

Auriel Schluter

Depression

Pastoral Responses

In my first article, I told the story of Steph, who struggled with depression for many years. In this article, I will explore some pastoral responses to those with depression.

So, what do we do when someone we care about is deeply depressed? The first thing is simply to be with them, not to try to make it better. Anxiety is a big factor in depression, and your friend needs to know that you can be in their presence without either being overwhelmed by their negative feelings, or needing to solve their problems. They want to be **accepted as they are**. Initially, your calm presence is all they need; it reduces their fear.

Spending time with a person who's depressed can feel like a slow-motion silent movie in comparison with life 'outside'. So you will need to adjust your pace and your volume, in order to connect with where they are. You may need to adjust your expectations of what they can concentrate on. One encouraging Bible verse might serve them for many weeks.

The physically ill tend to receive cards, flowers, and visits. They're included on church prayer lists. In contrast, the depressed often feel ignored or

even an embarrassment, so they withdraw further still. You need to think carefully about how to remedy this.

Each person is unique – and their experience of depression is very personal – so it is worth asking them to describe it. When you respond, try to use the analogies they have used. That helps to establish a connection. Here are some descriptions I have heard:

- Drowning in a fast-flowing river.
- Trying to climb a mountain of scree with boulders raining down.
- Being enveloped in a black cloud.
- Being stuck in a dark hole.
- Finding yourself at the bottom of a deep pit.
- Being a piece of china that's shattered into pieces.
- Being broken down and shunted out of the way.
- Being behind a glass wall.
- Looking out from inside a cage.

Listen to the description they give you. It will

guide you in how best to sit with your friend.

If you are a person they deem safe, you might be able to use these pictures to gently question them. If, for example, someone says they feel they are 'drowning in a fast-flowing river,' you might use the following comments/questions:

- I wonder how you got into the river.
- Was it always fast flowing?
- I wonder what you are hoping for now.
- Maybe someone will throw you a lifebelt / a boat will come along / the river will return to a gentler flow / you will learn to tread water and swim out. What do you think?

If someone is in a cage, you can talk about the different bars of the cage, to see how they got there. Maybe you could ask if the cage feels safe and why that is. Never judge their pictures or make your own interpretations – just wonder aloud with them and see what emerges.

The spiritual dimension

Many people facing depression will have lost their sense of God's presence. They might also have lost the assurance of salvation. For others, it is quite different. They might be clinging to God because He is all they have left. The important thing is to remember that their mental or emotional state does not accurately reflect their spiritual state.

We should not rush to see a friend's depression as sin. It is often an illness (for example, half of all mothers experience some postnatal depression.) We should no more face condemnation for depression than for having any other condition.

To indicate a belief that your friend is spiritually in danger is *not* helpful. No personality-type is inherently more sinful than another. Many Christians will already feel guilty that they are depressed, so to summarily judge them is to add shame to their guilt – and shame is far harder to shift, because it is about our identity rather than what we've done.

We are simultaneously sinners, saints and sufferers in this world. Psalm 88 gives a vivid description of a depressed mind. When you read it, you see a man in torment - *You have put me*

in the lowest pit, in dark places, in the depths (v.6). He is wrestling with God in the dark and there is no resolution. Psalms like Psalm 88 provide an opportunity under God to review some assumptions and responses. The poem invites us to grow. What the depressed person most needs from those who know them is grace and hope. Sin is lurking at the door for all of us. The depressed person is no more or less likely to fall than the high functioning successful optimist. It's simply that their temptations will be different.

Symptoms of depression

A person is considered to be depressed if they have a cluster of the following symptoms that persist over a period of time. There is a continuum from 'feeling blue' to total non-functioning.

- Sadness (pessimism, hopelessness)
- Apathy (inertia, non-action, no decisions, loss of spontaneity)
- Fatigue (no interest, no energy)
- Problems with sleep and concentration
- Eating problems (no appetite, or comfort-eating)
- Low self-esteem (guilt, shame, worthlessness, helplessness, hopelessness, self-criticism)
- Withdrawal (self-harm, suicidal thoughts)

A depressed person is coping with multiple losses: of energy, motivation, hope, purpose, health and relationships. Loss, perceived loss, and stress may well have been triggers.

When suicidal thoughts are expressed, these should be listened to seriously but calmly. Often, there is a death wish *without* a suicidal intention. An appropriate response is to acknowledge the despair this represents, to indicate understanding of why they feel as they do. Job, Jonah and others from the Bible are good examples to refer to, since they also felt this way. Remember that serious attempts at suicide have usually been thought through in practical detail; it is rare that they are expressed openly. Nevertheless, if you feel the person seems genuinely suicidal (or if their baby is in danger due to postnatal depression), seek professional help urgently.

It's very common for there to be multiple components causing the depression: physical and psychological, nature and nurture, internal and external, trigger and response. Depression is rarely either purely endogenous or purely reactive, but rather a mixture of the two. It is often triggered when a certain personality-type meets a certain set of circumstances. That's why counseling is well worth the time and effort.

It is also important that they are encouraged to see a doctor, not only because there are some types of persistent depression that will need lifelong medical help, but also because many temporary depressions need some short-term medication. It helps the sufferer to function well enough so that they can engage in personal exploration of the kind which brings them out of it, and gives them the tools to manage themselves better in the future. The physical dysfunction in the brain needs to be alleviated.

With the right sort of help, depression can be used by God to help a person explore assumptions, thinking patterns, and habitual responses. The process can be truly life-changing. It takes time to help a person see that their experience of depression is an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth, but it is well worth it.

Here are some resolutions to give you hope:

- A conflict avoider finds safe ways to disagree.
- A person stuck in a trauma from the past finds a way through that allows them to function once more.
- A person afraid of others' anger discovers their own hidden anger and understands it.
- A person stuck in grief finds a way to move on.
- A risk avoider takes little steps of faith instead.
- The stressed, burnt out person learns to recognise the steps that took him down into the pit and avoids them in the future.
- A perfectionist gains a more realistic lens to live by.
- The one caught in a cycle of shame finds

God's covering described in the Bible, and discovers – wonderfully and completely – that it applies to them too.

How amazing would it be to hear of such stories?

Ongoing responses

As a Christian would expect, **faith**, **hope** and **love** are key elements. People are relational, and isolation needs to be met with **love**. It needs people who are willing to 'be there,' even when there is nothing more they can do. It is a healing experience to shed tears in the presence of someone who can cope with it. Let them know you are praying for them – regularly.

People are rational, but their thinking will be clouded by depression, and may often lose touch with biblical truth. Remind them of the truth. I.e. Their **faith** is dependent on what Jesus has done, and not on a person's ability to pray, or read the Bible, or feel that God is close.

When they struggle to keep going, simply being with someone who holds out **hope** for them – when they feel hopeless – may rekindle their own. Depression is scary, and reassurance is needed. You are not negating their feelings, but instead, you are holding out real hope. Encourage them to be patient, because signs of improvement may be slight and slow to appear. They should focus on anything positive they still feel. Meanwhile, encourage them to avoid withdrawing into solitude. Educate others in the church family to know how to help too.

Since promoting a healthy body can aid healing, you may need to encourage the depressed person to eat sensibly and to take gentle exercise. They will probably sleep a lot, but encourage them to keep a good rhythm of night and day if possible.

Biblical Reflections

Genesis 1.1 is where God started – with darkness, chaos and emptiness. This is how a depressed person feels. Assure them that it is God who brings light and order and fruitfulness, and it takes time.

See how God dealt with Elijah in 1 Kings 19 – time, space, sustenance, and gentle questions led gradually to a new perspective. He came to

recognise the importance of community. Indeed, God drew him back to the place where He had initiated His covenant with His people.

Only God has the whole picture. Job's comforters thought they knew more than they did, and they misapplied truth. In the end, however, Job's understanding of God was greater than theirs.

Psalm 88 – An example of bringing honest feelings to God – he already knows! Psalms 42 and 43 show David talking himself around.

2 Sam 9.7 – Mephibosheth. There is always a place for the (emotional) cripple at the King's table – even if that person is rejected by others, including those in the church.

Lamentations have their place and purpose, as they did for Jeremiah. They have done the same for many others since that time, including such figures as the hymn writer William Cowper, who faced colossal depression.

Finally, Jesus faced it all - betrayal; misrepresentation; abandonment, all of them common triggers for depression. He knows, and He invites us to bring our burdens to Him (Matt. 11.28).

In summary . . .

DON'T – judge, cajole, minimise, catastrophise, generalise, attempt to fix, share their anxiety, or leave them in isolation. Don't collude with their helplessness, hopelessness or victimhood.

DO – stick with them, go at their pace, refuse to despair. Never be shocked or overwhelmed; encourage exploration and responsibility; assure them of God's love and presence, and model it. Hold onto faith and hope; encourage an attitude of opportunity; constantly hold out hope to them.

And finally - **do look after yourself!** If you're not careful, you can pick up their depression. So set good boundaries. Don't let the depressed person become too dependent on you. Give yourself space, ensure you have good support, and underpin all you do with prayer.



Useful Resources:

***When Darkness Seems My Greatest Friend* by Mark Meynell.** This is of particular use to those in ministry, as he is.

***Depression - Looking Up from the Stubborn Darkness* by Edward T Welch** is one of the Biblical Counselling resources coming from CCEF. (American roots of BCUK.)

***Christian Counselling* by Gary Collins** has a comprehensive section on depression, which gives a broad overview. It is a book that pastors could usefully have on their shelves for a lot of pastoral issues like this; it is very broad in its scope.

***Spiritual Depression* by Martyn Lloyd-Jones** and ***Conscience* by Ole Hallesby** are older classics giving valuable insights.

From secular authors:

***Depressive Illness - The curse of the strong* by Tim Cantopher**, a doctor who sees depression as a physical illness caused by stress and malfunction of the limbic system. But he also cites personal questions that need to be asked if the person is to avoid relapse.

***Depression* by psychologist Dorothy Lowe** offers many good insights of the routes and choices that lead into depression, and therefore are clues to ways out.

www.rcpsych.ac.uk - Royal College of Psychiatrists site; put Depression into the search engine.

guidance.nice.org.uk/CG90

livinglifetothefull.com - set up by a Christian psychiatrist following a CBT approach. Very useful for those wanting a 'self-help' approach, and may well be something a friend or pastor could work through with them.

careforthefamily.org.uk has a number of resources on postnatal depression – put 'postnatal' into the search box on their home page.



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