was February 14th Valentine's night. I was alone and miserable. The pain in my heart was excruciating. Heavy indulgence in alcohol and drugs did not alleviate the pain as I thought it would. How could I get rid of the pain and guilt of destroying the lives of my two beautiful children? There was only one way – to end it all. So, there and then, I decided that at first light I would get as many drugs as it took from my contact person and, at last, put an end to this dreadful suffering. Then, for some inexplicable reason, I did something that, unknown to me then, was to change my life – I screamed out to God for help!

Let me tell my story from the beginning ... I was born in a midland town in Ireland an only girl with four brothers and two doting parents. My mother was a great housekeeper, my father a frequently absent musician. Home was a warm refuge and safe place for my friends but school was very different. My whole experience there was of the cruelty of the nuns. Caning for lateness, talking or not doing everything perfectly and no encouragements. It had a detrimental effect on me and caused me to believe I was stupid. Insecurity, coupled with the huge inferiority complex that I had developed began to affect almost every area of my life. Although I was good at Irish dancing, music and tennis, when in competition, I froze in terror and did not do well. For years I believed I was a 'dumb blonde' because of my terror at exam time.

Whilst training as a hairdresser I met a young man training for the army and at 21 I married him. Before long I realised that my husband was an absolute perfectionist. Everything had to be just so. I played the role of the dutiful housewife and I tried everything I knew to do things perfectly but nothing I did was good enough. I could not live up to my husband's standards no matter how hard I tried. In the attempt to be this perfect person, I lost myself, and no longer had any idea who I was. For years I stayed home and cared for my two beautiful children and endeavoured to be what I thought I should be.

It was my understanding that I was unable to sweep the floor or even iron his shirts properly and I was not allowed to mow the lawn because the lines in the grass would not be straight enough! As a result the old insecurities and the inferiority complex raised their ugly heads once again. I felt a complete failure. I felt totally inadequate, beaten down and useless to the point that my stomach churned in panic when I heard the key turning in the door. To the outside world we were indeed the perfect family but our lives were a total sham. I was miserable, absolutely miserable. We did not even share a bedroom. But at all costs the appearance of the 'perfect family' had to be kept up, going to Mass every Sunday together, always sitting in the third pew on the left - the perfect family.

Attempts to talk with my husband ended in denial on his part that anything was wrong except on one occasion, when I thought there at last might be a breakthrough, only to be interrupted by a Rotary Club meeting. This was too much for me. That a meeting was more important to him than our marriage was the last straw for me. Something snapped in me. I knew I could not take any more of this sham relationship. Not thinking clearly and rather zombie-like I went through the motions of preparing to leave the marriage. In a daze, unable to communicate with anyone except one very close friend, I left, not comprehending at that time, the devastating effect this would have on my twelve year old girl and my fifteen year old son. They did not deserve the suffering that was to affect them for the rest of their lives. They were good children who never caused even a moment of trouble. They were an absolute joy.

I went to stay with my brother in America – a really bad choice. His answer to any problem was vodka and a joint, which I willingly followed. But there was no amount of alcohol or drug strong enough to remove the constant torture of knowing I had abandoned my children and virtually destroyed their little lives. I managed to hold down two jobs to support my habits for two years. I thought I was miserable in my marriage but this was misery personified – living with an alcoholic brother in an unfamiliar country, finding it difficult to adapt to a culture that is widely different to Ireland, intensely missing my children, trying to cope with guilt.

I saved the money to bring my children to America for the summer. My 'best friend' and drinking buddy borrowed it as she desperately needed a loan to cover her rent but never repaid it, leaving me to borrow from my mother. This incident caused me to determine never to allow anyone to draw close to me in the future. I put up very strong walls of protection around myself.

Noticing my unhappiness Arlene approached me and suggested friendship - it was like waving a red rag at a bull. Outwardly, I was polite but inwardly I was running a mile and yet I accepted an invitation to dinner at her home, which became a regular occurrence and eventually an invitation to Bible study. During these evenings I heard how good God was and how faithful He was. The others at the study seemed to believe that God was amazing. To me, however, given my desperately miserable life, the concept of a good God was totally foreign. Nevertheless, I continued to attend the weekly bible studies at Arlene's. And, ironically, I never missed a visit to the bar on my way home!

On that Valentine's night, in a place of hopelessness, I vaguely remember screaming out to God, "If you are the good God that those people at the bible study say you are, help me. Prove to me that you are good." I was a sixty-a-day cigarette smoker and it occurred to me to challenge God to get me off cigarettes. "Yes God, prove your goodness by getting me off cigarettes." I went to bed.

I never smoked another cigarette!

Usually I woke up several times during the night and smoked, but that night I slept soundly right through and when I woke the desire to smoke had gone! From that night, the thought of even holding a cigarette pack in my hand was repulsive. This was nothing short of a miracle. I knew from experience that one could not break a smoking habit of sixty cigarettes a day instantly, without severe side effects. I had absolutely no side effects and no desire to smoke. God was real. Not only did my longing for cigarettes cease to exist but I also lost the craving for alcohol and drugs. And, I totally forgot that I had decided to end my life that day! But now I had a decision to make. If this God was real, what was I going to do about Him.

The next Tuesday night I excitedly told my bible study group what had happened. They understood that I'd had a real encounter with God and had experienced my first miracle. They led me in a prayer of committing my life to Jesus and receiving His gift of salvation. From then on my life started to change. Smiling once in a while no longer brought on a surge of guilt. Although one day I found myself singing and I instantly stopped myself. I guess all the guilt had not yet dispersed... how could someone who had done what I had to my children ever sing again? I had no right to be happy. To be happy, in my mind, stated that I didn't care about what I had done to my children. But then I realised that this form of self-punishment was not compatible to the Scriptures. The gospel teaches that Jesus Christ took all the punishment for everything I had done - for all my sins.

Arlene invited me to church and I went. This would be the first non-Catholic service that I had ever attended - in my mind attending a service in a non-Catholic church was a mortal sin and I would go to hell for this if I were to die. At first, I thought that the people in this congregation were so "good" that if they knew about me they would probably drop-kick me out of their church forever. Nevertheless, the peace I saw in them and the peace I experienced while there drew me back again and I continued to attend.

Within six to eight months my life had changed significantly. It was hard to believe how sceptical I had been about the concept of the goodness of God. I guess my pain shaped my reasoning. I reasoned that if God were so good he would not allow all this pain in my life. Now I understood that my pain was caused by people, primarily myself, and was not God's doing. I was totally in love with Jesus not only because of what He had done for me but also because of Who He was - a forgiving, loving, good God who desired the best for me. This was so very different from formal religion. A true relationship with the God Who created me and was continuing to put my life back together. The change was so radical that within three years I was a missionary in the slums of Manila in the Philippines!

God continued the restoration, first with my son and later developing and restoring the fractured relationship with my daughter. Nothing pleases me more than spending time with my children and three grandchildren and God made this possible by providing for me to return to Ireland. There are no words to

describe how grateful I am to God. Not only did He rescue me from that pit of pain that almost led to me taking my life, He gave my once miserable life real meaning and purpose. Yes indeed, God is amazingly good.'

Christina was able to get free from the awful crippling effect of guilt in her life and live with a joyful sense of God's forgiveness and acceptance despite what she had done. Such freedom from crippling guilt is a great blessing and is available for everyone who receives God's forgiveness. It gives a great appreciation of God's love and mercy towards us.

Sadly, Christina died of cancer in 2006. She wanted as many as possible to hear her story so that they too could find release from guilt in the forgiveness of a loving God.

Footnote

Some people suffering from mental disorders find it impossible to believe that they are forgiven, even after confessing their sin and much reassurance from Scripture and others. They need constant reassurance and may need specialist help. Such false guilt is called delusional guilt arising in someone who has a psychotic or clinical depression and who cannot be reassured that their belief is untrue. In this case specialist help may need to be sought by others who are concerned about them.

Chapter 4.

We can be connected to the Life and Power of God

As human beings made in the image of God, we have the capacity to sense and connect with God. This is the faculty of God-consciousness. It is part of who we are as human beings, but, because we live in a secular society, it is a faculty we have often ignored or failed to nurture. Consequently, the problem for many is that the vital life-giving connection with our Creator is lost. If this is so we can feel adrift on the sea of humanity, disconnected from the ground of our being, with no anchor to stabilise or compass to guide, tossed helplessly and mercilessly on the sea of life. Something is missing. There is an inner void. That part which was designed to be inhabited by the Spirit of God is vacant. We feel lost, empty on the inside, disconnected, and devoid of spiritual vitality.

We are like a house wired for electricity but not connected to the mains supply. Our appliances won't work. Our TV set is dead. The pictures and sound are being transmitted through the airwaves, but are not being received. We have the spiritual apparatus but we are not connected, tuned in or turned on. So we are missing spiritual life.

The Gospel message is that Jesus Christ came to reconnect us to God. He said '*I have come to give you life to the full*' (John 10v10). In speaking about this spiritual life he used the analogy of life-giving water for thirsty travellers. He said '*If anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink, and out of his innermost being will flow rivers of living water*' (John 7v37,38). To those who feel they are 'running on empty' comes this open invitation to reach out to Christ in a personal way. His arms are already outstretched reaching out to you.

For the Christian, spiritual life is not merely about sacramental observance in a ritualistic way, but a living connection to Jesus Christ through faith. This living connection to God links us to His energy and divine power supply. The Spirit of God takes up residence inside and gives us a source of power outside of ourselves. The lights go on and life starts to work for us. The inner pain diminishes and we can find joy in living again. Sean's story is a good example of this; he was an alcoholic till he had an encounter with the life and power of God.

Not everyone who abuses alcohol does so to drown their sorrows or ease their emotional pain. For many in Ireland, drink is so much part of the culture that people feel it difficult to have a social life that does not include alcohol. And with men there is still bravado about the amount one can consume. There is a social pressure associated with alcohol which is hard to resist and the consequences can be disastrous. It leads to

the breakdown of many marriages, abuse of wives, dysfunctionality in the family, loss of effectiveness in the workplace and sometimes loss of job, never mind the personal disintegration that alcoholism can produce. Such was the case for Sean who became an "out and out" alcoholic and was about to end his life.

It was 6am and Sean found himself standing on the platform of Liverpool Street Underground station in London. He had been up all night tormented by voices as he went from one place to another through London. They had begun in his apartment where he could hear voices outside the door threatening to break in and kill him. He boarded an all night bus to get away from them. When he got off, he started dodging in and out of doorways with the voices chasing after him.

Finally he went into the Underground and arrived on the Central Line platform where the voices told him to jump under the train and he would get away from it all. He could hear the train coming and the voices in his ear telling him to jump. But somehow he knew that that was not the solution. 'So,' says Sean, 'I got down on my knees and cried out to God at the top of my voice. There was no one around at the time, but instantly 6 policemen gathered around me, asked me my name and put me on the train.'

What is it that pushes some people towards suicide? For some the pain of living just seems too much and the thought of voluntary death seems the only way out. What brought Sean, as a young Irishman, living in London, to this place?

Sean was born and brought up in Mullingar, County Westmeath, in a typical Irish family. Life at home with his parents, brother and sister, was normal and unremarkable. At secondary school Sean began to rebel. In the Christian Brothers' establishment where he went to school, he considered that he was being forced to learn two dead languages – Latin and Irish. He was determined that he did not want to learn them. 'Anything I learned was beaten into me'. There was one particular teacher that made life difficult. One day, after Sean had defied him, the teacher hit him across the jaw with a leather belt. Sean, in turn, grabbed the swinging blackboard and slammed it into the teacher. That was the end of Sean's schooling in third year!

Earlier, Sean had become an altar boy helping the priest to serve early Mass where his taste for alcohol began. By the time he was 13 or 14 he would be drinking cider in the park with a bunch of lads. This was their way of just hanging out together. When he was 16 he went to Dublin to work in a pub. A number of his friends got jobs in different pubs. On his day off he would go to the pub where one friend worked and drink for free all day, and his friend would come to his pub on his day off. And so a group of them, as 16 and 17 year olds began to consume large amounts of alcohol for free. By the time he was 18 he was a fully-fledged alcoholic. Then he went to London where he continued his drinking lifestyle. He lived in an alcoholic haze, never fully drunk, never fully sober.

Alcohol is one of the main factors in many suicides and attempted suicides. Substance abuse (including alcohol) is found in up to 55% of suicides. And this drinking usually starts in the teens. In Ireland (and increasingly in the UK) there is a culture of intoxication. It becomes a mission to get drunk. Binge drinking abounds. Whereas in many other European countries, drunkenness is embarrassing and is frowned upon, in Ireland there are lower levels of disapproval than elsewhere.

In addition, there seem to be few ways to socialise that don't involve drink. We learn to socialise in a context of alcohol and don't know how to handle ourselves apart from drink. We drink to celebrate, to drown our sorrows, we drink to drink! It seems that we are driven to pay our dues at the shrine of alcohol. There is an expectation that alcohol will deliver something to enhance our lives, something that we can't afford to miss or get elsewhere. Even though it fails to deliver, we are somehow driven slavishly back to try again.

The alcohol industry spends forty million Euro on advertising each year, to maintain this mirage with sexy, appealing, but illusory images. And we buy the deception, by the gallon. (Whereas the World Health Organisation defines 3 pints as binge drinking, 3 pints is seen as normal in Ireland. Binge drinking is more like 8 pints or more!)

And what does this delusion deliver?

1. Alcohol is a depressant. Those who drink to drown their sorrows end up further down. Those who drink to celebrate end up with a hangover and a greater tendency to suffer from depression. Alcohol-reinforced depression increases the risk of suicide very considerably.
2. Alcohol impairs problem-solving ability. If one drinks to try and escape problems, not only do the problems remain, the ability to solve them is impaired. In other words, things get worse rather than better. This leads to suicide appearing a more accessible solution.
3. Alcohol increases the likelihood of acting impulsively on suicidal thoughts. A person, who normally would not think of suicide as a valid option for solving their problems, may act impulsively when drunk. One's rational ability is suspended and one's judgement is handed over to this mythical monster.
4. Alcohol dependency itself can become a problem. This has the effect of straining one's relationships, sometimes to breaking point, isolation and even destitution.
5. Alcohol is a very toxic substance. It is likely to cause serious physical or mental health problems and is implicated in the death of 25% of 15 to 29 year old men.
6. It affects the brain, bringing developmental problems in teenage years, compulsive patterns of behaviour, avoidant coping styles and there may be residual damage to the brain even after stopping abuse.

Sean had no concern whatever about any of these possible consequences. His life was so totally dominated by alcohol that all rational consideration for his welfare carried no weight. All he wanted was more alcohol. He lived for a while in a house where he had unlimited access to drink. Because everyone else in the house was drinking there was little sleep and he got worn out with tiredness. So, in order to get some rest, at least a good night's sleep, he checked in to a psychiatric hospital to dry out. When the doctor examined him the next morning he told him that he was there under false pretences. Mentally he was 100%, but physically he had a serious health problem. He had an enlarged liver. If he didn't stop drinking he would have cirrhosis in 6 months, and 6 months later he would be dead. This made absolutely no difference to him. He was completely unconcerned about his own well being. But a year later, instead of being dead as the doctor predicted, he was back home in Ireland staying with his alcoholic mother in Mullingar and living on the dole. He would collect his dole money shortly after 9am on a Wednesday and would have it all drunk by lunch time.

A turning point came one day when he decided to visit his sister in Newbridge, Co. Kildare. When he got there she welcomed him with open arms and he was glad to see her, because they always loved each other despite the mess alcohol had made of his life. Eventually she asked him if she could have someone to come and pray for his healing. Sean said 'I don't mind' because he loved her and felt that prayer could do no harm. But he had no sense that he needed healing from anything. As far as he was concerned the only problem he had was that he couldn't get enough alcohol!

The next morning he went down to the off licence to tank up before this prayer business. When his sister's friends arrived to pray for Sean, they had planned to tell him what God said about alcohol. But they took one look at his condition and realised that anything they would say would go over his head. So instead they just asked him two questions: 'Do you believe in God?' and 'Do you believe that God can heal you?' He answered 'Yes' to both of them. He had always believed in God but didn't think he needed healing! Anyway, he sat on the chair and they prayed for him. As they did so, the desire he had for drink left instantly and has never come back. It just seemed to fly out the window. That was in January 1992. Any attempt he had made to dry out previously never lasted. He would be in the unit for a week and as soon as he got out he would be straight off to the pub. But this was different. His life was completely turned around. He has had absolutely no craving or desire for drink any more.

He came to the realisation that there was more to life than that which he had been living. He started reading the Scriptures and realised that God accepted him no matter what his condition and had heard his prayer when he had called out in desperation on the platform of Liverpool Street train station. Even though the doctors had only expected him to live for a year, he is still alive and in good health 17 years later, because God has given him a new life. He is still living in Mullingar and has been driving a taxi for the last 12 years.

Sean now has an infectious enthusiasm and is so grateful to God for discovering a whole new life he had never known existed previously. He got connected to the life and Spirit of God and discovered that alcoholic

spirits are a counterfeit for the real thing. Millions of people around the world are finding spiritual reality through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. There is a world of difference from formal institutional religion which many have come to feel has let them down. Likewise many are finding that the materialistic value system which they have pursued has left them empty. The monetary gods have collapsed big time with the economic crash. However, we can turn to a God who has been around a very long time and is the most enduring reality in human existence.

Chapter 5 .

We can have a life full of purpose and meaning

We all need a sense of something to live for - a purpose, a meaning to our lives. It is another fundamental inner need of the human spirit. If that need is not met we may feel that life is not worth living. As human beings we are all unique and individual. We each have unique gifts and contributions to make in life.

However if we have not yet found our place in society, or discovered our unique gifts, had them trained and skilled for effective use, then we may end up feeling useless. If people in positions of authority have put us down, we may lack a sense of significance. We may have been told 'You'll never be any good' or 'You're useless'. If we have never been affirmed or entrusted with responsibility we can feel powerless and of little use.

It is important to feel significant and needed, if we are to be motivated to live. Here again Scripture informs us that, to God, we are significant. He designed each of us for a specific purpose.

'For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago' (Ephesians 2v10).

He gave each of us a unique set of gifts when he made us (Romans 12v3-8). He designed every part of our being and personality for a worthwhile purpose. Each of us is a one-off designer-made creation for the purpose he has for us in his great scheme of things. We have a mission in life, something we were born to do. When we discover God's purpose for our life we are energised and motivated to live.

What's more, our purpose is beyond ourselves. It is to find some way, however insignificant it may seem initially, in which we can better the life of someone else. If we can get the focus off ourselves and our own feelings which can paralyse us into inaction, and find even one other person we can think about and help in some little way, that will make a start. We have a need to love as well as our need to be loved. Our God-given mission in life is to love others in practical ways (Matthew 22v37-39). That is how God designed us. That is how we function best. We may not all be a 'Mother Theresa', but we can be the channel of God's love to at least one other person on the planet. It is a richly fulfilling way to live and makes life worth living.

But we need to be spiritually reconnected to God first. We need to experience his forgiveness from our guilt and sense of failure in life. We need to know the worth we have in his eyes. We need to know and experience his love poured into our hearts to heal our hurts and insecurities. Then we can begin to open up and discover our life's purpose by reaching out to a world that needs God's love communicated through us.

Joe's story is a good example of this. The emptiness, meaninglessness and shallowness of the drink lifestyle was what really got to Joe. His father had been an alcoholic and had not been able to be a proper father to him. Despite this, Joe found himself, as a teenager, slipping into the same lifestyle. There seemed to be nothing else for young people to do but to go to pubs and clubs and get 'blotto' with drink. But it didn't satisfy him and led him to the brink. This is his story.

'I climbed over the bridge onto this sort of wall and I was literally hanging off the bridge with my hands stretched out behind my back, holding on to the wall, standing on a narrow ledge, leaning and facing into the water. A voice just kept saying, 'Go on, go on, go on.' It was as if there were dark forces involved even though I didn't believe in them at the time. I felt it so strongly. They just kept saying 'go on, go on, go on.'

There was a critical moment when I was just about to go along with that voice and throw myself into the river. When, it seemed out of nowhere, that I felt a man's hand on my shoulder and I felt a touch, a connection. I heard these words 'Don't do what you're about to do, son.' or 'It's not worth it, son'. I turned around, I was almost in a haze as I looked at this man and he said 'Come on son, you don't need this, you don't need this, climb back over.'

I was born in Galway, the eldest in a family of four children. I have two brothers and one sister. I suppose my family was fairly typical of Irish life in the 80's with not much work. My father was unemployed on occasion, he was an alcoholic and his alcohol abuse was a big part of our family life.

Being the eldest in the family, my mother used to lean on me almost as if I was the man of the house and this was quite a burden to me. I took that role because my father didn't take it. I did things like stealing money from his pocket to put bread on the table when he was drunk, trying to get money all the time. I have all of these images of sneaking into a room where my father would be drunk, getting money to give to mother who would be waiting outside rubbing her hands together if the job was done successfully.

A very significant time came when I was about 13-14 years of age, finding the courage to walk across the road to talk to a young lady, when fighting and shouting broke out at home. I just wanted the earth to open up and swallow me. That particular event really hurt me. I had to go over to my house and bring a bit of peace to my family because my father was going quite berserk with my mother. It was a dramatic situation. He was hitting her and I wanted to protect my mother, brothers and sister. The Gardai came to the house that night but once again my father manipulated them, as he was great at doing.

So I had fairly dramatic teenage years with Dad being drunk. Sometimes I would be sent off to look for him. Usually he'd be fast asleep somewhere in Galway, in some pub or in the car drunk. My heart used to be broken because I never knew my father because he was always off in a different land. My brothers and my sister always looked to me for help. I hated Christmas time because I'd end up packing the presents with my mother from a very young age. I didn't have a childhood; I just grew up too fast.

By the time I was seventeen years of age I felt that I had lived too much. I had difficulties in school and too many burdens on my shoulders. One night my mother asked me, "What's it like to be Joseph?" I painted a black, dark, dank picture. Nothing to live for, no hope even though I was doing reasonably well in school but there was just that darkness that alcoholism brings to a home. I felt a void and drained of life. She prayed for me that night that God would do something in my life, that in some way he would touch my life and bring some kind of meaning.

But nothing changed immediately in my circumstances or moods. Around that time I was in Galway City one night; I had drink taken with friends. I had money and my music, which was always great. A lot of people looked up to me because of it. But inside I was just so empty and lost. I went out to a night club and drank a few pints and when the night club was over, I was making my way home late at night. I came down beside O'Brien's Bridge and I felt this incredible draw to look into the river. It was winter and the water was flowing powerfully. As I was looking I could feel these voices saying to me 'Go on, throw yourself in there, all your problems will be solved. The loneliness, the pain and the hurt that you feel, the feelings that you have that nobody loves or cares for you will all be subsumed in the river and it will be over, everything will be finished.' I found myself agreeing with the words. When, it seemed out of nowhere, that I felt a man's hand on my shoulder and I felt a touch, a connection. I heard these words 'Don't do what you're about to do, son'. I turned around and I was almost in a haze and I looked at this man.

He held me and put his hand on my shoulder and he helped me to climb back over the bridge. He said 'You don't need to do this now'. We walked together and he just talked with me and he tried to make light of the situation. He stayed with me for a good while probably to make sure that I was ok and then said he needed to go and I made my way home. I thank God for that man. I really do believe that the Lord put him there at that significant point in my life. I don't know who he is, I don't remember the man but definitely that was a key moment and I was protected from those voices and the compulsion to throw myself into the river.

When I was hanging from the wall of the bridge I could imagine all these people coming to my funeral and them talking about me when I was dead. It seemed to satisfy some strange need in my heart for love. It was powerfully seductive actually. This lie that you will see the people that love you at the funeral in the church when you are there in a coffin.

'About six months after that, just before my leaving cert in the summer of 1984, I was out with my friends playing music which was the greatest thing in my life. Music opened doors for me and people kind of respected me because I had that gift. I was supposed to go out with my friends again that particular night and I was sitting down and before I ordered a drink I said to my friends, 'Look there has to be more to life than just drinking, night clubbing and going out with girlfriends. If this is what life is all about, it's very shallow and I don't want to have anything more to do with it'. A strange thing, I decided to leave them and went for a walk in the prom on Salthill.

'I remember just looking at the moon and saying, 'Lord, God, if you're up there please show yourself to me, please show me who you are and reveal yourself to me in a way that I can understand you.' It was a real genuine sincere prayer for me at seventeen. Then I felt a kind of a voice directed me to go to this particular individual's house, 'He has something to tell you that you need to hear.'

He got the shock of his life when he saw me coming and when I told him 'I'm looking for something deeper in life and I think you have something that we don't have. I have observed you in school and there is always that light in your eye, you're holding back on us, you have your life together as a 17-year-old in a way that I don't.'

He said, 'I know the Lord in my life, I know Christ in my heart and in my life.' Now that was different, I asked him to explain it and he told me, 'I believe that God the Father, sent Jesus Christ into this earth to live for us and to show us the way back to our Heavenly Father and that he died on the cross for each of us all.' He looked me in the eye and he said, 'Joe, he died for you. He took your sins on Calvary'. That shocked me. I said 'Stop, stop, stop, stop this talking altogether.' I couldn't handle it.

I said 'I've heard all of this before and I don't need to hear this' and he said 'You might have heard it with your mind but when was the last time you opened up your heart to hear this?' Those words really hit me very strong. 'You've got me there' I said. Then I found myself praying and saying 'Please Lord, I really do want to know you and what you've done for me.' It was like a cinema picture appeared in front of my eyes and I began to see Christ on the cross at Calvary and he looked at me and I looked at him and he said to me, eyeball to eyeball, 'I am doing this for you Joe, I'm stretching out on this cross for your sins and for all the troubles that you've had, the hurt and the pain and the sorrow, the fear and the loneliness you felt all through your childhood. I'm taking all of this off you and I'm taking it on the cross for you because I love you.'

'I was so taken by this love of Christ for me, so much so I said, 'Lord, go away from me I'm a sinful man'. I just said 'Please forgive me, please forgive me. I have offended you and I have done things in my life that I wasn't happy with. I hurt my parents, other people, girlfriends and obviously felt guilty and genuinely in my heart of hearts I asked for forgiveness and for Jesus to come into my life.

'When I asked him the strangest thing happened, I was sitting on this couch across the room from Michael, he was just talking to me and looking at me and my body began to shake and I felt as if something was happening to me physically, like the windows in the room opened up and a river came into the room. I could feel it, like a river of love, forgiveness and healing began to flow into the room down around my feet. It began to come up into my body and as it moved up my body every cell pulsated with life almost like a pins and needles tingling feeling. This feeling swamped up through my system to my heart which was like a battered and bruised, dirty old bin. I felt that this old dirty heart that was broken and let down, hurt and full of trash was taken away. I felt for the first time in my life that I had been given a heart to give, feel and receive love. I was so overwhelmed and, as it was happening and I was feeling it physically, spiritually and emotionally, all of my senses seemed alive at this moment.

'I looked over to Michael and said 'what's going on here?' He looked almost incredulous. 'I don't know, but it seems to me the Holy Spirit is doing something with you.' With that I just became overwhelmed with the

peace and the love and the healing balm – the gentle love of God, of Jesus. I felt forgiven. All the pain and disappointments of my life for those last seventeen years were being taken and washed away and being replaced by the most incredible sense of peace, love, and joy. Emotions that I hadn't experienced for a long time, since my early childhood began to flood through me. I felt God's complete and unconditional love for this lost, young seventeen year old and I just began to weep and weep.

I fell back on the couch at this stage into ecstasy. The ecstasies that we use to read about of the saints of old, who would be in great communion with the Lord and go off into another world. It was the most beautiful thing that I have ever experienced in my life. I knew that I had met with God and that things weren't going to be the same from here on. The first thing I did was to ask Michael for forgiveness for giving him a hard time in school. Then I went home full of the joy of the Lord, my eyes gleaming. My brother Bobby thought I was on drugs, and couldn't accept my explanation. My mother thought I had become a crazy man until she saw the complete change of character

Where there was strife there was now peace. I had become more helpful. I remember the next day waking up and looking at the trees. Everything seemed so different, so new, and so alive. It was incredible. I wanted to read my Bible, I found myself reading it and it just spoke to me. In fact, the first thing I ever read was John chapter 14, about God preparing a place in heaven for me. The words spoke so strongly to me and brought security, peace and restoration. From that time on my life just changed. It really did. I had met with Jesus I had met with God. It was all very new and all very strange.

In 1984, economy-wise a lot of my friends headed off and emigrated to America or England because there was no work in the town at the time. The whole drink culture especially in the West of Ireland was just sodden at that time. I set my life on a whole new course going to college to train as a school teacher. I wanted to make a difference in the youth of this nation. In teaching I've seen what suicide does to a school community and to the staff, parents and kids. It breaks my heart that young people are taking their lives because they don't seem to have a hope. I know what it's like to live as a teenager without any kind of hope or without any love in your life and I know that pain of not being loved and not being wanted.

'But it's not only young people who feel the emptiness of life. Getting back to that hand on the shoulder thing, something amazing happened when I was in college in Limerick studying. One night I came home in the middle of winter across one of the new bridges; it was quite late at night and there was no one around when I saw an elderly man in his mid 60's. He was in the exact same position I was in those years before in Galway. He was hanging over the bridge in the same way. I put my hand on his shoulder and I held him for a minute. When he turned around he had that same lost look that I had. I said 'Are you ok there?' He just started crying, 'I have nothing to live for. My wife is dead, my children don't talk to me, and I live by myself in my home. The only thing I do is I go through the day drink a few pints just to kill the pain and I have nothing left to live for.' Thankfully I had the opportunity to say 'Look, the Lord loves you and God has given you a life and there is no need to end it.' Thankfully he climbed back over the bridge and I was able to talk with him.

'So many people, both young and older, feel that life has no meaning for them and that they have nothing left to live for. I just want them to know the Good News of God's love and purpose for their lives. That is what has given me a reason to live.'

After this Joe got his life on track. He went on to train as a schoolteacher and now finds great fulfilment in helping to guide young people into meaningful and constructive lifestyles.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ said 'I came to give them a rich and satisfying life' John 10v10. He is the one who is able to help us find spiritual health and wellbeing. We are valued and loved by him. He alone can remove our guilt and forgive us and connect us to the life and power of God. And he can give us a meaning and purpose in life. Many people have found this to be the case as the foregoing stories illustrate. If you would like to explore developing this living connection to God we encourage you to participate in an Alpha Course, start reading the Gospels, start attending a vibrant church and invite Jesus Christ into your life.

Appendix For those who struggle with suicidal feelings

Life Matters

*'Oh, that you would **choose life**' Moses*

A. Life is worth living even when we don't think so

Life matters. It is a precious gift to be cherished. We may feel that life is so painful or hopeless that it is not worth living. But with appropriate help and support these feelings do subside. Suicidal feelings are not permanent. They do pass. When they do we can be grateful that we chose to stay alive. So many people who have pressed through the pain and come out the other side are so glad that they chose to persevere with help and support. They would have missed so much if they had acted on their feelings to end it all.

We express our compassion to those who feel suicidal, but we affirm that it is well worth choosing life, even when suicide seems an appealing way out. Attempting suicide is usually the act of a desperate person who needs compassion, understanding, our support and help, not criticism.

B. Why some people have suicidal thoughts

Suicidal thoughts are very common but most people don't act on these thoughts and feelings of despair. Sometimes these thoughts occur without any apparent reason. Sometimes people have a profound fear that they will not be able to cope with whatever has disturbed their peace of mind. Most people who contemplate suicide don't really want to end their lives. They just want to end the pain! The pain may have become so overwhelming that it seems unbearable any longer. Or they have lost all hope that things can ever be better again. Deep despair can settle over them like a blanket of darkness so that they can see no future.

- ◆ For some it is physical pain or disability, perhaps an incurable disease. As the body breaks down irreparably they may feel that they are a burden to others and may contemplate suicide or assisted suicide as a way out. Some are looking for a change to the law to allow assisted suicide. But this would place pressure on vulnerable people – including those who are elderly, disabled, depressed, terminally or chronically ill – to request assisted suicide. This is not the answer; it would only compound their sense of hopelessness and undermine the absolute value of every human life. What is needed is a response of love and care by family, friends and the wider community.
- ◆ More frequently it is emotional pain due to bereavement, relationship breakdown, loss of job, financial pressure, emotional or sexual abuse or depression. The darkness and despair from such emotional turmoil can seem unbearable in intensity and duration.
- ◆ People with serious mental disorders such as schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder and clinical depression may feel suicidal. They usually need specialist medical and psychosocial care either in hospital or in the community. Sometimes they may have little insight into their condition and urgent 'specialist-help' will need to be requested by a family member, friend or colleague.
- ◆ Prolonged alcohol or drug abuse may lead some people to feel suicidal or at least increase their risk of suicide.
- ◆ For some it is inner spiritual pain - from a sense of worthlessness, disconnectedness, lack of meaning in life, inner emptiness or 'lostness' - which leaves them despairing of life. People need a sense of love, value and purpose to make life seem worthwhile. These are the issues we have looked at in the first section.

C. What tips the scales?

People often have to cope with pressure, pain and distress in life and many have found successful ways to do so, while others find it much more difficult to cope with similar situations. What are some of the crucial keys for handling life's adversity that can bring us back from the brink?

The point at which the pain becomes unbearable depends on our coping resources.

“Suicidal feelings may occur when one’s pain exceeds one’s resources for coping with the pain.”



When pain exceeds our coping resources, suicidal feelings may be the result. In order to survive suicidal feelings there are some helpful approaches: either

- (1) find a way to reduce our pain, or
- (2) find a way to increase our coping resources (but be careful to avoid ineffective coping resources such as alcohol which only make matters worse)
- (3) Preferably both!

Where the causes are in the physical, mental or emotional areas seek professional help. Visit your GP to start with. Then be referred to another health professional such as a counsellor, psychotherapist or psychiatrist who will be able to help and support and inform about any other resources that are available.

Where the problem is rooted in the spiritual area a member of the clergy or a professional Christian counsellor can be of great help.

D. Some Practical Steps

The Foresight Project has identified the well-being equivalent of “five fruit and vegetables a day”. These ‘Five ways to mental well-being’ are suggestions for individual action, based on an extensive review of the evidence. (www.foresight.gov.uk)

1. **Connect...** With the people around - with family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. At home, work, school or in your local community. Think of these as the cornerstones of life and invest time in developing them. Building these connections will support and enrich on a daily basis.
2. **Be active...** Go for a walk or run. Step outside. Cycle. Play a game. Garden. Dance. Exercising makes us feel good. Most importantly, discover a physical activity that is enjoyable and suits the level of mobility and fitness possible.
3. **Take notice...** Be curious. Catch sight of the beautiful. Remark on the unusual. Notice the changing seasons. Savour the moment, whether out walking to work, eating lunch or talking to friends. Be aware of the world around and what is being felt. Reflecting on experiences will help in evaluating what is personally most important.
4. **Keep learning...** Try something new. Rediscover an old interest. Sign up for that course. Take on a different responsibility at work. Fix a bike. Learn to play an instrument or how to cook your favourite food. Set a challenge which will be enjoyable. Learning new things can increase confidence as well as being fun.

5. **Give** ... Do something nice for a friend, or a stranger. Thank someone. Smile. Volunteer time. Join a community group. Look out, as well as in. Seeing self and happiness, as linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding and creates connections with the people around (See Chapter 2, section 2.2 of the final Project report).

E. Professional Resources and Supports

The best coping resource is another human being to talk with.

If you find someone who wants to listen, and tell them how you are feeling and how you got to this point, you will have increased your coping resources.

Talk, Talk, Talk!!



Professional Services

- ◆ Medical Services.

Consult a GP first if feeling suicidal. He/she may prescribe you some medication to alleviate the worst symptoms or may refer you for more specialist help. Serious mental disorders usually require psychiatric and multidisciplinary care either in hospital or in the community. No stigma should be attached to mental health issues.

- ◆ Professional counselling.

There are many good counsellors available who will be able to talk with you and help you through your current pressures. Just be sure to choose an accredited counsellor from one of the professional bodies such as the IACP (www.irish-counselling.ie), or IACC (www.iacc.ie).

Spiritual Supports

- Personal prayer

When Christ was in Gethsemane, he was overwhelmed with sorrow and darkness as the burden of the sorrows and sufferings of the world came pressing in on him. It seemed too much for him to bear, he even asked his Father if there was a way out to escape such terrible suffering. But instead of escaping it he prayed and prayed and prayed again till he found inner strength from God to persevere. Because he has experienced overwhelming inner pain and invasive darkness in his soul he is able to understand us in a way that no one else can. Through talking through *with him* how we feel we can receive inner spiritual strengthening to enable us to press through 'til we come out the other side. He can bring us through our Gethsemane and Calvary 'til we experience resurrection to a new level of living. There is no greater support than the inner strength we can receive from him.

- Prayer groups

Many have found that prayer groups, where the warmth of sharing in prayer and care together with others, can be a great support. Jesus sought the support of his closest friends in prayer when he was going through his darkest hour. If he felt he needed the spiritual support of close friends, how much more do we need it. In the event, Peter James and John let him down and fell asleep, and we

may feel that others let us down as well. But often they can be a real support, which increases our ability to cope.

- The Church community
Many churches have GROW groups, Rainbow groups, Alpha groups etc, which help people to find group support in the community.

Community Supports

- ◆ The Samaritans provide a 24/7 phone line where you can talk to someone anonymously, day or night. 08457 90 90 90 (UK) or 1850 60 90 90 (IRL) or email jo@samaritans.org
- ◆ AWARE groups provide support for people suffering from depression (www.aware.ie)
- ◆ GROW is a Mental Health Organisation which helps people who have suffered, or are suffering, from mental health problems. (www.grow.ie)

F. Conclusion

So, in facing our pain, whether physical, mental, emotional or spiritual pain, there are alternative options for handling it. We can find ways to ease the pain and we can increase our coping resources.

We can choose to find life or death. If we choose death, we give up the fight and leave the consequences of our death to our parents, friends and relatives. That solves nothing for us and is certainly no blessing to them. One family member, after the suicide of his brother commented, 'Not only did he take his own life, he took part of ours as well'. The pain of having lost a close family member or friend to suicide is one of the most tormenting and overwhelming griefs known to man. It can lead to a series of suicides in a family or a community.

But it doesn't have to be that way! We can choose to find a healthy way to address our problems. Suicide has been described as a permanent solution to a temporary problem, except that it solves nothing, rather it passes the baton of suffering to our loved ones.

Scripture places before us the choice of life or death and urges us to choose life, for our own benefit as well as for that of our family and friends.

*'Today **I have given you the choice** between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. **Oh, that you would choose life**, so that you and your descendants might live! You can make this choice by loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and committing yourself firmly to him. This is the key to your life.'* (Deuteronomy 30 v19,20. New Living Translation)

Helpful websites

www.chooselife.net

www.metanoia.org

www.medicine.manchester.ac.uk/psychiatry/research/suicide/prevention/nci/

www.samaritans.org

www.chooselife.ie

www.ias.ie

www.mentalhealthireland.ie

www.alpha.org