

Dealing with Depression

Sadly, the Christian Church has been guilty of mishandling depression. While usually having good intentions, sometimes people say ignorant things to others struggling with depression. For example, *“Just get up and snap out of it,”* or, *“You’re not praying enough,”* or, *“This is result of some sin in your life,”* or, *“Depression medicine shows you’re not trusting God for help.”* Of course, heaping things like this onto someone battling depression only serves to make them feel more defeated and exasperates the depression. It’s very important to understand depression before one can be helpful to someone who is depressed.

Effects of Depression

- *“I so badly don’t want to feel this way, but I can’t help it!”*
- Racing thoughts that you can’t control
- Sleeplessness
- Constant sleeping / extreme exhaustion
- Unable to attend to the basic needs of daily living (showering, cleaning, bathing the kids, attending to family).
- Depression in one family member affects the whole family.
- The less you’re able to do, the worse you feel about yourself.
 - *“My family would be better off without me.”*
 - Suicidal thoughts/attempts
 - Complete hopelessness for any relief or recovery

What Causes Depression?

Two primary causes for depression are life circumstances and chemical imbalances; i.e. “circumstantial depression” and “chemical depression”. Circumstantial depression means that some circumstance has affected your life and the result is that you’re feeling depressed. Chemical depression is brought about by some type of chemical imbalance in your body, and the result is that you’re feeling depressed.

Circumstantial Depression

Everyone will feel some degree of depression due to circumstance. This could be any traumatic, sad, or disappointing news or event, like loss of a job, death of a loved one, breaking up with a girlfriend/boyfriend, getting a bad grade on a test, or comparing yourself to someone else. There are countless examples of circumstances that can cause short-term or long-term circumstantial depression.

Five Types of Relief from Circumstantial Depression

1. Change in Circumstances – Sometimes, all that is needed to end circumstantial depression is a change in circumstances. Feeling depressed because you had some bad news might be quickly resolved by hearing some good news. Sometimes feeling depressed can be resolved by deciding to watch your favorite movie, and thus getting your mind off of what’s getting you down. Sometimes you can go to the gym, or go on a walk/run, and you find that getting up and moving around has made you feel a lot better. Or, sometimes you might call a friend and hang out for a while and that’s all it takes to find relief from an otherwise depressing day or week.

When experiencing circumstantial depression there’s a degree of truth to the idea of, *“Get up and move on. Pull yourself together and snap out of it.”* We can tend to stay in bed and listen to sad songs and wallow in our circumstantial depression. In times like this, it’s great to have a friend or loved one who comes along side us and says, *“No way, we’re going out today and having some fun.”* That change of circumstances may be just what is needed.

2. Spiritual Renewal – Certainly not all depression is a result of spiritual struggle, but sometimes this is the case. There is something to be said for examining oneself spiritually when circumstantial depression is being experienced. Sin and/or spiritually unhealthy responses can result in depression. The Bible speaks to these sorts of things in the following examples.

James 1:2-3, ***“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.”***

- James, the author here, is writing to Christians that are encountering various trials due to being persecuted for their faith. These trials were things like, arrest, beating, loss of job/property, separation from loved ones, even death of loved ones. Despite various trials, the Lord instructs that we can “consider” (choose, decide as an act of the will) how we will respond to terrible events. In this case, the instruction is to choose joy. Joy doesn’t mean to feel happy, but instead it means to remain calm/content, and focus on the spiritual perspective. Meaning, that I can choose to be content, despite difficult times of trials, knowing that my faith is being tested and when I spiritually endure, I’ll develop strong faith and character. In short, my circumstances don’t have to defeat me. I can refresh myself daily in the Lord, lean on His Spirit, and saturate my mind with truth from His Word.

Psalms 42:5, ***“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.”***

- Here again, a reminder that there are times when spiritual renewal is the appropriate response to depression.

Genesis 4:6-7, ***“Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”***

- The context here is that Cain brought an offering to the Lord, but it was a lazy and inappropriate offering. Meanwhile, Cain’s brother, Abel, brought a thoughtful and appropriate sacrifice. God was pleased with Abel’s offering, but not with Cain’s. This resulted in Cain feeling depressed about his offering, and angry with his brother as he compared himself to Abel. Comparing ourselves to others is a recipe for misery and depression. Doing wrong is a recipe for depression. Here, the Lord is saying, if you’re feeling downcast, you need to examine and consider that can be a result of your choices. Our choices impact our countenance. One way to bring ourselves up, emotionally and spiritually, is to do right!

Philippians 4:6-7, ***“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”***

- Here, God says that when we seek spiritual renewal by prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving to the Lord, that His Spirit administers a type of peace, a spiritual tranquility that has the effect of guarding our heart and mind; our thoughts/feelings/disposition.

3. Time and Healthy Mourning – You’ve no doubt heard someone say, “Sleep on it”. This advice can be very helpful. Often, the reality is that when we wake up from a night’s sleep, strong feelings we had when we went to bed have become regulated. Similarly, as time passes, we become further removed from whatever circumstance caused us to be depressed, and the feelings of depression dissipate. As well, there’s a healthy way to grieve and mourn when we experience loss. Appropriate grieving allows us to process hurts in a way that brings about closure or healthy responses. For instance, losing a loved one can be devastating. Sometimes people cope by drinking or abusing drugs, or by “sweeping it under the rug” and failing to grieve in a healthy way. These unhealthy responses can exasperate depression.

4. Physical Exercise – When we exercise, our body releases chemicals like endorphins, dopamine, and serotonin. Endorphins are the body’s natural painkillers that also create a feeling of well-being. Dopamine can relieve depression and expand your capacity for joy. Serotonin regulates mood, sleep, digestion, and other functions that make us feel better. So, sometimes a solution for depression can be to get moving!

5. Counseling – Seeking wise counsel is not only helpful as we navigate challenges in life, it’s also a Biblical instruction. Proverbs 11:14, ***“Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory.”***

Chemical Depression

Chemical imbalances in our bodies can often be hereditary. Chemical imbalances can be triggered by hormonal change such as puberty, postpartum, or menopause. When someone seems to be struggling with depression and they can't quite put their finger on why, it's generally a good idea to have a doctor take a look "under the hood". Sometimes our body is out of balance and medications are incredibly helpful to regain the balance needed to move past depression. In fact, medication is a blessing from God. God has used the plant as a source of medication throughout human history. As the Lord sees fit, he guides man to discover medical breakthroughs that allow us to defeat physical problems.

Ezekiel 47:12, ***"And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food...Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing."***

Matthew 9:12, ***"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."***

Jeremiah 8:22, ***"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?"***

Isaiah 38:21, ***"Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover."***

Luke 10:34, ***"He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine."***

Some people have a wrong and irresponsible outlook on medication, accusing people who use prescription medication as "lacking faith" and "playing God when they should be praying". Medication is not a supplement for God or faith. Imagine having cancer and being told that if you get chemotherapy that you're lacking faith. Or, imagine having diabetes and being told that using insulin is a playing God when you should only pray your way out of diabetes. These are foolish statements. God intends that we use medication and prayer at the same time. Physical and spiritual approaches are necessary as we are both spiritual and physical beings. Imagine if someone said, "Why eat food? Why not just pray that God will sustain you?" Bottom line, God knows that you sometimes need medication, and that's perfectly fine. Relief from chemical depression can come from medication, prayer, and prayer from others.

How can the Church respond to depression?

Become knowledgeable about depression. Acknowledge and correct any past destructive responses to those suffering with depression. Welcome an environment of vulnerability; nobody is "bad" for struggling with depression. Pray for those with depression.