



The subject of depression in the Church is seen as taboo by many believers. But for author and speaker **Jo Swinney**, that's an attitude which urgently needs to change



Breaking taboos on depression

“I think there is still a thought that Christians should be joyful at all times,” says Jo Swinney. “But if you’ve even read a tiny bit of the Bible, you’ll know that’s pretty nonsensical! There is still so much more to be done on this issue.”

Jo’s work, however, is certainly making inroads. In 2006, she wrote her first book, *Through The Dark Woods*, which was based on her personal experiences with depression.

Having suffered on and off from depression since the age of 13 – following the

loneliness of being sent to boarding school in the UK while her family remained in the Algarve – it was a project born out of necessity.

“The writing happened because I had this thing that I wanted to say about depression, and because I felt so passionately about wanting to be open about it,” explains Jo.

“I lived in Canada for four years, which is where I got treatment and got on top of my depression. It was much less stigmatised in North America. It really wasn’t a big deal and people spoke openly about

it. And so, coming back to England in 2004, I felt the contrast. I felt that it was still something people were ashamed of. Depression really wasn’t spoken about, and if people found out about it, it was considered to be a bit shocking. Because I’d gone through such a shift of perspective on depression in Canada, I wanted to be part of changing perceptions over here.”

Jo’s illness was brought under control via Christian counselling and medication. This openness led to her book receiving rave reviews from eminent professors



Depression is all too common, even among believers, says Jo Swinney

and psychiatrists. But the stigma Jo had encountered on returning to England still remained.

"Well, there were some funny things that happened," says Jo. "A friend of mine, when she saw the title of it, said, 'Did you write that about the time before you were a Christian?' And I had a few other people say, 'Oh, I thought you were a Christian.' So there were some comments that made me realise that it was even more of an issue than I thought.

"In fact, people still tell me that I'm brave for having talked about depression, and I find that a bit baffling. I think that reflects the attitude that's still there. I mean, why should it be brave? I don't really understand. I just think it should be normal to talk about it.

"Quite a few people who were my good friends were surprised because I had kept my struggles well hidden, and it made them quite sad that they hadn't known. And a lot of people told me they had been depressed too, which I didn't know about." This hidden world of depressed

Christians began to reveal itself to Jo when – following on from the book – she began speaking publicly on the topic. These engagements have taken her to such conferences as New Wine, Greenbelt and the Christian Resources Exhibition, and what she has discovered during this time has come as a big surprise.

"I did two seminars at New Wine one year and they were packed to the rafters – literally 400 people at each one," she explains.

"Afterwards, I got loads of letters from people saying, 'I've never heard this talked about from the front before,' and it was just shocking."

But what is also certain is that Jo's talks on depression are making a difference in people's lives – possibly because she is honest about her ongoing struggles. However, she remains modest about her efforts.

"I just see it as being a catalyst to get people to start talking, and to raise the awareness," states Jo. "There's only so much you can do in a little hour-long slot

and I'm not a counsellor. I've really tried to be clear about the fact that I'm just a fellow sufferer. I'm telling my story and that's helped me, and I'm encouraging other people to do the same."

Since the release of *Through The Dark Woods*, Jo has written three more books – *Cheerful Madness*, exploring the topic of relationships, *God Hunting*, investigating spiritual disciplines, and her latest publication, *Keeping Faith*, about the dynamics of family life when someone who is raised as a Christian loses their faith as an adult.

But she says her heart will always be drawn to those believers with depression – people whom she is desperate not to see driven into the background.

"We're all quite frightened of brokenness, and mental health in particular is scary if you aren't familiar with it, but I think that stops people getting treatment, and that's a real shame.

"I do think attitudes have changed a lot in the last five years, though, but they need to keep changing – because depression is so common."