

## Depression and faith

Many Christians *do* suffer from depression and, as we have already said, there is *nothing shameful* about this. The struggle is much harder when other Christians judge, misunderstand or dismiss our experience. Depression in Christians is rarely caused by our spiritual life, but depression will affect us spiritually. We may feel we are 'losing our faith', or not able to make sense of it. We may think we have fallen out of favour with God, and with other Christians.

The relationship between depression and faith is made of many strands, not easily separated. The best place to begin our search for understanding is with God, who loves and cares for us. God designed us to be whole people, secure as His children, fulfilled by His love and filled with His Spirit. But He also knows our weaknesses. He knows 'how we are formed' (Psa. 103:14, NIV).

### A practical response to faith struggles

**Prayer** needs no words. Sighs, tears and even silence are accepted by God.

**Hang on** to what we know is true even when we don't feel it is.

**Let go** of any rules imposed by others or by ourselves – the 'oughts', 'shoulds' and 'musts'. Often it is good to ask for the support of a trusted friend, counsellor or pastor.

## Concluding thoughts

The experience of depression need not be all negative. Many depressed people will say that their experience has given them a fresh understanding of their own humanity, and of their God.

*Why are you downcast,  
O my soul? Why so disturbed  
within me? Put your hope in God,  
for I will yet praise him,  
my Saviour and my God.  
(Psalm 42:11)*

A BRIEF INSIGHT INTO

# DEPRESSION

## Understanding depression

C.S. Lewis wrote that in Narnia it was always winter, but never Christmas. This is an apt description of depression – a bleak, dark time with no end in sight.

Depression is very complex. Each person's experience is different. Periods of depression can be very lonely, when we may feel that no one understands what we are going through.

Depression has many faces, and presents itself in different ways. It will be shaped by the individual personality and the life experiences of the sufferer. Many have described depression in picture language. They may say it is like a black shroud or cloud; or it is like being stuck in a pit, or trapped in a prison.

On many occasions people will say that they are depressed when they have one or two bad experiences and they are feeling 'down' at that time. But the occasional low mood which accompanies the ups and downs of life is not to be confused with actual clinical depression.

Depression can be identified by symptoms such as these:

- Life seems meaningless and hopeless;
- We experience a feeling of 'emptiness' or 'numbness' that makes us question the point of living;
- We are unable to see a single thing to look forward to;
- We feel so miserable that we can't motivate ourselves to perform simple tasks;
- We are weepy and tearful for long periods, unexpectedly or for no apparent reason;
- The familiar and safe become burdensome or threatening.

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## More about the nature of depression

One common cause of depression is a painful early life experience. A sense of purposelessness in mature years can also trigger the downward spiral. Changes in body chemistry, emotional burnout, and anxiety are other causes.

In its earliest stages, depression usually occurs for a reason. Often this happens when we are faced with a serious difficulty in life. Depression is not abnormal and we are not unusual when we suffer with it. In fact, it is very common and widespread across all ages, cultures and backgrounds, and amongst men, women and children. Famous people, such as Winston Churchill, have suffered with depression.

Little is known about the underlying causes of depression, though Dr Grace Ketterman suggests a group of intermingling influences<sup>1</sup>: Genetic predisposition; family practices and beliefs; impact of the environment; stress.

We know that depression is a 'brain state', like happiness. When everyday life becomes stressful and things become 'too much', the working of our brain is affected to the extent that a 'shutdown' trigger is activated.

A toxic thought-life may not always cause depression but will certainly maintain it – every thought has a corresponding reaction in our brain. The longer we spend falling downwards, the harder it will be to regain balance and come 'back up' again. Symptoms of depression spill over into all areas of our personality and relationships. They are never confined to our emotions alone.

1. Grace Ketterman, *Depression Hits Every Family* (Nashville, TN: Oliver Nelson, 1988), pp.16-19.

## Overcoming depression

Climbing out of depression is hard work; it takes commitment and effort. This does not come easily when we are depressed, but it is the pathway to hope and freedom. There are some essential matters that we need to address if we are to be successful.

### Managing our thinking

We need to understand that our view of things is often faulty and this feeds the depression. This is when the view of a trusted, objective friend is most valuable. If left unchallenged, negative thought patterns can become strongholds that prevent us from changing (2 Cor. 10:3-4).

#### Challenge harmful self-talk

Unhelpful self-talk is one common barrier we need to overcome when we begin climbing out of depression. Here are some examples of toxic thoughts:

- High standards: *'I'll never be good enough so why try?'*
- Fear of rejection: *'They won't want me anyway.'*
- Protection against disappointment: *'Expect the worst and you will not be surprised.'*
- The martyr's burdens: *'My problems are bigger than anyone else's.'*
- Suffering is a friend: *'I suffer. This is my lot in life.'*
- Fear of falling apart if pain is faced: *'I can't look at my inner pain because it may swallow me up!'*
- The voluntary prisoner: *'It's safe in this hole of depression.'*

#### Recognise the good things in our lives

Affirming what is positive in our lives is a good place to start to bring balance instead of simply giving in to negative thoughts.

#### Replace negative thinking with kindness and compassion to self

Depression occurs when the systems of our brain that regulate positive emotions are toned down, and the systems that regulate negative emotions are toned up. So, when we are depressed we often become very self-critical and can judge ourselves more harshly than we would ever judge others. Remember that God does not condemn us, but accepts us (Jer. 31:3; see also 2 Cor. 12:9; Phil. 4:7). Being kind to self is about finding an internal gentle and compassionate voice to soothe ourselves. 'Compassion towards ourselves and other people can help us heal our turbulent minds and enhance our well being.'<sup>2</sup> It's important to accept that we may need encouragement from friends or carers to help us.

#### Address the painful emotions

Painful emotions are common in depression. Under the broad umbrella of fear, we may experience anxiety or worry. Another broad group includes resentment, frustration, impatience, annoyance, hate, anger, rage. We can add guilt, shame and despair to this list. These exhausting emotions produce uncomfortable reactions in our bodies. Yet they are not an accurate guide to reality. We need the guidance of both our *faith* and our *reasoning* to review our emotions more objectively and more accurately.

Many Christians feel ashamed about their emotions, but there is no shame in being depressed. God still loves and accepts us when we tell Him how we are feeling.

2. Prof. Paul Gilbert, *The Compassionate Mind* (London: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2009).

## Taking practical action

#### Start to address any physical symptoms:

Sleep problems can occur during depression. Healthy eating needs to be restored. If it has been neglected, we should attend to our personal appearance and clothing. This makes a statement to others and to us. We need to try to start some exercise we find enjoyable, little by little, gradually building up the time invested in it. Physical exertion prompts the release of chemicals in our brain (endorphins) which give us a 'feel-good' factor.

#### Manage behavioural patterns:

Say 'no' to withdrawal and isolation from other people.

#### Challenge the downward spiral:

*negative thoughts → reduced behaviour → low mood → negative thoughts → ... and so on.*

#### Begin to set realistic, enjoyable, personal goals:

This rekindles hope and a sense of purpose – but take little, achievable steps.

#### Look for an objective point of view:

We need to become aware of the various changes which may have occurred as a result of depression, including problems within our relationships. An outside opinion may be most helpful because we will begin to see things from a different, yet caring, viewpoint.

#### Seek help from people who genuinely care about us as individuals:

Not just about how we are performing our religious duties (church attendance, Bible reading and so on). Genuine friends and carers need to be committed for the 'long haul', as overcoming depression takes time.