



Welcome to Fresh Hope!

What's My Story?

Too often mental health “recovery” focuses on learning to cope and survive with your mental illness, which leads to helplessness, hopelessness, and a sense of permanent loss. Persistent mental health challenges easily destroy one’s self-confidence and rob you of the joy of living. I know, because I’ve been there.

In 1995 I had a manic episode that became public and ever so painful to so many. My actions hurt my wife and family deeply, along with a church full of members. After months of news reports in the paper and on TV, and three months of a living hell that took me to the brink of suicide, I ended up in a hospital in Michigan where I received a name for this “monster” within me that I had tried so hard to control. For the first seven years following my diagnosis, I was on a journey.

In 2001 after a horrible relapse, a friend told me he now knew that I really had a mental illness. He said he knew me to be a smart person, smart enough to not repeat what had happened in 1995. Thus my relapse and repeated manic episode was confirmation to him that it was real. For me, it was confirmation that I wanted my life back! I wanted to live again – in spite of my disorder. I knew I wanted more out of my life than just coping with my illness. So for the first time, I began to attend a mental health support group, believing I would find people there who had found the “key” to living a rich and full life in spite of their mental health issues. But to my dismay, I found a group of people struggling, pretty hopeless, and beat down by their illnesses. And after each meeting I attended, I found myself discouraged, sad, powerless, and thinking, “There has got to be more to my life than just allowing the management of daily coping of my disorder to take over my whole life.” And it is this frustration that led me to my journey to fresh hope: fresh hope that is found in the Lord, fresh hope that empowers me to live a full and rich life *in spite* of my disorder, fresh hope that enables me to live symptom-free of my disorder as I proactively live out my wellness plan.

Hi, my name is Brad and I have bipolar disorder. I have what some call a mental illness. It *is* part of me, but it is not ALL of me. However, I am not my diagnosis. And I will NOT allow others to minimize me to a diagnosis or marginalize me because of the label of bipolar. I didn’t ask for it. I didn’t seek it out. It’s not a character flaw, nor is it a moral issue. And it’s not a spiritual/faith issue! I can choose to let it define me, confine me, refine me, outshine me; or I can choose to move on and leave it behind me.

Today, it's a small part of my life. Yet I know all too well that bipolar disorder or any mental health issue left untreated can easily destroy your entire life! I know that, because prior to 1995 this disorder was beginning to destroy every part of my life. But today it is only a small part of my daily life. For I have fresh hope!

What is Fresh Hope?

Fresh Hope is a journey to wholeness in one's life after a mental health diagnosis.

Fresh Hope is learning to live a FULL and rich life in spite of a mental health diagnosis.

Fresh Hope is empowerment to take my life back.

Fresh Hope is the process which enables me to "rule over" my disorder, vs. coping with it.

Fresh Hope comes from the Lord!

During the seven years following my relapse, I began to study, search, and pray for ways that would bring back a joy to living. Knowing that the Lord was key to finding that joy, I searched high and low to find a support group that was faith-based. I found nothing. I searched on Google for nearly two years looking for websites where I might find materials for starting a faith-based support group. I found nothing.

As I talked with my doctor, Dr. Michael Egger, about this, he asked, "Have you ever thought about starting a support group based upon your own personal journey?" I brushed it off and thought, "Yeah, sure. When people find out that I'm a pastor who made the newspaper and was on the news and went through all these things, they'll stop coming immediately." And yet, I couldn't let go of his challenge. It was as though the Lord was saying to me, "This is the way that I plan to redeem all of the past years of pain and struggle." But I kept tripping over my past and myself, and I assumed others would trip over it, too. So I put off the thought of starting anything at all. Yet I could not get the idea out of my head of a group that was safe, where people could experience hope, healing, and unconditional grace. And after fourteen years of recovery – the first seven only a "coping recovery," and the second seven years a recovery based upon wellness – Fresh Hope was born.

We held our first meeting of Fresh Hope on Tuesday, February 3rd, 2010. We started with 17 people the first night. In the weeks that followed the group got smaller. But during that time we all began to learn the narratives of one another's lives. And through this process, Fresh Hope began to blossom and evolve into what is now a network of groups that are springing up throughout the country.

Starting Fresh Hope has brought more healing and more hope into my life than I could have ever imagined. I marvel at how the smallest little thing that somebody says gives a huge breakthrough to another person on the exact night they need to hear it. In all my years of ministry as a pastor, I have never seen lives change so easily.

What makes Fresh Hope different from other support groups for people with mental health issues?

Fresh Hope is faith-based and Christ-centered. We don't apologize for it. We look at our mood disorder as we do with all things: through the lens of faith, faith in a God Who is the God of the universe; Who created us, made us, and is all powerful and all-knowing; the true God; the God of the Scriptures, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the Father Who loved us so much that He sent His only son, Jesus Christ, to die for us. And we don't apologize for it.

With that said, understand that we don't get hyper-spiritual in our Fresh Hope meetings, either. People are where they are, and we're fine with that. I've seen many people who have little to no faith at all, or may even have a different faith, come and be quite comfortable; because more than anything, it's a safe place. It's a safe place to experience God's love and not have the Bible shoved down your throat or somebody coming at you.

When people speak from their own experience, it's hard to argue with them, especially when somebody says, "This is how I've experienced the Lord in my recovery." But the purpose of the group is not to be a Bible study, nor is it supposed to be a debate about spiritual matters. Instead it is a group that is there to help extend hope, where hope is extended from a Christian perspective to those who have mood disorders; hope that God is able and quite capable and will do something great.

Our groups are peer-facilitator-led, vs. group-led or by an outside facilitator. Our leaders are trained to give some direction to the group, not in a therapeutic way as a therapist would lead a support group, but different than just letting the group take its own direction. There are topics and a specific plan to follow, especially for the first half of the meeting time.

Our tenets are based on a model of faith-filled wellness. You might call it faith-filled recovery principles. Our belief is that one can manage his or her own recovery and live a fulfilling and joy-filled life. Now when I say "manage one's own recovery", this means that you're the lead active person in it. You're the person taking active responsibility for your recovery, with your doctor assisting and helping, but *you* are pushing through and choosing to live.

We recognize that even when we're sick, we still have the power to choose. We believe that faith enables us to continue to operate. And sometimes faith is all that we have when we are at our sickest.

We recognize the difference between our brain, our mind, and our soul. Our brain is the organ, and our mind is what the brain does. The Lord uses our minds to feed our souls through His Word; our faith is part of our soul. This distinction is fundamentally important. It is because of the distinction between our brain, mind, and soul that we maintain that at times our brains are not chemically balanced; causing the function of the brain to bring about unhealthy/unbalanced thinking and actions. These unhealthy thoughts and actions are not a true reflection of who we are. The difference between who you are and who you want to be is what you do. It is especially

during these times that we need to call upon our faith even more in spite of what we are thinking and feeling.

Faith is the key element that enables us to overcome and makes Fresh Hope different than other recovery models. From our perspective, our faith is what enables us to not lose hope, and in fact is our source of hope even at the most hopeless times of our journey. Faith in Christ is not only the source of our hope; it gives to us the power to renew our minds (Romans 12:2). Because of Christ, our hope and faith, we do not simply live our lives “coping” with a mental illness; instead we live out our lives in wellness *despite* our mental health challenges.

We see Fresh Hope as an environment where people listen, where people share only from their perspective. We don't preach at each other. We don't tell each other how to do something, what to believe, or how to respond. We encourage one another, and we share our journey with one another. We do challenge one another at times. But it's a safe environment. It's a safe environment where equipping people to successfully manage (self-empowered wellness) their mood disorder is the goal.

Fresh Hope is a belief that God can use our brokenness for our good, and that when God uses us, He has a purpose and a plan for our lives, mental health challenge or not. Feeling like we're broken and shattered in a million pieces, or not, God has a plan.

In fact, Fresh Hope believes that until we're broken and recognize our brokenness and our need for God, He really can't use us all that much.

In Fresh Hope, we infuse hope and faith that God loves us and empowers us to become victors, and to live as victors in Him, in spite of anything in our lives – maybe most of all, our mental health challenges.

What are the goals of Fresh Hope?

The first goal is to empower the person who has a mental health challenge to successfully manage his/her recovery, choosing wellness to live a happy and fulfilling life.

The second goal of Fresh Hope is to empower loved ones to understand and appropriately relate to their loved one who has the mood disorder, and come alongside their loved one in recovery, so that they too might enjoy life.

The third goal is that we provide a safe place for sharing both pain and hope without fear of judgment by anyone. In other words, we want to make it a safe place where self-discovery can happen and people can be honest and transparent with one another.

The fourth goal is really the overarching goal, and that is to offer *healing for the past and hope for the future*.

What blessings can you expect?

Fresh Hope as a peer group support system is phenomenal. It blows my mind – no pun intended – at how powerful the Fresh Hope experience has been for people and how it's helped them. I know self-help groups help people, but I have never seen lives changed like this in all my years of ministry.

I am thankful for your choosing to have a Fresh Hope ministry. You will see lives empowered and changed.

Gripped by Grace,

Brad Hoefs
Founder of Fresh Hope