

My Friend Is Struggling With... - Depression

Takeaway: You are not alone or unloved; God loves you and is near to you.

Scripture: James 1:13, Isaiah 53:3, Psalm 34:15, 17-18, 1 Peter 5:7, Galatians 6:2

UNDERSTANDING

Being as no two cases of depression, or any mental illness, for that matter, are the same, there are no two cases in which the onset of symptoms are for the same reason.

First, it's important to define the terms we'll be using, so you can rightly understand what's being discussed. Sometimes, a reactive depression, where you feel deep sadness or melancholy, can occur after trauma, the loss of a loved one, or some other event. That is depression out of grief, and it lasts for a finite period. While these moments are important, and those feelings are important and valid, this isn't what we're discussing tonight.

Depression is grief out of proportion to a circumstance. We are talking about depressive disorders, which, while they ebb and flow, do not just go away. It is caused by one's brain not producing enough of certain chemicals in the brain, called neurotransmitters. When someone has depression or a depressive disorder, these depressive feelings happen randomly, at any time. Unlike the fleeting feelings of a reactive depression, these feelings last a long time and can be so severe that they inhibit a person's ability to function normally. This is what we mean when we are talking about depression.

Secondly, it's very important to note that having depression isn't a sin. In the first week, we made clear that mental health issues are not sin-related, but just in case you missed it, having depression is not a sin. It is not a sign of God's anger with you. It is a medical condition like any other physical illness. Sayings like, "too blessed to be depressed" are absurd. You are created in God's image, hand-woven by God. If the brain you were born with isn't producing enough chemicals, leading to depression, that's not a sin issue. It is a legitimate biological, health issue.

[VIDEO: Depression Understood: What it is like to have depression]

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJ7cf-AgLTQ>)

JESUS UNDERSTANDS

From a biblical perspective. It's popular to take modern diagnoses and personality tests and attribute them to Bible characters. Even the best psychologists in the world wouldn't try to diagnose someone they hadn't met with, so we, too, should be careful about that. However, what we can do is see that some people in the Bible experienced what you experience. Did you know that Jesus experienced deep, prolonged sorrow?

Isaiah 53:3 pg. 536

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

This verse is from the Old Testament, but it was looking forward to what the life of the Messiah, God in the flesh, would be like. Jesus would be a man of sorrows, acquainted with the deepest grief. When it says that He was a man of sorrows, it means that He would suffer mental pain and anguish. Some of you can relate to that. When it says that He was acquainted with grief, meaning “a sickness or disease characterized by malady, anxiety, and calamity.” Does that sound familiar to anyone?

Whether it was throughout His earthly life or not, the Bible tells us that Jesus would and did experience mental pain, anguish, even sickness associated with mental pain. This is important because it reiterates that this can't possibly be a sin. Jesus lived a completely sinless life. If while living a sinless life He could also experience symptoms of depression, then depression cannot be a sin.

Also it lets you know that you are not alone, you are seen, and you are understood. Jesus gets you. He's walked in your shoes. How much must He care for you being fully aware of what you felt?

GOD IS CLOSE

Not only does He care, but He is close. Your depression may make you feel like He's not but nothing could be further from the truth. The tricky thing about depression is that it is one of the most compelling liars you will ever face. Unfortunately for some, depression becomes comfortable, and so it's easy to believe the lies. It lies about your value, about your potential, about how much you are loved - it tells you depression is a tunnel with no light, and you should just give up. It will also lie about how much you are loved and valued by God. God doesn't not love you because you are hurting. It's quite the opposite — He draws close to you when you are hurting.

Psalm 34:15-18 pg. 264

15 The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry. 16 The face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. 17 When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. 18 The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

The Lord, of course, knows your deep hurt. He knows your innermost thoughts, so He doesn't need you to cry out to Him to know how you're feeling. God doesn't count it as whining. Crying out to Him acknowledges our need to Him - He doesn't want us to try and ignore it. When nothing else is good enough, we can find sufficiency in Him, and our faith in praying to Him shows we need Him. He is our Father, able to provide rescue for us, in increments when and where we need it - if not all at once.

Proverbs 18:14 - “The human spirit can endure a sick body, but who can bear a crushed spirit?”

Our brains are so complicated, not even those who have spent their lives studying them fully understand them. This is not an issue man can help heal; we can only manage and care for it. God desires restoration for us in bad health, and in terms of our minds, He is the only one who can help us bear our crushed spirit. Whether or not we recognize it, God brings any and all healing we receive.

APPLICATION

I want to give you some practical thoughts and steps you can take if you feel like you may be struggling with depression:

1. Get Help.

The first step is being diagnosed. Mental health issues are like any other health issues. We are not qualified to diagnose ourselves or come up with appropriate treatment plans. It's important to see someone that can help you figure out what is going on, so they can then give you even more help in the form of therapy, medication, or setting personal goals and plans. Not all mental illnesses are the same; not even all depressive disorders are the same. Seeing a professional counselor is a great way to allow someone to help you, and it's nothing to be ashamed of.

2. Be open.

Even before being diagnosed, one must admit to themselves that they need it. Some people may notice and reach out to you, but you may have gotten so good at carrying it, people forget you are acting depressed - if they ever knew in the first place.

However just because you're good at carrying it, doesn't mean it's not heavy. Share your load with someone you trust. Pray that God would lead you to someone, and that He would prepare their heart for you.

3. Cry out to God.

Sometimes, you'll feel ashamed, like God is mad or disappointed in you, and you'll be tempted to duck Him or avoid Him. That's the last thing you should do.

1 Peter 5:7: "Cast all your cares on Him, for He cares for you."

Your pain isn't trivial to Him. I know this seems like a "churchy" thing to say, but He feels your hurt and hurts with you. If it matters to you, it matters to Him, because you matter to Him.

4. Don't withdraw.

Your depression will sometimes tell you that you don't need people, but God never intended for us to be alone; especially in times of extreme hurt. Depression will also tell you that no one cares and you're not worth anyone's love. Don't believe any of it. You need to draw closer to God and trusted (ideally, Godly) people who can be there for you. Don't isolate as much as you may want to do so. Sometimes your mind in solitude can be quite dangerous.

5. Look up.

It can be hard to hope. Sometimes, you will feel like there is no hope. But when your feelings try to mislead you, remind yourself of what is true. Jeremiah was an Old Testament prophet that wrote the book, Lamentations. He understood pain and anguish. He is affectionately known as, "The Weeping Prophet." And yet, in his anguish, He reminded himself to fixate on hope.

Lamentations 3:16-24 pg. 401

16 He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; 17 my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; 18 so I say, "My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord." 19 Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! 20 My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. 21 But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope

22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; 23 they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 24 "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

It's so hard to remember, sometimes, when you're in your darkest moments to look up. When you feel like you don't have enough strength for another day, He does. His mercy renews every day for you.

This message isn't just for those that struggle. It's for those that don't because we are one family and one body. We're supposed to care for each other. Here are some practical steps you can take if you are in any sort of relationship with someone that has depression:

1. Help carry the burden.

People with mental health struggles carry a burden, but they themselves are not a burden. People who suffer with depression are not a burden.

Galatians 6:2 - Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

The Law of Christ is to love God with all you've got and to love your neighbor as yourself. You fulfill that law when you see someone weighed down by a burden, and you help them. Sometimes, just knowing you're there is a comfort. Don't feel the need to say anything if you have no words. It is better than saying the wrong thing. Don't make them feel as if they are a project that needs fixing. You can be the reason that person feels seen, valued, and supported.

2. Be faithful.

When someone comes to you and shares their pain, they've taken a big risk. They've put a lot of trust in you. You might be the only person they've told. Don't break that trust! Don't let them down. Pray for them. You can pray right then and there if you feel led. But also, faithfully pray for them. Send them texts to let them know you're praying for them and to see how they're doing. Don't let not knowing what to say keep you from saying anything. That sort of silence is painful. Be a faithful friend by letting them know you're there for them and really care for them.

Another piece of faithfulness is to not give up on them. Depression is a lifelong weight for most people, and a part of it is occasional numbness when it might be hard to be there because there seems to be no response. In these moments, your friend or family member may be subconsciously protecting themselves from the constant negative emotions, desensitized to their own suffering, or just drained from fighting a battle in their head. Real empathy is sometimes acknowledging something isn't ok. Real empathy is being willing to hurt for someone else, so they don't have to struggle alone.

3. Look up.

You need to look up, too. Don't let all the distractions in the world keep you from loving someone. Again, be the reason someone feels loved and supported and seen. Keep your eyes open for the hurting. Ask God to reveal to you whom you need to encourage, and really listen to what He says. Don't just make an empty effort to "do the right thing." There have been so many times that I have been (and I know I'm not alone) prompted by God to reach out to someone, and it turned out to be exactly the right time. They needed someone, and God sent me. God will send you. God will show you who needs you. But you must look up and take notice.

CONCLUSION

First, if you are hurting, we want to know, so we can love you well and be an encouragement to you. We won't judge you because there's nothing to judge. We'll just love you and encourage you. If the time is not right now, please contact a leader soon.

Secondly if you don't struggle with depression I want to invite you to commit to keeping your eyes open for people that are hurting. Pray that you would hear from God, see the people that need you, and be willing to be sent by Him into those situations.

Small Group Guide

How to Talk About Mental Illness with Students:

Create A Culture of Safety and Honor: Make it clear to your group that if someone shares a struggle, we don't share someone else's struggle outside the group to our friends. It's okay for students to process what is shared in small group with their parents. The only time we share someone's struggle is when it involves someone being harmed or in danger.

Helpful Responses: The following are some key phrases that are helpful in response to what a student shares that show empathy and security: "Thank you for sharing," "What can we do to help?," "I'm sorry you are dealing with that," "How can we pray for you about that?," "Do you have anyone that you can talk to when you struggle?," "Can we be the people you talk to when you struggle?"

Questions:

- James 1:13 says, *"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one."* How does this verse dispel the idea that having depression or other mental illnesses is a sin? Why is it important to be reminded of that?
- Isaiah 53:3 says that Jesus would be a man of sorrows, which means He would have experienced mental pain and anguish. This is a familiar feeling or state of being for anyone that has depression, but it's also something we all experience at some point. What are some circumstances that may lead anyone to experience mental pain and anguish?
- Isaiah 53:3 also says that Jesus would be well acquainted with grief, which means experiencing sickness associated with malady, anxiety, and calamity.
 - Why is it important to know that Jesus would experience these things?
 - How might that be comforting?
 - What does that prove?
- How might counseling be helpful for someone with depression? How might it be helpful for all people in general?
- Jesus shows up for the hurting. Psalm 34 says that He comes near to the broken hearted and hears their cries. How might we model this part of Jesus' character in the lives of our friends that struggle with depression?
- What might keep a person who struggles with depression from looking up or wanting to look up? (See point 5 in application section)
- What might keep a person who does not struggle with depression from looking up or wanting to look up? (See point 3 in application section)
- What is one step someone who struggles with depression could take to get help?
- What is one step you can take if you don't have depression but want to help someone who does?