



1-1-1980

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Recommended Citation

Thatcher, Evelyn (1980) "Dealing with Hostility and Depression in LDS Women," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*. Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol6/iss1/7>

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Dealing with Hostility and Depression in LDS Women

Presented at a meeting of the Southern California Chapter of AMCAP at Long Beach, December 1, 1979

By Evelyn Thatcher, M.S.W.*

I'm here, in part, to expose a dangerous subversive group within the Church that is having a powerful impact on the membership. It frequently is given more weight than local Church leaders, the General Authorities, perhaps even the priesthood. As far as I've been able to ascertain it affects women more than men and almost without exception leads to unhappiness, dissatisfaction and ultimately depression.

This mysterious group is known as "They". I'm not sure who "They" is, but "They" is perfect and "They" can make life pretty difficult for someone not secure in the knowledge of who they are. If you don't believe me, do a little personal research. You'll find that most of your depressed clients will tell you that "They" say you have to have a big family. "They" say you'll be condemned if you hesitate about accepting a Church calling. "They" say if you're not always cheerful you're committing a sin. "They" say be perfect now, and "They" say you're not doing your duty as a Latter-day Saint woman if you don't know fifty-five ways to fix wheat and like the stuff to boot.

In part the concern with "They" represents a conflict with authority that frequently presents itself in one form or another in many of my depressed LDS female clients. These women are in conflict with fathers, husbands, the Church, the community. They see themselves as powerless against overwhelming powers and often, as in the examples mentioned, create even more oppression for themselves by developing unreal expectations and rules for life out of myths and fears.

Sometimes in an effort to protect themselves they align themselves with what appears to be a power bloc, a source of identity, the Ideal Mormon woman. The uniform is frequently the long granny dress. The standards for acceptance in the group include making your own bread from home-ground wheat, quilting, sewing and having children and loving every little moment with each little darling and never, no, never wanting to give a whole lot to Deseret Industries for a day or so. The motto of their group could be, "Just do good, don't think".

I remember an interview I saw a few years ago on a Salt Lake television station not known for its particularly positive attitude toward the Church. A woman's convention was being held at the Salt Palace and there were several hotly contested issues being voted on where the two opposing philosophies came down to Church vs. non-Church. The reporter asked one young woman why she was in attendance at the

convention and she replied that a letter had been read in Relief Society urging the sisters to go. Then the interviewer brought up one particularly inflammatory issue and asked the sister how she had voted on it. She replied, "Oh, I voted against it". "Why", the reporter asked. The young woman looked rather confused and said, after stammering for a moment, "Just because". Again the reporter asked, "But why did you take that particular stand on that particular issue". Our young sister stuttered and stammered a little more, giggled nervously and then answered, "Just because". I am not implying that all the women in the Church are non-thinking automatons, but there are enough to concern me, and in my estimation, that attitude is prime fodder for depression.

The power bloc I alluded to earlier is a false front that covers a lot of confusion about roles that seem to exist among the membership. A favorite myth in the Church is the one about the humble but strong little wife standing behind the scenes and nobly prodding the priesthood holder up the ladder to perfection and exaltation with his family in tow. There is a double message in that myth. The first says that the man is the leader of the family, i.e. the supposed strength. The second says that the wife is the actual strength. Confusing. It is that confusion that sometimes leads me to semi-facetiously label the Church a pseudo-patriarchal-matriarchy.

Somehow over the years the infamous "They" has moved from the concept, based upon eternal truth, that a man/woman relationship should be a strength/strength relationship to the incorrect and unrighteous idea that it is a strength/weakness one and we're never entirely sure who is the strength and who is the weakness. The result is we argue about it, we backbite, carp and criticize, we get angry and depressed about it.

"They" teaches the women to think, but not too much, to honor the priesthood but not to take it too seriously. I once heard a bishop's wife say to a group of women, "If we leave it up to the men to get us back to Missouri, we'll end up in Texas". Funny, but not funny. "They" teaches, if you want it done right have a woman do it and too often, unfortunately, that philosophy is based upon experience.

Our women are great, they march on through life, raising righteous children, supporting their husbands, working for the growth of the Church, serving their God. Only too often they don't acknowledge who they are and what they are accomplishing because they are haunted by a fear of imperfection, of not measuring up, of not being as good as Sister Smith, or Jones, or Brown. An article in the Spring 1979 Exponent II by Margaret B. Black and Midge W. Nielson, humorously brings that hidden image of the perfect Mormon mother into focus. Let me share some of it with you.

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"Many LDS women unconsciously compete with an idealized image of the already-perfect wife and mother who successfully incorporates all the demands of family, church, and society into her life. Although we have never met such a woman, we persist in believing she's out there somewhere. We can just imagine what she must accomplish in a day...

"Patti gets up very early and says her personal prayers. She zips her slim vigorous body into her warmup suit and tiptoes outside to run her usual five miles (on Saturday she does ten). Returning home all aglow, she showers and dresses for the day in a tailored skirt and freshly starched and ironed blouse. She settles down for quiet meditation and scripture reading, before preparing the family breakfast. The morning's menu calls for whole wheat pancakes, homemade syrup, freshly squeezed orange juice, and powdered milk (the whole family loves it).

"With classical music wafting through the air, Patti awakens her husband and ten children. She spends a quiet moment with each and helps them plan a happy day. The children quickly dress in clothes that were laid out the night before. They cheerfully make their beds, clean their rooms, and do the individual chores assigned to them on the Family Work Wheel Chart. They assemble for breakfast the minute mother calls.

"After family prayer and scripture study, the children all practice their different musical instruments. Father leaves for work on a happy note. All too soon it is time for the children to leave for school. Having brushed (and flossed) their teeth, the children pick up coats, book bags and lunches which were prepared the night before and arrive at school five minutes early.

"With things more quiet, Patti has story time with her pre-schoolers and teaches them a cognitive reading skill. She feeds, bathes and rocks the baby before putting him down for his morning nap. With baby sleeping peacefully and three year old twins absorbed in creative play, Patti tackles the laundry and housework. In less than an hour, everything is in order. Thanks to wise scheduling and children who are trained to work, her house never really gets dirty."

That's not all of the article but it's enough to get the idea. We laugh, but our women run from this ogre of Patti Perfect, are driven by it, a good part of their lives, and it doesn't even exist.

Sooner or later, however, they have to come face to face with themselves and sometimes they don't like or are frightened by what they see. Maybe an emotional crisis occurs and a sister is confronted with the fact that she doesn't have a personal philosophy to fall back on. Perhaps the priesthood leader is suddenly no longer in the home because of death or desertion and she realizes she is terrified of facing the world alone because she feels she simply lacks the skills to do so, or all the children are finally in school and our young mother with a ten to fifteen year old bachelors degree in English, Music or Political Science realizes she hasn't had a really original thought in years.

Then what happens. She gets depressed, often profoundly so, sometimes needing professional assistance, generally needing the love and support of those around her, always needing to reassess the fears that drive her and have finally tripped her up. She

needs to learn who she really is, that she is O.K., that she is lovable, that all she is asked to do is be real and develop her talents to the best of her ability, and to realistically know what her ability is.

How does the depressed overwhelmed Mormon woman present herself? What symptoms do we see? Generally we see the more classical presentation of depressive symptoms: despair, withdrawal, sleep and appetite disturbance, confusion. Another manifestation that I have seen, however, is a more active and openly angry response to the feelings of depression and that is the one I choose to pursue.

This woman is angry and often not particularly thrilled about seeing a "Church" counselor whether through LDS Social Services or in private practice. She expresses dissatisfaction and anger. She frequently has a history of dependence on a parent or parents and her husband. If single, the dependence is generally on a priesthood leader. If married, she questions her love for her husband and is angry at him. She is resentful for her children, of authority in any traditional form, of the Church. She is angry at her Father in Heaven and not sure she likes Him and quite convinced that He doesn't like her. She is angry about the role of women in the Church, at least as "They" interpret the role and without really understanding it herself. She frequently wants to go back to school and get a degree, often in Social Work. She is resentful of and rebellious toward Church philosophies and will complain loudly about anything even vaguely feeling like a rule and will rebel in her mind but comply with her body which increases the anger. In many ways she looks, acts, and feels like a rebellious teenager and her depression basically comes across as a post-dated adolescent rebellion. The perfect Mormon mother image thus becomes the dominant mother for whom she lives. All her efforts are turned to try and satisfy the insatiable needs of this unfulfilled and unfulfilling life-force.

In an attempt to clarify let me present a case study. Although this is an actual case, it also is a composite of many such cases I have seen, in and out of clinical practice. It is interesting to note that I see relatively few women showing this manifestation of depression in actual practice although the numbers are increasing. By far the majority are encountered in safe, non-threatening situations where I am seen as a peer rather than a counselor or authority figure. In formal counseling situations the attempt is made to turn me into a peer in order to make the need for help tolerable. They seem to come out of the woodwork in the foyer at Church or at informal gatherings. The minute I am formally wearing the hat of Practitioner at LDS Social Services, they fade. In order for them to talk to me informally we pretend I don't do what I do and try to ignore the fact that what they're pretending doesn't exist is the reason they're talking to me in the first place.

Back to the case: This young woman, whom we'll call Alice, is in her mid-thirties and is the mother of six children. Her husband has held many responsible positions in the Church including that of bishop. Alice has been seen as a dynamo in the ward and is often seen as that perfect woman "They" talk about. She has held many leadership positions and is generally seen as

a strength. She comes from a family where she was an only child with a domineering mother and an emotionally distant and dependent father. She joined the Church in adolescence and married right out of high school, moving directly from the domination of her parents to the parenting of her husband. She produced a child every other year, fulfilled all her Church callings, kept a well ordered home and did what her husband told her to do. Her husband was secure in his job. They had worked to buy a home and she loved it very much. He was called as a bishop and was spending more and more time away from her and the family while at the same time growing children were making more and more demands on her.

During that period of time her husband began to feel dissatisfied with his chosen profession and started contemplating a radical life a considerable distance from a rural to an urban environment and attending school for a number of years, with its attendant economic problems. The more the husband talked about it the more depressed she became. Add to that the fact he was gone all the time as bishop and she was pregnant with her sixth child. She went to her doctor about her increasing physical symptoms, he diagnosed depression and decided he would provide counseling to help her through it since he had apparently some background in counseling.

As they continued to work together, she felt she was falling in love with the doctor and he reciprocated. They entered into an emotional but not physical affair. She tried standing up to her husband by telling him she would refuse to move and he would have to commute on the weekends. That had no impact and so she told him of her relationship with her doctor and then unloaded her years of frustration and anger at being dependent on him. That had an impact. He was deeply hurt, confused, repentant and wanting to change and began constantly asking her what he could do to make things better. His sudden passivity was more frustrating to her than his years of domination.

He had already made the commitment to go back to school so in an attempt to hold the marriage together, they sold the house and moved the entire family into student housing. Needless to say, the move did not help the situation. She had given up her home, her familiar surroundings, close proximity to her doctor, the one source, in her perception, of unconditional love and acceptance, and she was angry.

The first time I saw her she felt like someone who had just chained herself to the door of the Pentagon, except in her case perhaps it would be more appropriate to say the Church Office Building. She was tense, anxious and angry. She said her husband was an unthinking, unfeeling clod, the Church imposed arbitrary and unjust rules on a population of empty-headed, unconscious robots, and she was resentful toward her children because she felt guilty at the thought of leaving them to go to college and get a degree of her own.

Alice was tired of being a puppet, first to her mother, then her husband and the Church. She was angry at her father for fading away instead of standing with her and defending her against her mother. She could see no way to escape and that fed her depression. For years she had heard talk after talk about the high and noble calling of women in the Church and Kingdom but all being a

woman meant to her was being dominated and repressed. It meant a lifetime of stretching a budget to fit eight people, six of them children she wasn't sure she could relate to and one of them a husband who seemed to need her only to meet his needs and conform to his pattern.

Her adult life to date was a series of meetings where she couldn't hear the speaker because of fussy children, lessons she couldn't concentrate on because of all the other things going on in her head, and a personal philosophy that implied if she was unhappy or not striding bravely forward toward perfection, she was sinning. As she was, living it, her life was one of no personal growth, of isolation, of no rewards.

Her husband's response after the initial shock and guilt to all her anger and frustration was to adopt a cheerful, everything's-OK attitude, and to whistle and hum a lot. He used it to try and block out his pain but it only served to infuriate her.

How do you help someone in this type of situation? Let me share with you a few specific counseling skills that I've found useful.

1. Listen non-judgementally. It is all too easy for professional and non-professional counselors to slide into offering platitudes or aphorisms when confronted with a human being in pain. We want to provide comfort, to alleviate the pain they feel and the resulting discomfort it creates in us. We also have a hard time avoiding becoming defensive when something that is of value to us is attacked. It is of extreme importance that we not let ourselves become trapped into a discussion and defense of doctrine and the Church. When we do that we immediately put ourselves into a position of authority and get added to the individual's growing list of targets for rebellion. Nor does it help to agree with her angry statements regarding the Church; that only puts the counselor in a position of compromise and increases the insecurity the individual is experiencing. Rather, respond to her feelings, not her words. Use statements like, "it sounds like you were hurt and frustrated when the bishop didn't seem to care about how you felt", or "you feel angry when the members constantly talk about Christianity but your visiting teacher knows you're sick in bed with six screaming children and doesn't lift a hand to help." At this point defending the bishop, the Church, or the visiting teacher would put you firmly on their side.

I never say "when you get back in the Church" or "when you get your testimony back ..." Relating to her on that level is implying that she will soon come to her senses and come back into the fold. That minimizes her feelings and turns all her frustrations into a rather childish temper tantrum against a huge, immovable and always right force. The missionary approach is great when teaching the gospel in a missionary setting; in counseling it can be harmful. Even when she brings up gospel topics on her own for discussion, and she will, I never use the missionary "when." never assume that she will fully accept the teachings of the Church. Instead I operate on the assumption that she has a choice to make, that she will be able to make it, and it might not necessarily be in the direction of the Church. This kind of approach tends to leave the LDS counselor with feelings of insecurity related to the fear of taking risks with something as important as the testimony of

the individual they are counseling. It must be understood that rebellion is not being encouraged by not forcing the issue of acceptance of gospel principles. The client must be given the room to form her own opinions. The most active role I take at this point is to simply make sure I am living the teachings of the Church to the best of my ability. I do not flaunt my involvement in the Church, nor do I hide it, it is simply there.

2. Help her separate and deal with the authority figures in her life. Generally they come down to four: parents husband, Church and Father in Heaven. Sometimes, for a working woman, her boss is included in this group. I begin with her parents and ask her to tell me about them to help us get acquainted with them. As she does so we begin to explore the beginnings of her feelings of powerlessness, not for purposes of condemning her parents but for understanding. As we gain an understanding of the authority patterns in her family of origin, we see that her relationship with her husband finally fits into that same mold. After a little work she can be helped to see that she relates to the Church in the same way. She expects domination and unrealistic demands for performance, never questions, and so is in one more situation where she is over-powered.

I believe that we relate to our Father in Heaven in much the same way we relate to our earthly father. If an individual has had a faulty relationship with her father, then the chances are pretty high that she views her relationship with her Heavenly Father as disappointing and not meeting her expectations. When I suggest that to clients they usually resist the idea at first. After some examination of the character of the two relationship, however, they understand they can separate the two. The same transference is also often made to priesthood leaders.

Not long ago I was counseling with a young woman whose father provided for all her material needs and wants but was emotionally distant and unable to meet those needs. I shared with her my feelings about the similarity in the two relationships. She denied it and began talking about her relationship with her Heavenly Father. As she did so she progressively became more upset and not five minutes after denying the whole idea she exclaimed, "Heavenly Father never lets me have what I want!" She stopped abruptly, thought a moment and said, "You don't have to say a word, I can see the connection". Not everyone works it out that quickly.

3. An extremely important part of the working-through process is to help the individual understand their expectations vs. the realities of life. Everyone carries around with them certain unreal expectations for performance for the key figures in their lives. I call it the Ensign Image. For example, no matter what the parent is really like, we have a rather perfect image of how that person should perform, kind of like Patti Perfect applied to another person. Truman Madsen would probably attribute that expectation to a hidden memory of our relationship with our Father in Heaven in the pre-existence and I tend to agree. Whatever the source, however, in mortality it is basically unreal. Part of growing up is learning to see our parents as fallible. Women whose parents have dominated them have a more difficult time making that transition and so are

caught in an untenable position. They need the parent to be perfect in their response to them but when the parent is imperfect and relates in a hurtful way, the individual is doubly hurt, first, by the injury inflicted by the parent, and second, by their disappointment at the parent's lack of perfection.

In order to free themselves from this Catch-22 situation they must confront their expectations for what they are and give them up for the realities. The process of working it through is very similar to dealing with a death. The Ensign Image perfect parent or husband or whatever needs to be laid to rest so a relationship with the real one can at last be started. The emotions dealt with during this time are similar to those working through a death, anger, disappointment, sadness and finally acceptance.

One tool I have found particularly effective at this point is one I hijacked from the Intensive Journal Process by Progoff as taught by Frances Heussenstamm and that is the Dialogue with Persons. This process brings the individual face to face with the offending party and allows them to safely express their hurt and frustration, their anger, and to renegotiate the relationship. The technique is relatively simple and in most cases in something I have them do as homework. In some situations where it is going to be a particularly painful process, I have them do it with someone they trust nearby or in a setting where they are able to maintain contact with me, either through geographical proximity or by telephone. Briefly the process is as follows:

a. Have the individual spend a few minutes doing deep relaxation exercises.

b. Ask them to identify the individual with whom they wish to dialogue and write down eight to twelve stepping stones of that person's life beginning with "they were born". Stepping stones are milestones in a person's life expressed in a word or phrase such as, "went on a mission", "got married", "became depressed".

Dates and places are not included and they should not be expressed in complete sentences. They are used only to provide perspective.

c. The dialogue is written in the form of a script and begins with: Me - Hi, (person's name, or however you would address them), and they would respond in like manner. It is always difficult to get started at first, just as it would be if the individuals were speaking face to face.

The dialogue gives them an opportunity to express their feelings where that would be impossible or improbable at best in any other way. Once the frustrations and hurt have been expressed they begin to actually enter into a dialogue and the product is increased understanding, release of some of the unreal expectations, and acceptance of the realities and forgiveness. They can read their writing to others but there should be no analytical or editorial comment. The dialogue belongs strictly to the individual.

Once the unreal expectations are given up, the person finds fewer disappointments and more positive experiences in that relationship. Without having to condemn anyone else, they are able to stop condemning themselves.

4. Finally, our depressed, oppressed, angry sister needs to be helped to make her ideas her own. From the time she was born she has been told what to think and do without ever working it through on her own. If someone told her the moon was made of green cheese she accepted it and never bothered to read the account of Neil Armstrong walking on it and coming back with rocks, not cheese, in his pack. Somehow she got the idea that asking questions is the high road to apostasy and never realized that it is not only all right to ask questions, but necessary for survival.

During this phase she will experience some of the rebellion she should have experienced in adolescence, or which she tried and failed. It is important that she be helped to make this a positive, healthy rebellion rather than a destructive one. Talk to her about it, help her know what to watch for. With her permission her husband and bishop can also be helped to understand what is happening. Most of all it is important that she understand this process of rebellion so she can engineer it and enjoy it. If done correctly it doesn't last too long.

It is at this time that I encourage her to take a class or develop a skill not related to homemaking. I also ask her to start getting involved in other people's lives, to get out of her own pain and try to help someone else with theirs in a way she can tolerate.

By and large I have found that I deal with a depressed angry sister much the way I would with a rebelling adolescent, only she feels more accessible to me than a teenager in pain.

We are still left with the conflict about the roles of men and women in the Church and the concerns regarding perfection. Regarding the roles, I don't have the answer for everyone; I do, however, have it for myself. As I've studied and prayed about it and worked and reworked it in my mind, I've come up with an answer that feels very good to me in my life. When women ask me for an answer, I tell them they'll have to find it the way I did in order for it to have any meaning, to belong to them. The one thing I do preach long and loud is that an eternal Celestial man/woman relationship is one based on strengths, not on weaknesses.

And last but not least, what do we do with the monstrous, perfect "They?" We need to put it to rest along with all the unreal expectations, and I, for one, will not mourn its passing at all. When "They" rears its ugly head, confront it with reality, with doctrine and it will melt like ice on a stove. The Saints have a hard enough time living the doctrine without trying to meet the demands of the perfect "They".

Let me give you a piece of reality that can be used. It is taken from the talk given by Sister Barbara Smith at the Women's Fireside on September 15, 1979. She said:

Each woman in today's world has responsibilities akin to those which Ester faced. The circumstances of each life are significantly different, yet each woman faces the challenge of being true to the principles of the gospel if she would improve the quality of her mortal life and make herself worthy of the opportunity of eternal progression. She would begin by understanding who

she is and that she has a magnificent potential as a daughter of God. Her goal then should be lofty. The Scriptures say: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5: 48)

Quickly I caution that this is not an obtainable goal in one step or one year. It takes a lifetime of conscious effort, of striving and learning and living, to become a holy woman."

In closing I'd like to share with you the words of an old hymn that I find enjoyable and meaningful. It's called "Freedom Daughter" and is sung to the melody of "Hope of Israel".

Freedom's daughter, rouse from slumber
See, the curtains are withdrawn
Which so long thy mind hath shrouded:
Lo! thy day begins to dawn.

CHORUS:

Woman, 'rise, thy penance o'er,
Sit thou in the dust no more;
Seize the scepter, hold the van,
Equal with thy brother, man.

Truth and virtue be thy motto,
Temp'rance, libery and peace.
Light shall shine and darkness vanish,
Love shall reign, oppression cease.

CHORUS:

First to fall 'mid Eden's bowers,
Through long suff'ring worthy proved,
With the foremost claim thy pardon,
When earth's curse shall be removed.

CHORUS: