

By **WILLIAM C. KASHATUS**

Lincoln: Role model for depression

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, many leaders have struggled with depression but none as severely as Abraham Lincoln.

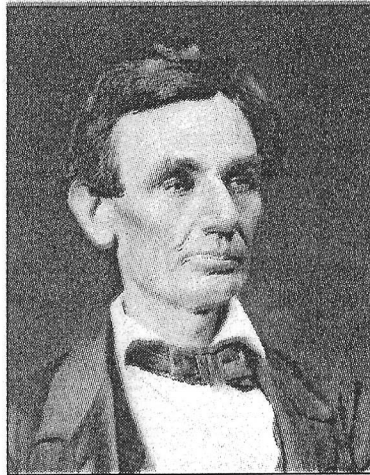
Lincoln, whose birthday we celebrate on Sunday, wrestled with several demons during his presidency: a wife who was going insane, the death of a young son, a quarrelsome Cabinet and the constant anxieties of civil war. The toll those years took on him can be seen in the accompanying photos.

But he was prepared to deal with each stress because of a life-long struggle with mental illness.

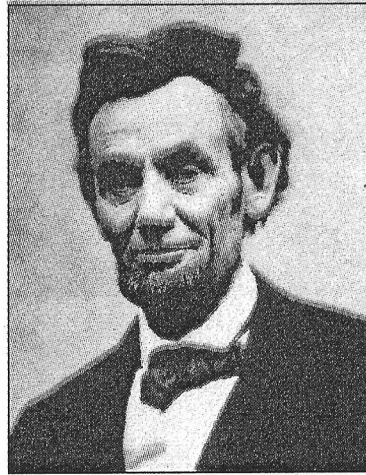
Depression is widely misunderstood and commonly ignored by many who suffer from it. Lincoln's example offers hope to the more than 19 million Americans who struggle with depression.

Clinical depression is characterized by persistent sadness; sleeping too much or too little; reduced appetite and weight loss, or increased appetite and weight gain; loss of pleasure in activities once enjoyed; difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions; loss of energy; feeling guilty or worthless; thoughts of suicide or death. It is often the result of genetic predisposition or environment. In Lincoln's case, both.

Mental illness was prevalent in the Lincoln family. His mother was described as a "sensitive and sad woman," while his fa-



President-elect Lincoln in 1860 (left) and five years later, before his assassination in 1865.



ther "often got the blues and wanted to be alone." But environmental influences also existed.

Lincoln's childhood was filled with tragedy. His mother died of disease when he was 8. Depressed and angry, his father ignored or beat him. Although Lincoln enjoyed moderate success in early adulthood as a militia captain in the Black Hawk Indian War and a member of the Illinois legislature, he failed in business twice and was often in debt.

The death of his first true love, Ann Rutledge, sent him into a

sharp decline in which he often spoke of "committing suicide."

While depression can occur at any age, Lincoln's breakdown occurred when he was 26, consistent with a recent survey published by the "Archives of General Psychiatry." According to the survey, the highest risk for the onset of a major depressive disorder increases sharply in the early teens and more gradually up to the early 40s, with the mean age of onset about 28. In addition, of those who've experienced a major episode of depression,

more than half will have a second.

Lincoln's second major episode occurred in his early 30s after a long period of intense work. Having been admitted to the Illinois bar, he was trying to maintain a steady law practice while also campaigning for the Whig Party. In the midst of all the demands, he became engaged to Mary Todd, the daughter of a prosperous banker from Lexington, Ky.

Uncertain of his abilities to support a family, Lincoln snapped. He broke off the engagement and took to his bed for a week, refusing to see anyone.

"I am now the most miserable man living," he wrote to his law partner. "It appears to me that I must get better or die." Lincoln's acknowledgment that he was suffering from depression was a major turning point. Once he decided to persevere, he was able to invent ways to cope.

Lincoln eventually married Mary, who encouraged his political aspirations. He found some relief in humor. When faced with a difficult situation in public, he would often tell a funny story to defuse the tension. He wrote poetry as an outlet for his sadness.

Most important, his work gave him a sense of importance and an identity in the political culture that had become so important to him. He was ambitious and achieving, typical of many who suffer from depression.

While Lincoln labored to acquire the national exposure that would allow him to run for the presidency, he always kept a sense of the larger potential he had to do something extraordinary.

Ultimately, a deep, personal fear that he might "die without having contributed anything to mankind" gave him the strength of character to lead the nation through a bloody civil war and secure the freedom of 4 million black slaves.

Today, clinical depression is very treatable with more than 80 percent of those who seek help showing significant improvement through medication, therapy or a combination of two. Yet fewer than half of those suffering from the illness seek treatment, dismissing it as a "personal weakness."

Lincoln's example shows that those who suffer from depression are often stronger, more compassionate people for their struggle and can find greater happiness in life by treating illness. ★

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