



## Comfort for the sick

When it became clear that her life would never be the same again, Emily Ackerman searched the Scriptures and sought help from others struggling with pain and disability. Now she has written a book to help others facing a long term illness.

Linda lived happily in her country cottage, took pride in her garden and enjoyed her job as a vet. She drove 20 miles on a Sunday to be part of a good church and often went hill-walking with friends.

Then Linda fell ill with arthritis. She was unable to work, or get to Sunday services because she was too sore to drive. Linda really missed her workmates and the sense of achievement her job had given her. The garden started to get out of hand and she had to swallow her pride to ask for lifts to the village shop. Her beloved dogs went to stay with her brother 'for now'. She felt conspicuous because of her poor walking and obviously swollen hands.

As she lay in bed day after day in a quiet house, her naturally optimistic mood started to slip. Was she going to recover? How would she manage if she didn't? What about paying the mortgage, and that overseas mission trip she had booked later in the year? And what about God? Didn't he want her out there serving him, being salt and light to her clients and friends?

Linda had always propped up others, but now she needed support herself. At

this point, she realised that some of her friendships were not as solid as she had thought. Without the shared hobbies or church teamwork, some friends just faded

away, embarrassed or overwhelmed by her situation. Others told her firmly that she needed to try a different diet, or to pray more trustingly for God to heal her.

Linda's story reveals the multiple losses suffered by people who fall sick. As she went from independent working woman to workless invalid, she lost status, income, companionship, hobbies and her vital sense of purpose. I know exactly how Linda feels, because it happened to me in 1990. I was a young mum with tiny children, a part-time medical job and a lot else packed into my week. When I fell ill with ME, I too lost my high status career, earnings, hobbies, sports and church activities. I lost my sense of being a good mum who could meet her family's needs. Instead I was given harsh symptoms, limits, pressures and sorrows. I lay in bed for endless hours, bored, sore, worried and brooding.

As the months and years went by, I watched my well friends move on with their lives, leaving me behind. I was full of difficult questions. Why me? What about my dreams? Didn't God see my suffering? Would I ever find my way back to my old life?

As my church attendance dwindled, my need for spiritual input grew. I was starving

### How to welcome a sick person into your church

- Go over to her and ask how she is. She may not feel up to going in search of conversation. You don't have to solve her problems, just offer friendly concern and a listening ear.
- Ask if there's anything she needs to enter in to the life of the congregation. How's the access situation from her point of view? Is there an e-mail or phone prayer chain she might like to join? Could someone keep her a seat close to the door so she can arrive late, or slip out early without fuss? Does she need a lift and could you sort out a rota? Would she appreciate a visit from the pastoral care team? Maybe she'd appreciate having her small group meeting in her house once in a while, with a host arriving early to tidy the room and prepare the snacks.
- Tell her and show her that she is still a valuable part of the church. Keep her updated about what's going on, even if she can't always make it. Let her know your news, too; she needs friendships more than ever.
- Send her a card or e-mail once in a while, with a joke, quote or news item.
- If you want to meet up with her, suggest it with your diary in your hand. Vague promises that aren't followed up are normal between busy people, but can be devastating for an isolated sick person, who waits in vain for weeks.
- Remember that she may have to back out of things at the last minute. This hurts her more than it hurts you, so try to be gracious – and suggest another date soon.



*"Mary and I noticed that you hadn't been to church for a while. We're just checking you're still a Christian?"*

for a word of comfort or advice, something to help me keep my dreams alive.

Naturally, I cried out to God for help. I asked him over and over to release me from this trouble, back into my old life. From my new viewpoint under the duvet, that life looked wonderfully happy and satisfying. Why didn't I appreciate it more when I had it? Even walking down the street to get a pint of milk now looked like a rare and precious privilege.

I didn't realise it at the time but God had set my feet on another path. He was calling me to persevere; to build a new way of life, one small step at a time. Slowly and with many tears I learned to accept his agenda. I found that he is big enough to sustain me through the pain; I don't 'need' to be healed to survive as a person. This discovery helped my confidence to grow.

Gradually, the focus of my questions moved from 'Why' to 'How'. How can I solve the problems I face? How can I tap in to God's power and provision for the likes of me? How can I serve others as I am now?

I set out to find other sick people who might have some answers. I found that we 'sickos' have a lot in common, whether we face cancer, depression, back pain or MS. I gathered tips, war stories and black jokes from a wide range of people living with life-changing illness. These outwardly fragile warriors were generous with their time and energy, and I learned in my turn to support others who were ill. This fellowship of suffering is an unseen but powerfully effective community.

As I trawled through the Bible in search of comfort and inspiration, I was deeply

struck by the life of Joseph. This dramatic story, complete with amazing technicolour dreamcoat, seems to mirror the stages of life with an illness. Joseph's efforts to overcome loss, disappointment, suffering, rejection and imprisonment strike a powerful chord with me. I'm encouraged to find that nothing could prevent him from reaching his God-given destiny because he chose to walk with God. The more I look, the more I find.

After 20 years of worsening illness and disability, I set out with nervous determination to write a useful book for people like me. I wrote every morning for one hour, clad in my trusty dressing gown, followed by the inevitable nap. I asked more questions of sick people and offered a peek into their lives and experiences. I pulled together practical strategies to tackle difficult emotions, strained relationships, unruly symptoms and spiritual burnout. I considered loss, worklessness, boredom, stress, vision, hope and self-esteem.

I took a good hard look at healing to see what God has promised to us all. I pondered terminal illness and death,

pulling in a hospice doctor and other health care professionals to help me along. I looked at how illness affects singleness, marriage and parenthood, and searched out ways to take back the ground. And since I've fallen into pretty much all the pitfalls of illness, I'm personally equipped to point them out, complete with muddy footprints and exit strategies.

For inspiration, I took my Bible friend Joseph along. With his story running through the book, the disaster of illness starts to look more like an adventure.

The process of writing this book taught me a great deal about God's loving provision for every sick believer. He has neither forgotten nor rejected us. I hope that the book will bring comfort and hope to the sick. It can also help those who love us to understand more about what it's like to live with ill health.

+ *The Amazing Technicolour Pyjama Therapy* by Emily Ackerman is published by Muddy Pearl, ISBN 978-1-910012-12-3, price £9.99. It's available post-free from [www.muddypearl.com](http://www.muddypearl.com) or from your local bookshop.

## Giveaway

We have five copies of Emily's book to give away. For your chance to win, simply send your name and address to WA/Pyjama, *Woman Alive* Competitions at the address on page 46 by 24th November 2014. The first five names to be selected on that day will each receive a copy of the book.

