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# 9 THINGS EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT DEPRESSION

# DEPRESSION IS NOT SADNESS, GRIEF, OR DISCONTENTMENT



**CHRISTIANS MAY BE TEMPTED** to confuse depression with sadness, grief, or discontentment, but there is a huge difference between depression and sadness, grief, discontentment. According to the American Psychiatric Association, “The death of a loved one, loss of a job or the ending of a relationship are difficult experiences for a person to endure. It is normal for feelings of sadness or grief to develop in response to such situations.”<sup>1</sup>

The symptoms of depression include a loss of interests in activities that a person normally would enjoy, changes in appetite, difficulty sleeping or sleeping beyond what is normal, fatigue, slowed movements, slowed speech, feelings of worthlessness, difficulty concentrating, and suicidal thoughts or thoughts of death.<sup>2</sup>

Discontentment is the failure to be satisfied with one’s status or possessions. In the Bible, discontentment is associated with Israel’s complaints after having been saved from Egypt: they looked at their present situation, liberated from Egypt, as worse than their former bondage (Ex. 16).

Depression is more like the feelings described in Psalm 88. The psalmist writes, “For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. You have caused

my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness” (Ps. 88: 3,7, and 18).

Kathryn Green-McCreight in *Darkness is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness* describes her experiences with bi-polar disorder. She writes, “depression is not just sadness or sorrow. Depression is not just negative thinking... It is being cast to the very end of your tether and, quite frankly, feeling as though you are being dropped...While God certainly can pick up the pieces and put them together in a new way, this can only happen if the depressed brain makes it through an episode to see life among the living.”<sup>3</sup>

This is important to realize because if we fail to recognize these distinctions, we could give a person suffering from depression superficial and simplistic answers that could lead to serious harm—for example, expecting a person to “just stop” struggling with thoughts of suicide or failing to take symptoms seriously could result in that person’s death. If you know of anyone suffering symptoms of depression, you should take it very seriously and avoid giving simple answers or having what may seem like reasonable expectations for a person who is just sad or discontent.

1 <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/depression/what-is-depression>.

2 <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/depression/what-is-depression>.

3 Kathryn Green-McCreight, *Darkness is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*, 6.

# 2

# DEPRESSION IS A PHYSICAL ILLNESS — A MEDICAL ISSUE — TIED TO THE BRAIN



IN 2013, LIFEWAY RESEARCH conducted a survey which revealed that 48 percent of Evangelical Christians believed that “prayer and Bible study alone can overcome serious mental illness.”<sup>4</sup> While it is important for Christians to see a spiritual dimension to managing or experiencing some degree of healing in their mental health, the study may point to a failure to realize that mental illness is a real illness, an illness involving the body.

Michael Horton writes, “Contemporary brain science has shown the remarkable extent to which our thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and actions are connected to our bodies specifically, our brain and chemical interactions. This leaves no room for the soul if we reduce ourselves to what can be subjected to observation and repeatable experiments. The fact that body and soul are so intertwined is elementary for a biblical view of humanity.”<sup>5</sup>

It’s a mistake to put the soul in opposition to the body and deny the existence of mental illnesses like depression. People imagine that this view is somehow a denial of supernatural realities like sin, salvation, or demonic powers—it’s not. It’s an affirmation of the physical world with physical defects like illnesses and diseases of all kinds. People can suffer from cancer, a broken leg, or the flu and, like depression, these are physical realities.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, several factors are involved in depression:

- “Biochemistry: Differences in certain chemicals in the brain may contribute to symptoms of depression.”
- “Genetics: Depression can run in families. For example, if one identical twin has depression, the other has a 70

percent chance of having the illness sometime in life.”

- “Personality: People with low self-esteem, who are easily overwhelmed by stress, or who are generally pessimistic appear to be more likely to experience depression.”
- “Environmental factors: Continuous exposure to violence, neglect, abuse or poverty may make some people more vulnerable to depression.”<sup>6</sup>

Given what the Bible says about humans being both body and soul, we should expect these sorts of realities. Though we don’t want to reduce a person to a list of physical symptoms and pretend that there is nothing spiritual about struggling with depression, we also don’t want to reduce the real bodily or physiological issues involved with depression. Michael Horton writes,

*Because we are psychosomatic (body-soul) unities, physical and spiritual issues intersect in ways that can’t be easily pulled apart. A person suffering from a spinal cord injury will be especially susceptible to bouts of spiritual depression, doubts, and even anger. The same is true of mental illness. On one hand, a naturalistic perspective reduces human beings to a mass of physicochemical accidents. On the other hand, a hyper-supernaturalistic reaction is to treat physicochemical problems simply as spiritual maladies. Good theology is not enough, but bad theology kills literally, physically and spiritually.<sup>7</sup>*

It’s perfectly consistent with the Bible to see depression as a physical illness, a medical issue tied to the brain.

4 <https://blog.lifeway.com/newsroom/2013/09/17/half-of-evangelicals-believe-prayer-can-heal-mental-illness/>

5 Michael Horton “Faith and Mental Illness,” *Modern Reformation*, July/August 2014.

6 <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/depression/what-is-depression>

7 Michael Horton “Faith and Mental Illness,” *Modern Reformation*, July/August 2014.



# 3

# DEPRESSION IS NOT THE RESULT OF PERSONAL SIN



**DEPRESSION, UNLIKE DISCONTENTMENT** or cynicism, is not sin; it's a medical condition. Depression is something that happens to a person; no one chooses depression. Depression is a form of suffering, and our tendency to link "suffering to particular sins (and therefore its remedy of simply more faith and obedience) is toxic both spiritually and physically."<sup>8</sup>

Part of the problem is that people don't understand what sin is. Michael Horton writes,

*In a biblical perspective, sin isn't just something we do or don't do. It arises out of a sinful condition. Just as the whole self is created in God's image, the whole self is fallen in Adam. Consequently, we are sinners and sinned against, victimizers and victims. We are caught up in a maelstrom of living on this side of the curse, and many of its effects are in no way dependent on a specific sin, demonic attack, or anything else for which one is personally responsible. That is not to say that we are not personally responsible for our sin, but that the sinful condition is far greater in its extensiveness than that.*<sup>9</sup>

This doesn't mean that depressed people don't sin. They are sinners like the rest of us, but their depression is not the result of personal sin nor is their depression an act of personal sin. Instead, their depression arises out of the fallen condition of all humanity. This means that we can understand depressed people as victims to a destructive disease like cancer. Biochemistry, genetics, personality, and environmental factors all play a part in predisposing one toward depression.

The reason why it's important to make a point that

depression is not the result of personal sin is because this view can really harm the person by either adding guilt to the person already suffering or giving a false hope that if they just stop sinning they will find healing. Both responses are destructive and the Bible speaks to each.

In John 10 Jesus and his disciples come across a man born blind. Seeing the man, Jesus' disciples make the common assumption that his blindness came through personal sin. They ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). It seems like a good question at first glance. After all, the Bible says, "The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked" (Proverbs 10:3). So, maybe there is some sort of divine law that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. This has always been the common wisdom of humanity. But Jesus answers to the contrary, turning the common wisdom on its head. He says, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). Through this answer Jesus reveals the simplistic and often false judgment passed through a misuse of wisdom like that of Proverbs.

The Bible's wisdom is always there to remind us that there are consequences for our actions that will affect our lives and the lives of people around us, but the Bible's wisdom must not be used to condemn people who are suffering by assuming that personal sin is always involved. Instead, God has a greater purpose in this world, which is infected with corruption because of the sin of the first man, Adam (see Genesis 3). God's greater purpose is to turn evil to good as a display of his mercy and grace and to show his kindness to people who sin.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Horton "Faith and Mental Illness," *Modern Reformation*, July/August 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Horton "Faith and Mental Illness," *Modern Reformation*, July/August 2014.

Like Jesus' disciples, we need to avoid making judgments and speculating about why people suffer. It's always complicated, and biology can play a part because the world has become corrupt and unruly. We should expect people to be born blind in a world that is fallen. We shouldn't be surprised that people are born with brain defects that result in depression or other mental illnesses. And in cases in which people

suffer, we need to understand that this suffering is not simply the result of personal sin; with some things personal sin may play a part, and people suffering from depression will still sin in their state even as we who are not depressed sin, but depression is not the result of personal sin. No one should ever be made to feel guilty for their depression. They need help, hope, and healing.

# 4

## PEOPLE EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION NEED MEDICAL ATTENTION



**ACCORDING TO** the American Psychiatric Association, “medical conditions (e.g., thyroid problems, a brain tumor or vitamin deficiency) can mimic symptoms of depression so it is important to rule out general medical causes.” This is extremely important. Attempts to deal with depression using only prayer, Bible study, or worship could be detrimental since other serious medical conditions can mimic symptoms of depression.

A medical professional is trained to recognize symptoms and rule out all options before prescribing medication or other means of healing or management. It’s not the case that everyone suffering from depression-like symptoms needs medication, but a good doctor and psychiatrist are best equipped to help patients and their families make that decision.

Because people suffering depression may struggle with thoughts of suicide, it is important to take their condition seriously. Sometimes people imagine that the pain and suffering

of a depressed person will pass with time, that the person will eventually “get over it,” or that the person only wants attention. But suicidal thoughts are a clear indication that a person is not well. “Self-protection is healthy and ‘normal,’ while the urge to end one’s life is unhealthy and ‘abnormal.’”<sup>10</sup> Kathryn Green-McCreight describes her experiences of contemplating suicide as strong temptations that go against everything she knows to be true, especially her Christian faith. She writes, “While I was sick, I experienced much suicidal thinking and wishing. This in itself distressed me, because I as a Christian believe that life is a gift from God. It is to be lived to the glory of God.”<sup>11</sup>

The feelings, thoughts, and pain that a depressed person goes through can be so intense as to lead a person to desire death. If someone is struggling with depression, they may have suicidal thoughts, and medical professionals are best equipped to help a person suffering in this way.

<sup>10</sup> Kathryn Green-McCreight *Darkness is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*, 31

<sup>11</sup> Kathryn Green-McCreight *Darkness is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*, 31

# 5

## DEPRESSION IS TREATABLE



**THE BEST APPROACH TO** treating depression is holistic and involves doctors (psychiatrists), counselors, and pastors. Though not exclusively spiritual, depression has a spiritual dimension. People who suffer from depression may also struggle with understanding how God can allow them to suffer such great pain. Kathryn Green-McCreight described her pain as so intense that “every breath, every thought, every moment of consciousness hurt.”<sup>12</sup>

**CHRISTIANS SHOULD CONSIDER MEDICATION.** Sometimes Christians are not open to medication because they imagine that the use of medication is somehow contrary to a life of faith, or that it denies that God is active in the world to bring about his good purpose for everything, but the truth is that God often works through ordinary natural means. It’s a mistake to think that either doctors heal or God heals. In every case it’s both. God created a world in which doctors can heal and treat all sorts of illnesses, from broken bones and bacterial infections to cancer and mental illness.

Michael Horton shows that the creation account is an example that God can work supernaturally and naturally through ordinary means. He writes,

*Ordinarily, God does not act immediately and directly, but indirectly through secondary causes. It’s interesting that in Genesis 1 and 2, we have not only the direct command, “Let there be...!” followed by the report, “And there was...,” but also the command, “Let the earth bring forth...!” with the report, “And the earth brought forth....” Even in this mighty act, God created the world out of nothing (ex*

*nihilo), and he worked through the physical elements and processes he himself had created to bring about their fruitfulness. Both are God’s acts. When he sustains the world each moment even now, in the Son and by his Spirit, the Father ordinarily guides the natural processes he put in place rather than acting as the only cause, as he did in bringing everything into existence in the first place.<sup>13</sup>*

This is true about depression. “If depression consisted solely of spiritual problems,” says Ed Welch, “there would be no reason to talk about medication or other physical treatments. But depression *does* have physical symptoms.<sup>14</sup> Because depression is related to the body, we should be open to the options that doctors and medical professionals offer. This does not mean that medication is always the answer. It’s more complicated than that, and only through working with a doctor and psychiatrist should a person make the decision to take or not take medication. There are risks and difficulties for both options. Ed Welch gives helpful advice when he says, “medical treatments might be helpful to ease or erase physical symptoms of depression (and other psychiatric problems). In this generation, there are a handful of treatments available. None of them helps all the time. All of them can have harmful side effects.”<sup>15</sup>

It’s good for a Christian to consider medication but not to expect that to be the only aspect toward living with and dealing with depression.

**CHRISTIANS SHOULD WORK WITH THEIR DOCTORS TO CONSIDER MORE THAN MEDICATION.** According to the

12 Kathryn Green-McCreight *Darkness is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*, 44–45

13 Michael Horton “Faith and Mental Illness,” *Modern Reformation*, July/August 2014.

14 Ed Welch *Blame It on the Brain*, 125

15 Ed Welch *Blame It on the Brain*, 125

American Psychiatric Association, “There are a number of things people can do to help reduce the symptoms of depression. For many people, regular exercise helps create positive feeling and improve mood. Getting enough quality sleep on a regular basis, eating a healthy diet and avoiding alcohol (a depressant) can also help reduce symptoms of depression.”<sup>16</sup>

Even though medication is a great blessing, people shouldn’t see medication as the only answer to the problem. Medication and other medical treatments like electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) may be an important part of treatment, but the best approach to depression is to focus on whole body health and not simply brain health. Though diet and exercise may not alone be enough to help a person suffering from depression, it can greatly aid a person who is depressed and often struggles to accomplish the ordinary tasks that can seem impossible at the moment: eating, socializing, praying, exercising, bathing, getting out of bed.

#### **CHRISTIANS SHOULD TAKE THE SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF STRUGGLING WITH DEPRESSION SERIOUSLY.**

Christians who suffer with depression will likely experience suffering associated with their faith. They may doubt about God’s goodness or mercy. They may feel as though God does not love them. They may struggle to make sense of how God could allow them to suffer and their families to suffer as a result of their mental illness. Struggling with depression can often leave one hopeless and despairing of life itself, imagining that death could be a salvation for their suffering, or even secretly considering suicide as an option for relief.

Depressed people need to be reminded of the hope that Jesus Christ offers. Michael Horton writes,

*“Pray more” and “Read your Bible more.” In itself, this is good advice. But what suffering people of any type need most is good news! When you’re depressed, being told that you just need to “trust God more” or be more devoted to spiritual exercises simply drives you deeper into yourself.*

*Because of your body’s chemistry, you’re not in a position to get out of bed and face the day. Apart from the gospel, calls to more prayer and Bible reading become burdensome laws that drive us farther from resting in Christ. It’s the proclamation of the gospel in word and sacrament that pulls us out of ourselves to cling to the Father of all mercies in his Son, by his Spirit, and to seek his revealed purposes and will for our lives.*<sup>17</sup>

The gospel of Jesus Christ has a lot to say to people suffering depression because the gospel promises the renewal of creation that has been plunged into darkness. The gospel isn’t just an answer to personal sin; it’s God’s act of healing the world, ending death and decay, and restoring the world to its proper order:

*The hope of the resurrection is not mere optimism, but leans the Christian life ever facing toward the future, not merely dwelling in the present. The Christian hope is not only for the individual Christian, nor the church itself. It is for all of creation, which was bound in decay by the first sin: “Cursed is the ground because of you...thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you” (Gen. 3:17–18). This curse of even the land and its increase will be retracted at the resurrection. All of creation will be redeemed from pain and woe. Even for those with broken brains, this understanding of the Christian hope can comfort and encourage.*<sup>18</sup>

This kind of gospel, a gospel that speaks to every aspect of creation, gives hope. It leads us to “pray honestly, casting ourselves on God’s mercy” because we can trust that we “aren’t coming to a judge, or even to a therapist, but to our heavenly Father who has accepted us in his Son. We’re not rubbing a lamp and making a wish, but we are children crying out to the sovereign God who cares for us and answers our feeble, half-hearted, and even intemperate rants with love, wisdom, and compassion.”<sup>19</sup>

16 <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/depression/what-is-depression>

17 Michael Horton “Faith and Mental Illness,” *Modern Reformation*, July/August 2014.

18 Kathryn Green-McCreight *Darkness is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*, 51.

19 Michael Horton “Faith and Mental Illness,” *Modern Reformation*, July/August 2014.



# 6

# GOD CARES ABOUT PEOPLE SUFFERING WITH DEPRESSION



**DEPRESSION CAN POSE A** powerful challenge to a person's faith in God. And in the midst of such suffering it is important to remember that God cares. Knowing that God cares and having proof of God's care in the person of Jesus Christ, who suffered and died for the sins of the world, should give us hope and help our faith to persevere through times of doubt and trial. Ed Welch explains the challenge this way:

*It is hard to argue when we are reminded that Jesus shared in our sufferings and has compassion for those who suffer. It is easier to protest, however, when we hear the proposition that God is both good and generous. At this moment in your life, it would seem that goodness and generosity, especially from the all-powerful God, could only be demonstrated by the removal of the depression. If he takes it away, you are persuaded. If not, you remain a doubter.<sup>20</sup>*

Yet, Jesus gives us the greatest proof of God's love:

*But remember what you already know. First, Jesus suffered, and Jesus was clearly loved as the only Son of the Father. When we suffer what seems like endless pain, it is hard to believe that God loves us, but Jesus' suffering proves that it can be true. That doesn't mean that we always understand what is going on behind the scenes, but it is true nonetheless. Somehow, temporary suffering and love can go together.<sup>21</sup>*

This all reveals an important point. Theology will not end

suffering, but it can help us to persevere through it.

*A robustly biblical theology of the cross and resurrection fixes our hope on Christ, who knows our suffering more than we do and who has overcome it objectively. We live in our Christian families and in our churches in that in-between time, awaiting the day when we share fully in body and in soul in Christ's glory. Our churches have to be a place where we "wait for it with patience" together. In the process, we need better soul care that appreciates the extent to which physical and mental suffering can be relieved in the meantime. Christians should welcome these advances as signs of God's orderly providence and compassionate care for his creatures. There will always be a central place for spiritual care especially the faithful ministry of preaching, teaching, sacraments, prayer, and discipline. But, like a kid with a broken leg, getting people to the "emergency room" may be the first order of business.<sup>22</sup>*

As Christians, our faith is not a substitute for therapy. It's not an excuse to avoid doctors. It's not going to change our circumstances; but our faith, our prayers, and our reading of Scripture can transform our experience of suffering. Prayer can help us to trust in God as we pour out our hearts to our Father. And yes, through prayer, God may answer by healing us of many pains and sufferings. We should believe that the Bible is true about the supernatural. Miracles can and do happen. But we shouldn't demand it even though we can hope for it. There is a difference here.

Hoping in God, trusting in his goodness, allows for God to

<sup>20</sup> Ed Welch *Depression: Looking Up from the Stubborn Darkness*, 38

<sup>21</sup> Ed Welch *Depression: Looking Up from the Stubborn Darkness*, 38–39.


<sup>22</sup> Michael Horton "Faith and Mental Illness," *Modern Reformation*, July/August 2014.

be free to do what he believes is best even if it doesn't make sense to us in the moment. To hope means to desire our pain and suffering to end, but also to know that God really knows what is the best in our situation. This is hard to understand, and that is why we need to look at the reality of life,

understanding who God really is through the cross of Jesus Christ. We need to let the love of God, shown by sending the Son to give us eternal life, act as a pair of glasses to give us a clearer vision of our situation. You can know that God cares because he has demonstrated his love through Jesus Christ.

# 7

## JESUS SAVES THE WHOLE PERSON, BUT NOT ALL AT ONCE



**PART OF THE CHALLENGE** of the Christian life is understanding that God has in fact begun to save his people from the corruption and decay of this world, but he does not save all at once.

The apostle Paul describes this tension as a “wasting away” while simultaneously “being renewed:” “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16).

Before getting into this tension, however, we must remember that one aspect of salvation does happen all at once: Jesus saves his people from the wrath of God and from the punishment for sin. This aspect of the believer’s salvation is not a process, for Jesus acts once for all to take away our guilt and give us a new, perfect record before God. Jesus also saves us from the corruption of sin and its effects upon the world, one of which is disease. However, this aspect of salvation is not immediate. Saved Christians still suffer diseases, natural disasters, persecution and oppression, enslavement, and many other evils. The pain of our physical bodies often threatens to drown out the truth of the promise of the believers’ renewal and salvation. How can we say Jesus is saving even our physical bodies?

Despite the decay, corruption, and breakdown we see in our bodies, God is working renewal in our lives. He has given us his Spirit to make us a new creation. While this is not immediately obvious, our renewal is taking place in the increase of

joy, the increase in godliness and good works that evidence the life given to us by Christ. Paul writes, “we are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus *so that* the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (emphasis added).

We must look to the way of the cross and the way of humility, and weakness that to the world seems foolish but in reality are the very avenue God uses to proclaim hope to a dying world. God is the one who is, who was, and who is coming. He is in the process of coming right now by the work of the Holy Spirit, bringing people into his kingdom, renewing them in his image, and preserving and protecting his church. He rules over his enemies by keeping his people from losing hope, by protecting them from the onslaught of the devil. The Holy Spirit gives perseverance, faith, and hope to the believer who rests in Christ for salvation. If you suffer from depression, you have hope even that your body will be renewed and that even in the sufferings of this age, the life of Christ and the new life you have in him continue to unfold.

At the second coming of Jesus, it will all be finalized. Physical bodies will be transformed to be like his. At the resurrection, the dead will be given new life and all things will be made new. The hope of the sufferer is that a day *is coming* when the renewal of things will be completed and the corruption and decay and death of life will be once and for all removed from the world.

# 8

# DEPRESSED PEOPLE NEED HELP AND FRIENDSHIP



**FRIENDS NEED TO REALIZE THAT** mental illness will impact the friendship and should adjust their expectations accordingly. Kathryn Green-McCreight speaks from experience as one who suffers from mental illness and knows how challenging it can be to a friendship. She writes, “Friendship is very important for those with poor mental health, but it is very hard to be a true friend to someone in such a condition. It is just too difficult for some people and for some relationships.”<sup>23</sup>

For the friend of someone with mental illness, the feeling of helplessness can cause the person to freeze up and never do anything. While friends cannot bring the sick person healing, they do have a lot to offer the suffering person. Friendship and community is often vital in helping the depressed person keep from losing hope. The only thing worse than suffering from depression is suffering it alone.

One of the things to realize is that expectations of the friendship need to be realistic. This will be an exercise in self-denial and self-sacrifice. This is hard. Really hard. Kathryn Green-McCreight writes, “Sometimes a person with a mental illness is capable only of being on the receiving end of friendship...It can be boring to be with a person who has no conversation to make, no desire to go out with you, eat with you, talk to you. And someone who is so little fun to be with can worry you, annoy you, overwhelm you.”<sup>24</sup>

However, caring for someone with mental illness is what Jesus calls us to when he tells us to love our neighbors. Relationships are not to be all about “us;” they are to be about the other person. The road of depression is filled with pain and difficulty, and the easy thing to do is to check-out. That’s why it is important right from the beginning to make the

commitment to be faithful to the wounded person and to God through the circumstances.

Kelly Kopic writes, “this commitment—that of a sufferer and a companion, and in some ways of the larger community—requires that they ask what faithfulness requires. It requires that all involved face facts. The suffering is real, the lack of a solution may be an immovable fact, and the biggest truth of all is their place before God. They are held before God in Christ, the crucified and risen Lord.”<sup>25</sup>

While a person with mental illness won’t be able to reciprocate the friendship in the way other friends can, the friend with a mental illness still desperately needs you. You may find that you learn more in this friendship than anywhere else about Christ’s sacrificial love for both of you.

Many people may feel intimidated by being friends with someone with depression. It may feel overwhelming, like you don’t know what to do or how to help. Depression is a serious illness; however, that doesn’t mean you can’t help.

**FRIENDS CAN HELP BY SIMPLY BEING PRESENT.** While this often doesn’t really feel like helping, presence can be a powerful way to nurture a person through suffering. Faithful presence in the person’s life shares the burden of their pain and gives the person a tangible expression of love and support. It also tells the person that their illness has not taken everything from them. In the midst of the intense pain and suffering when all they can see is their pain, a friend’s presence coming alongside can mean the world to them. Lifting your own voice in lament alongside the sufferer shares the burden of their pain. Kopic writes, “What those who are trying to help do not always appreciate is that there is real

23 Kathryn Green-McCreight *Darkness is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*, 19.

24 Kathryn Green-McCreight *Darkness is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*, 20

25 Kelly Kopic *Embodied Hope A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering*, 151



power in simply walking with another person through that particular experience, bearing witness to the real challenges... the voice of others helps keep you sane.”<sup>26</sup>

There is powerful comfort in simply acknowledging the pain and being at the sufferer’s side to face it together.

**FRIENDS CAN HELP THE DEPRESSED PERSON SUFFER FAITHFULLY.** In the midst of suffering, someone with depression can get hit with doubts about God’s goodness, faithfulness, and love. Friends can help by listening to these fears, acknowledging the pain and allowing the person to lament, but always at the end reminding them of God’s mercies in Christ. A sufferer needs to know their cries are heard, not just by a companion, but by God. They need to know they can come before God with their lament. They need their friends to be a faithful presence of Christ’s love and hope.

“Both the sufferer and those who care for them need to be committed to faithful suffering,” writes Kapic, “They are called to be full of faith in God and faithful to one another, even amid the challenges. They are called to tell the truth about the pain and hardships even as they are faithful to point one another to Christ crucified and risen. For this to happen we need each other.”<sup>27</sup>

It is important for friends to avoid making accusations like, “you just need more faith” or “God is teaching you something through this experience.” These and other superficial attempts to answer the “why” of it all are easy pits to fall into,

especially when, as a friend, you feel helpless and powerless. But these types of responses do more damage than good. Instead, focus on helping the one suffering to have endurance. Remind them they have a tangible hope in Christ even in the midst of the pain.

**FRIENDS CAN HELP BY DOING PRACTICAL, EVERYDAY TASKS.** When suffering with depression, the small everyday tasks feel overwhelming. Friends can help by doing the everyday things like washing the dishes in the kitchen, doing laundry, cooking a meal, going to the grocery store, etc. These small tasks may seem insignificant but can actually have a huge impact in the life of the depressed person, helping them to persevere when they feel overwhelmed or guilty because of the limitations of the illness.

**FRIENDS CAN HELP BY LEARNING FROM THE SUFFERER.** This seems counter-intuitive: Isn’t the sufferer the one supposed to learn from the friend? However, when people go through intense pain—when they suffer faithfully—they are actually building up the body of Christ. They don’t need to feel guilty about their illness or the limitations it puts on them. Friends can help by reminding the depressed person that persevering in their faith and offering their praises and laments build up the people of God in unique ways. From the sufferer, friends learn of God’s goodness in the midst of suffering, of God’s graciousness in hearing their laments, of God’s faithful continuing presence in the life of his people.

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<sup>26</sup> Kelly Kapic *Embodied Hope*, 151–152

<sup>27</sup> Kelly Kapic, *Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering*, 151.

# 9

## THE CHURCH CAN HELP



**TOGETHER, REMIND ONE ANOTHER OF** the hope you both have in Christ despite the hardship of this life, and look forward together to the hope of the renewal Christ will bring at his second coming.

“Thus in our own distress, when we find it easy to doubt God’s grace and provision,” writes Kapic, “the body of Christ gives shelter and sustenance under the canopy of their faith. The flame of individual faith weakens when it is alone, but in true community the fire of faith illumines the night.”<sup>28</sup>

In *Life and Death: In the Valley of the Shadow*, Simonetta Carr speaks of the challenges of being a Christian mother with a son battling schizophrenia. She speaks of the real struggle of seeing her son hospitalized and of doing research and learning patience, love, and hope in such a dark and frustrating situation. Throughout the process, she was not alone. She explains how her church was involved supporting her every step along the way, and she speaks about how the ministry of the church gave her a sense of encouragement and hope.

She writes about how her pastor would visit every week to play “a few rounds of chess” with her son, who had “prepared the chess board in anticipation.” When the church came alongside her family during these challenges, she writes, “I was surprised to discover how many of them had similar experiences: so many had children, siblings, parents, or close relatives suffering from mental illness. Some of their stories were disquieting. I realized most of us bear heavy burdens, often alone. It gave a new meaning to the word *hospitality*.”<sup>29</sup>

Her church became a place where she could share her burdens and experience hope, and through her experience she could see that “Enormous encouragement came from knowing my son belongs to the Lord. He was baptized in the name of the

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and publicly professed his faith, and God faithfully proclaimed the gospel to him week after week for many years through word and sacrament. I can rest on the promise that ‘he who began a good work in [my son] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ’ (Phil. 1:6).<sup>30</sup>

Simonetta Carr’s story shows how the church can help by simply being a loving church that knows Jesus and responds to the gospel of grace with love and compassion. This ordinary week-in and week-out pattern of church life can bring a sense of stability and comfort. In this way, the church can be a place of sharing, hope, love, and mercy—this is what people who suffer from mental illnesses like depression need. This is an important part of what families who suffer need.

A church, a pastor, or a group of Christians can’t fix mental illness, but they can help in all sorts of ways. They can pray. They can show hospitality. They can be listening ears and embracing hands. They can show up and bring with them the love of God, showing the goodness and mercy of the gospel in physical, tangible ways. It is easy to look at these ordinary realities and question their power, but for people who are suffering, the ordinary is exactly what they need, and it’s through the ordinary that God often works in extraordinary ways to save, assure, and love. This is Paul’s point in Romans 12:3–8. He writes,

*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in*

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28 Kelly Kapic *Embodied Hope*, 127

29 Simonetta Carr “Life and Death: In the Valley of the Shadow” *Modern Reformation*, July/August 2014.

30 Simonetta Carr “Life and Death: In the Valley of the Shadow” *Modern Reformation*, July/August 2014.

*Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who*

*does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:3-8)*

The grace of God working in these ordinary ways is a gift from God to help demonstrate the love that he has for us: the love that sent Jesus Christ to live and die for our salvation.

# RECOMMENDED READING



**Eswine, Zack. *Spurgeon's Sorrows: Realistic Hope for those who Suffer from Depression*.** One of the real challenges that a Christian may have with depression is feeling that God cannot use them for his glory. Here Zack Eswine puts readers in contact with a Christian preacher who suffered from depression and yet pursued God's glory through it.

**Green-McCreight, Katheryn. *Darkness Is My Only Companion*.** Katheryn Green-McCreight is a Christian theologian who speaks about her own struggles with bi-polar disorder. She addresses all the common concerns in a way that draws the reader into prayer and toward hope.

**Kapic, Kelly. *Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering*.** Dr Kapic guides the reader with wisdom and thoughtfulness in how to offer help and comfort to someone suffering from chronic and/or severe physical pain. He makes no defense of God and does not attempt to answer the question "why," but instead navigates the messy and raw reality of pain and Christ's presence in the midst of that pain. The book is half theology and half a practical handbook on walking alongside suffering people.

**Murray, David. *Christians Get Depressed Too: Hope and Help for Depressed People*.** This is a great book to start with in understanding how Christians can experience depression and find hope.

**Murray, David. *The Happy Christian*.** This is not a book for people struggling with clinical depression or other major mental illnesses. Instead, this book is for anyone thinking about happiness but struggling with discontentment or dissatisfaction with life.

**Welch, Edward T. *Depression: Looking Up from the Stubborn Darkness*.** Some books speak to people who are suffering from major depression disorders like clinical depression or bi-polar disorder, but this book can really benefit people who are suffering from milder forms of depression.

**Welch, Edward T. *Blame It on the Brain*.** This is a good place to start when sorting out how to understand the relationship between body and soul in common mental illnesses.



