

How Karen Brown Beat the Sadness Sickness

(A Story about Depression for Children)

By

Neil Fullan MD

©March, 2011

Prologue

These stories are written to help children and families understand mental health conditions, in this case depression, but they are not intended as treatment manuals. This story is dedicated to Katherine and Sterling Price who treated my family like we were their family. We feel the same way about them. Grace before meals in their home always ended with the same words that they lived: "Lord, make us ever mindful of the needs of others."

I. Halloween

"Ow! You're hurting me," Karen called down to her mother, "Danny's got a hold of my foot and won't let go."

"Tattletail," he shot back at her.

From the kitchen came the voice of "she who must be obeyed," Danny let go of her foot, or you'll be doing all the dishes until you are thirty- two years old."

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied.

“He’s not letting go,” Karen wailed.

The children heard a familiar step on the stairs, and Danny immediately let go of Karen’s foot. Karen ran down the stairs from their bedrooms to insure that her foot was not held hostage again. She almost crashed into her mother on the staircase, but when her mother saw her she turned around and stared back down the staircase. Karen’s mother, speaking in her most authoritarian voice, said, “It is a beautiful Fall Saturday, and everyone over three years of age needs to go outside now, and breathe some fresh air because it is a beautiful morning.” This was followed by the sound of many feet trooping outside their bungalow. Michael found an old rubber ball which had belonged to a family pet years ago, and began tossing around to his brothers and sisters. Later this game was upgraded to softball when an appropriate ball and bat were found. One advantage of having a large family was the ease with which ball teams could be organized. The disadvantage was having enough bathroom time in the morning before leaving for school. School had been in session for two weeks now, and this year bathroom logistics seemed fairly good. The children played in the yard until they were too tired to move, and then there were grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup for supper. The warm soup seemed to warm her up all over. This warm meal didn’t stop anyone from going back outside after supper for a game of hide and seek in the dusk followed by a marshmallow roast in the fire pit. The smells of leaves, marshmallows, and wood smoke blended in delicious perfusion in Karen’s nose.

Monday came way too soon for Karen’s liking, and math class hit her like a garbage truck after her beautiful weekend. She couldn’t believe how much harder fifth grade math was than fourth grade. She did her best not to drift off into daydreaming, but Ms. Lindstrom’s monotone voice put her under. Soon she was riding unicorns through an enchanted forest which, after a while, changed magically into flying horses. She was climbing rapidly on such horse when a huge wart-covered dragon loomed over her. Suddenly the dragon dissolved and in its

place loomed Ms. Lindstrom who seemed very intent on the answer to problem number thirty-nine. Karen gave it her best shot and said, “one hundred and one.” Ms. Lindstrom gave a look of pained confusion and said, “That’s right Karen.” Karen felt like she had used up twenty years of good luck, but managed a slight smirk anyway. The rest of the day went better if not better than usual, and after school, volleyball practice went really well. She even managed to spike a ball on the top of Alice Blidowski’s head when she wasn’t paying attention during a practice warm-up; she had been waiting to do that for several months . . . who said paybacks weren’t sweet. Karen was excited about Halloween and her costume. Some of the kids in her grade were saying they were too old for costumes and candy, but Karen knew quite a few high school students that were going out so she felt very good about the whole thing.

This Halloween was one of the best. It was warm for Halloween so she didn’t have to wear a coat over her costume which she hated because then nobody could see it. She was able to go out with two of her best friends, Gail and Trish; and she felt her praying mantis costume was exceptionally well crafted. Her dad had rigged hinged wooden legs and that looked like the real thing yet they were not heavy. Her mother had made the body from kelly-green organza that looked very authentic. She had made large eyes out of paper Mache and antennae out of plastic tubing from the hospital where she worked. Karen supplied some make believe sound effects, and everyone told her how great her costume was. She collected much candy, but knew the rule was that everyone shared the candy and it was metered out slowly over the next weeks.

II. Christmas

The next weekend started well, Halloween had been a lot of fun, and she saw a lot of trick-or-treaters from her class out with her. The best part was the good weather; you never knew what to expect in the midwest, but it had been sunny and not cold. The day after Halloween had been a different story. Karen seemed to be unable to control her temper. She got into an argument with her sister because she borrowed a blouse without asking and Kaitlin got very angry about this, then she had a fight with her mother because she truly believed it was not her weekend to wash dishes. Lastly she had an argument with her father over the way she spoke to her mother, and ended up grounded for the weekend. Saturday night she went to bed early and cried herself to sleep. Sunday went a little better, but she felt tired most of the day. At church, one of the not so nice boys asked her if her dress belonged to her grandmother, and it made her feel very sad. Normally this kind of remark would have bounced right off of her, but this day she kept mulling it over in her head. She started to question her appearance and feel badly about it. That night she cried herself to sleep again, and this time she found she was not able to sleep well. At breakfast the following morning, she didn't feel hungry, but managed a small bowl of cereal. She noticed how dark it was getting in the morning and for some reason she found that made her feel out of sorts.

As November stretched into December, Karen found herself less excited about Christmas this year than others. She had turned down some invitations to Christmas parties and felt less like spending time with her friends. One afternoon she found herself walking home from school with her best friend, Gail, who said, "Is anything the matter Karen?"

Karen replied, "No, is anything wrong with you?"

Gail looked surprised and hurt by this remark to Karen said, "I'm sorry, Gail, I'm feeling on edge these days and sad. I wish I could go away for a while."

Gail asked, "Where would you go?"

Karen thought about this for a while and then said, "I think California would be good; it's nice and warm out there and I've always wanted to see the ocean."

"Can I come too?" remarked her friend, "I've always wanted to try surfing."

"Sometimes I feel like California wouldn't be far enough," Karen added, then continued, "Gail, there a few things I would like you to have such as my brown bear and my blue sapphire ring."

"I couldn't take those; they are some of your favorite things," she replied.

"If you are truly my friend you will take them, because I want my best friend to have them, Karen said seriously. Reluctantly, Gail agreed, but it didn't feel right to her especially because Karen had also told her she had been crying a lot. She asked Karen if she was feeling OK, but this seemed to make Karen irritable. In the end she kept quiet while Karen put her treasures in a shopping bag and gave them to her. She asked Karen if she could give Karen a few things of hers to show Karen that she cared about her, but Karen said she would rather not do that. She thanked Karen and made a rather speedy departure for home because it looked as though Karen was on the verge of tears.

About a week before Christmas, Karen's mother asked her if she had her shopping done and Karen told her that she hadn't done any yet. She said she wasn't much in the mood this year. Karen's mother thought that was peculiar, but told her that weekend she would take her shopping, and the two of them could make a day of it. When Saturday came, however, Karen said she was sick and needed to rest. Karen's mother was a nurse and had a pretty good idea about what Karen looked like when she was sick. She took her temperature, and gave her a brief physical and said she couldn't find any signs of the flu or any other illness. At this point Karen became angry and accused her mother of calling her a liar. She told her mother that she (Karen) was the only one that could really tell if she was sick, then she began sobbing uncontrollably. Her mother asked her, "What's the matter, Honey?"

Karen said, "I don't know. I feel sad or angry most of the time and I don't know why. I hate myself and none of my friends like me anymore. I keep thinking about Grandma and how much I miss her."

"Karen, Grandma died over three years ago, and you were not close to her; you only saw her for a few days a year," her mother said.

"I know but I think about her a lot. It's not fair that she died when I was so young; I didn't even get to know her well," Karen wailed. They talked about grandma for a while. Then Karen's mom said that Karen should rest, but she asked if she could do some shopping for Karen because Christmas was only a few days away. Karen told her that would be fine, and went back to sleep. Around one P.M. there was a knock on her door and her father came into her room, and told her he had made grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup. Karen had been expecting this because her father could only make about three different meals, and this was the only one that really worked for lunch. He asked her what type of sickness she had and she told him she didn't know; it just made her tired and cranky. He didn't press on the subject, and she suppressed her anger about yet another person asking her what was wrong. The next day Karen asked to stay home from church because she wasn't feeling well, and she could tell this really upset her dad who thought the only reason someone should miss church was if they were in the hospital or jail.

Karen was able to get up for the last day of school before the holiday, but she had a lot of trouble concentrating in class. At the end of Mrs. Bronstead's fourth hour class, the teacher asked her to stay after class for a few minutes. Karen tried to leave saying she couldn't be late to her next class, but Mrs. Bronstead said she had already let the teacher know that Karen would be a little late. She started out by saying, "Karen, you haven't turned any of your homework in for five weeks. I know you are a good student so I wanted to speak with you about this alone in case you are having person problems or family problems."

Karen could feel the tears starting run down her cheeks, but she said truthfully, "I don't know what's wrong. I just feel bad all the time, and I can't concentrate on what I'm doing. I don't like myself, and I just want to be somewhere else."

Her teacher said, "In that case, Karen I'd like to ask you to come with me to the guidance office, and speak with Mrs. Hutchinson about this."

"Could we do this after Christmas?" she asked.

Mrs. Bronstead replied, "I don't think we can, Karen, I'm quite worried about you, and I need her input on this because she specializes in these types of problems. She may be able to suggest some things that could be helpful. Come on let's get started."

They reached the guidance office in a matter of minutes, and after a brief wait, Karen found herself in a comfortable overstuffed chair facing Mrs. Hutchison. Karen knew that Mrs. H', as she was called was a nice person, but she felt embarrassed anyway. Mrs. H' asked her how she was doing, and in light of the tears in her eyes, she couldn't very well tell her everything was wonderful, so she told about her sadness and the anger. She told her she had lost five pounds and wasn't eating well. She told her she was having problems sleeping at night, and found that very few things she used to enjoy were fun anymore. She told her that she didn't want to be with her friends, but she missed them; and she was ashamed of her behavior towards other family members.

When Karen had finished talking, Mrs. H' asked her if she had told these things to her parents and Karen told her that she didn't want to worry her parents with these problems. Mrs. H' asked to sit down that night with one of her parents, and tell them what she had told her. Karen promised she would. That night she asked her mother to have a talk, and they sat at the kitchen table where Karen went through all the issues she had discussed with Mrs. H'. She told her mother about the problems she was having with friends, and how she hadn't done much homework in the last four to five weeks. She said she didn't want to ruin everybody's Christmas with her problems. She said she thought the holidays would cheer her up, and she didn't think that her mother needed to worry about it. She did ask her to speak with her dad so he wouldn't get angry about the homework; she was sure she could make it up over Christmas.

Karen's mother listened patiently, and then she spoke, "Karen, I'm sorry but I feel this is a serious problem we are dealing with here. I know you don't know this, but many people in my family suffer with depression, and many of the things you are telling me tonight sound very much like the types of problems I have heard my mother speak about happening to my aunts and other relatives."

Karen said, "Couldn't we wait until after the holidays to do something about this, I don't want to ruin Christmas."

"Taking care of you will not ruin anyone's Christmas; in fact, it might make it quite a bit better. Taking care of our emotional health is every bit as important as taking care of our physical health. Karen, this sounds to me as though you are having an emotional problem, and I want you to talk to a doctor friend of mine who specializes in those types of problems. Her name is Dr. Lloyd, and she is a very nice lady who understands these types of problems. I will call her tomorrow and set up an appointment."

"During Christmas?" Karen asked.

Her mother told her that doctors worked at least part of Christmas, and she did not think this was going to be a problem.

III. New Year's

Dr. Lloyd listened patiently while Karen told her the story, then she asked some questions about it. She asked questions about Karen's health in general and about her family. She then asked Karen's parents for their input, and asked about things that had been going on in school. When everyone had had a say, Dr. Lloyd said she felt Karen was suffering from depression, and she felt that a combination of individual and family therapy along with a medicine called an antidepressant

would be helpful. They outlined a plan and goals for the therapy, and she explained how to use the medicine to the family. She told them that both therapy and medicine take time; this was not like an earache where medicine would work in a matter of days. She asked if she could speak with Mrs. H' about their plan and the family gave their permission. This way, Mrs. H' could work with Karen on getting her homework made up, and she would have a designated counselor at school she could speak with if there was a problem at school.

Karen was surprised to find that therapy could be fun; there were even some games Dr. Lloyd liked to play. She gave Karen suggestions about how to deal with some situations that made her uncomfortable, and techniques for fighting back against the depression. As the weeks went on Karen found that she was doing more with her friends and having fewer episodes of anger or sadness. Her sleep and appetite got back to normal, and she found herself laughing more often. She made up her missing school work, and found that; once again, her concentration was back when she was doing her homework. She felt particularly good one night when the family was sitting around eating popcorn and playing a board game when her father looked at her and smiled saying, "We've got our Karen back."

,