



Dealing with Depression

By Philip M. Bickel

The Emotional Flu

"I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would be not one cheerful face on earth. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell.

To remain as I am is impossible. I must die or be better, it appears to me."

– Abraham Lincoln

Depression is as old as the human race. Twenty-four centuries ago, the Greek physician Hippocrates diagnosed depression, calling it "melancholy." Depression hasn't died out since then. Heightened by our urban environment and our urgent pace of living, depression is the most common form of emotional pain today.

- Depression is an illness, like arthritis or cancer.
- Depression affects the entire body, not only the mind.
- One in five people suffer from depression during their lifetime.
- Depression is the leading cause of alcoholism, drug abuse, and other addictions.
- More than half the people with depression fail to get proper treatment.
- After heart disease, depression is the #2 cause of lost work days in the USA.

Who gets depressed? It impacts all ages, all races, all economic groups, and both genders. Women, however, suffer from depression twice as often as men. We don't know all the reasons for this, but it is probably due to:

- Major biological changes such as the onset of menstruation, menstruation itself, pregnancy, postpartum, and menopause.
- Social conditioning which results in a lower sense of self-worth and competence than men.

- Discrimination in the workplace (lower pay, slow promotions, etc.).
- Domestic duties of housework and child-rearing, which are still handled primarily by women.
- Rape and physical and sexual abuse.

Depression is “the emotional flu” which strikes almost all of us at some time in our lives. But simply because depression is common doesn’t mean it is of no consequence. This flu debilitates, draining hope like a bleeding wound. This flu kills, because untreated depression is the leading cause of suicide. As an anonymous poet expressed:

*Nothing enchants or attracts me.
 My name? My fate?
 I don't care.
 In endless depression I live languishing.
 My only passion?
 Death.*

Mental health experts define depression as an emotional state of dejection and sadness. It ranges from mild discouragement and downheartedness to feelings of utter hopelessness and despair. We all experience these feelings at one time or another. The difference is that for the depressed person, these feelings have become constant companions, like bothersome neighbors who won’t leave your home.

We can tell that people have gone beyond normal human lulls of sadness and discouragement when they exhibit the following signs:

- Ongoing irritability
- Changes in appetite or weight (usually diminished)
- Insomnia, or the desire to sleep constantly
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities
- Decreased sexual drive
- Inability to concentrate, remember things, or make decisions
- Extreme sadness, hopelessness, worthlessness, guilt, or self-reproach
- Recurring thoughts of suicide or death

When someone has at least four of these symptoms for longer than two weeks, he or she is in a state of severe depression and ought to seek professional help. Talk to your doctor about the possibility of depression. These symptoms could also indicate some other medical problem.

In general, psychiatrists and psychologists deal only with the more extreme cases of depression. But most of us would appreciate some preventive advice to help us avoid ever reaching that point. Far too many depressed people assume that the only way out of the gloom is to grit their teeth and suffer through it. That just isn't so. This booklet will provide you with both the findings of modern science and the timeless truths of the Bible, so that you (or a friend) may be liberated from the manacles of melancholy.

Only one-eighth of an iceberg appears above the surface of the ocean. Depression is like that. What we see are sorrow, anxiety, and other symptoms. But what lies below the surface is the cause of depression. The depression of some folks may have one single cause. Others may have a combination of causes. Knowing the cause(s) and resolving the issues can help you deal with your depression.

In this booklet, we will briefly discuss several causes of depression and how to deal with them. Perhaps in one of these examples you will see yourself or someone you know who tends to get depressed. May the advice offered here help you deal effectively with depression.

Physical Causes

Sometimes depression has a physical cause. Examples are:

- Slow recovery from an injury
- Prolonged illnesses like hepatitis and mononucleosis
- Undiagnosed illnesses, such as heart disease, thyroid dysfunction, cancer, infectious diseases, and immune/autoimmune disorders
- Vitamin or mineral deficiencies
- Side effects of prescription and over-the-counter drugs

Besides these physical causes, experts speak of another type of depression called “endogenous,” which means “originating from within.” Endogenous depression is a profound melancholy caused by chemical imbalances in the nervous system.

The most extreme form of endogenous depression is manic depression. The manic depressive person swings between low periods of deep sorrow and high periods of extreme optimism and happiness. During a period of euphoria, he or she may take rash action, such as marrying a stranger or buying expensive items on credit.

Is there any way to get off of the runaway roller coaster for manic depression? Yes. Medical substances, such as lithium, help balance the chemicals of the nervous system. Therefore, the kindest thing you can do for a manic depressive is to refer him or her to a doctor.

However, most people with endogenous depression do not alternate between sorrow and euphoria. They simply remain trapped in the pit of despondency — and for no apparent reason. This is called clinical depression. Unlike a passing bout with the blahs, clinical depression dominates a person's life and makes even simple daily activities impossible.

People with clinical depression should seek medical help, because there are means for treating their illness. Many doctors prescribe medicines known as tricyclic antidepressants which help stabilize the nerve cell chemistry. Although antidepressives have some uncomfortable side effects, they are not addictive and help many of the patients who take them.

The good news is that depression can be successfully treated in more than 80 percent of the people who have it. The sad news is that over half of those suffering from depression fail to get proper treatment. Why not?

Because depression carries its own set of myths:

- Myth 1: Depression is a character flaw or a sign of a weak personality.
- Myth 2: Any self-respecting person should be able to overcome depression simply by toughing it out.
- Myth 3: Songs in pop culture tell us, “Don’t worry. Be happy,” “Let a smile be your umbrella,” or “I simply remember my favorite things, and then I don’t feel so bad.”

All these myths imply that people should be able to handle depression on their own. But depression is not a mood you can simply snap out of. If you had leukemia, would you expect to shake it off like a cold? If you had diabetes, would it help to skip dessert? No.

So if you are depressed, begin by seeking the help of your medical care giver, who will help you identify the physical causes of depression.

Bereavement and Depression

Orlando’s wife Jean died unexpectedly. Both Orlando and his 6-year-old son Lonnie missed her deeply. Every time the boy would start to talk about “Mama,” Orlando would say, “We’ll talk about that later, Lonnie.” But they never did. Six months after Jean’s death, they were both severely depressed because they had not dealt with the grief.

The loss of a loved one — whether through death, divorce, or extended absence — is a major cause of depression. After a few months, about 75 percent of grieving people learn how to close the wound and go on living. However, 25 percent of bereaved people develop deep depression.

What causes this prolonged slump? Here are some possibilities:

- Some people may refuse to accept their emotions, viewing sorrow and weeping as signs of weakness. This was Orlando’s problem, and he passed it on to Lonnie.
- Some people resent that the departed person has abandoned them. Knowing this is illogical, they bottle up their resentment and hope it will go away. But it won’t, until they realize their feelings of abandonment are common and do not negate their love for the departed.
- Some are wrestling with guilt. They imagine they are to blame somehow for the death of their loved one. Or they shame themselves for not having expressed their love more openly.
- Some grieving people can’t bring themselves to tackle the chore of sorting through their loved one’s clothing and possessions. The emotional pain would be too intense.

Our natural need to confront our emotions is demonstrated by a touching story from the Bible. Lazarus, a dear friend of Jesus, had died. Jesus' reaction is told in two simple words: "Jesus wept." Think about that: Jesus wept! If you are depressed over the loss of a loved one, do what Jesus did. Let your emotions surge. Let the tears flow. It's OK.

Eventually, some caring friends helped Orlando and Lonnie pull out of their depression. The friends came over and helped Orlando and Lonnie move out Jean's things. They encouraged the father and son to express their anguish. In addition, these friends shared their faith. They talked about Jesus Christ who destroyed death's power by His own death. He rose from the dead and is still alive today. He offers all who believe in Him a life without pain, tears, or loss — a forever life in heaven.

Orlando and Lonnie placed their trust in Jesus and were able to confront reality again. They now see that life has its bitter moments, so don't harbor the bitterness; express it. They also know that this life is but one short chapter to be followed by a never-ending adventure when God calls us from this world to the next.

Jesus invites you to overcome depression caused by grief by accepting the reality of His victory over death. Even though tears will fall, you can live with the sure hope of being reunited with your loved ones who have died confessing the name of Christ.

Low Self-Esteem and Depression

Everyone had a hard time getting along with Ellen, because they considered her a know-it-all who bickered about everything. No one was more tired of Ellen than her sister-in-law Becky. When it happened that these two had to take a long road trip together, Becky dreaded being trapped next to gabby, crabby Ellen for days on end.

However, since Becky had no other options, on the first day of the trip she decided to try listening to what Ellen had to say. Becky was surprised. Ellen actually seemed to be knowledgeable on many topics.

"You didn't even graduate from high school," Becky said. "Where did you learn all this?"

"From reading books and talking to experts," Ellen replied. Then she ventured, "Do you really think I know what I'm talking about?"

"It sounds good to me."

After that, Becky enjoyed the trip immensely. Since she didn't dispute Ellen's ideas, Ellen didn't argue with her. In fact, by the end of the trip Ellen was no longer the abrasive, critical woman she had been before. The night before they parted, Becky asked, "Why did you always argue with people before?"

"I guess it was because my father always criticized me and called me an idiot. I didn't argue because I thought I was smart, but because I assumed everyone thought I was stupid."

"And," added Becky, "it wasn't until now that someone finally listened patiently, encouraged you, and helped you overcome your low self-esteem. Ellen, I'm sorry I misjudged you for so long."

When we think negatively about ourselves, we become susceptible to depression. Ellen had lived under a cloud of depression for years due to her father's harsh criticism. What might be other causes of low self-esteem?

- Believing that one is plain or unattractive.
- Comparing one's self to others, noting all their good points and ignoring their weaknesses.
- Setting unrealistic goals and failing to attain them.

Still others lose self-esteem when they fail to live up to their own standards. Seeing the gap between what they think they ought to be and what they are, they sink into the quicksand of depression. Some psychologists try to explain away such guilt by blaming it on religion. Patients are told, "Just give up your strict standard of ethics, and then the accusations and guilt will disappear."

Such advice fails to provide a true remedy for guilt. Usually people feel guilty because they are guilty. After doing something that hurts others, they feel distressed and depressed. Such real guilt will not go away by ignoring it. It can only be erased by forgiveness. And the only one who can obtain true forgiveness for us is Jesus Christ.

The Bible says Christ "*was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities*" (Isaiah 53:5). If you humbly accept the pardon Christ has won for you, you are truly free from guilt. You don't simply wish guilt away. Christ washes it away!

"OK," some may argue, "maybe God forgives me, but how can I ever forgive myself?"

Folks who refuse to forgive themselves are worshiping an idol, the idol of the "me-that-can-never-be." They are like a little girl who has dropped her china doll and broken it. Her mother carefully repairs it, but the little girl refuses to take it back, because it has cracks in it. Instead of being happy that she has her doll back, all she can think about is that it isn't perfect anymore.¹

We are all like that doll. Our lives are cracked and broken by the mistakes we make and the harmful things we do. Christ offers us back to ourselves, repaired and whole. He assures us that He esteems us highly. So don't reject His help by refusing to forgive yourself.

Anger and Depression

Many depressed people harbor a lot of anger, but don't always recognize it.

Susan spent every Christmas season thoroughly depressed. She had a good marriage and fine kids. They enjoyed being together. But Susan couldn't seem to avoid spoiling every Christmas with an attack of depression.

As she and her husband discussed the matter, they discovered the cause of her seasonal depression. When Susan was a child she had always longed for a happy Christmas, but it never happened because her mother was an alcoholic. Susan could remember thinking, "I hate Mom. If she wanted to, she could make Christmas nice for us — but she'd rather get smashed!"

Now that Susan was an adult, her resentment toward her mother poisoned every December. After coming to this realization, she needed to deal with her anger. With the help of a Christian counselor, she forgave her mother. She also learned to forgive herself for having harbored bitterness all those years. When all these matters were finally confronted and dealt with, Susan and her family experienced their first "happy holidays" free of depression.²

Is anger contributing to your depression? Admitting this is hard, but it could be the first step toward healing. For our own emotional health God advises, *“In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and don’t give the devil a foothold ... Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you”* (Ephesians 4:26-27, 32).

If anger and/or resentment are contributing to your depression, openly admit this to God. You need not doubt that He will forgive you. Even though we have done wrong, He surely forgives us as soon as we turn our hearts to Him in humble sorrow for our mistakes.

Lack of Purpose and Depression

Often after the birth of a baby, a woman will experience an attack of depression called “postpartum blues.” For nine months she has worked toward a goal, and with it now accomplished, she feels adrift with no particular aspiration or purpose.

Without clear goals in mind, our lives seem rudderless, and we may become depressed. In fact, a psychoanalyst named Victor Frankl proposed that the need to find the meaning of existence is a basic human drive. Frankl formulated this theory while confined in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. He observed that people who had a sense of destiny and purpose patiently endured the horror of the death camp. Those without such an explanation for their existence often committed suicide or isolated themselves in a bubble of depression.

In later years, Frankl strove to help his patients by leading them to discover the meaning of their personal existence. For example, he would advise a mother with postpartum depression to focus on the goal of raising her child with love and devotion.

We all ask, “For what purpose have I been placed on this earth?” Without the answer, we will always be prone to depression caused by a sense of meaninglessness, wasting our days on mediocre goals.

Where did we come from? Where are we going? We all have an eternal destiny. Those who reject what Christ has done to pardon us and reconcile us with God, await only eternal separation from God. However, those who make peace with God through trusting in Christ, exist to serve others here on earth and to live in everlasting happiness with God upon leaving this world.

Knowing your current purpose and your eternal destiny will lift you above your bouts with depression.

Helplessness and Depression

Some scientists placed several dogs in a room which was divided in two by a barrier low enough for the dogs to jump across. On one side was a metal grid through which an electrical current could pass. When the dogs felt the electrical shock, they would leap to safety on the other side.

Then the scientists hamstrung some of the dogs, making them unable to escape the shocks. These dogs grew nervous and ill. More significantly, when they were untied, they made no attempt to leap over the barrier to avoid the shocks. In the final stages of the experiment, the scientists lifted the dogs over the barrier until they relearned how to jump to safety.

Some psychologists believe that people experience similar futility when faced with extremely difficult problems. For instance, the improbability of ever escaping from the lower economic class may drive the poverty-stricken into depression. Or consider the man looking for employment, the woman with a chronic, incurable illness, or the teen who longs to go to college but must work in a dead-end job. After trying various solutions, people in such circumstances may lose all hope.

Jennifer was raised in a family filled with hatred and abuse. She grew dissatisfied with life the way it was and she got involved in witchcraft. She had hoped the occult powers would grant her control and solve her problems. But her messed-up world did not improve. Her home was still full of hate. She had no close friends. She attempted suicide.

Then, through the help of a Christian friend, Jennifer was led to faith in Jesus who guided Jennifer out of her darkness. Her life began to change; her hatred vanished, replaced by an unexplainable love toward the people she had previously hated.

To all who are depressed because life seems hopeless and futile, God promises, *“I will come to you and fulfill My gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”* (Jeremiah 29:10-11). *“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you”* (Hebrews 13:5).

A Friend: One of the Best Cures

Psychologist Javier del Amo proposes that depression is caused, in part, by a process of isolation. When a person lacks meaningful communication with others, his or her emotions become “frozen” or “paralyzed.” To remedy this situation, del Amo advises that the depressed person needs a friend who will communicate on a deep, emotional level. This meaningful relationship will help the victim of depression to “thaw” and regain the ability to perceive life with hope.

With this in mind, let’s consider several ways to be a friend to someone in low spirits:

1. Devote time to that person. Listen.
2. Be positive and encouraging, but don’t be excessively cheery either.
3. Don’t wallow in his/her problems.
4. Take care of tasks which he/she lacks the desire to do.
5. Utilize happy or restful music to lift their spirits.
6. Help them think and care about someone besides themselves.
7. Involve them in useful activities or recreation in order to draw them out of the past and into the here-and-now.
8. Teach them to focus on just one small task at a time, until they can gradually assume normal responsibilities.

9. Make sure the person is keeping doctor appointments and taking medications.

10. Learn all you can about depression. You will benefit from increased understanding and empathy.

If you know someone who is depressed, you can be such a friend. If you are depressed, you need a friend like this. If you lack such a friend, seek out a free counseling group at a church or community center. Those who attend will have stories similar to yours. You'll discover that many people feel like you; you aren't alone.

One additional friend longs to help you. Throughout this booklet, we have seen that God wishes to be your friend. The Father sent His Son Jesus to this earth to reestablish the friendship we had cast aside. This booklet has described four ways in which Jesus Christ expresses His love and good intentions toward you:

1. By His death on the cross, He paid for all your sins so that you can receive forgiveness and freedom from guilt.

2. By His resurrection, He has broken the grip of death and offers you life that never ends.

3. Christ can fill you with the power and love of God the Holy Spirit, so that you don't have to surrender to feelings of hopelessness.

4. Because of the above, you can know the meaning of your existence and have a purpose for living.

All this, God has done for the pure and simple reason that He loves us. *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins"* (1 John 4:10). God initiated the action to make peace. He did this even though we were so lost in our own sin and problems that we could not love Him properly.

All that remains is for each one of us to individually accept God's offer of friendship by turning away from trying to live without God to trusting in Jesus. Please accept God's offer of friendship. Thank the Lord for all that the Savior has done to make you at peace with God. If you don't know how to express this in your own words, you may wish to use the thoughts of this prayer.

*Heavenly Father, thank You for Your love and Your friendship!
While I was wandering in sin, distrust, and anxiety,
You never stopped loving me.
You sent Your holy Son, Jesus, from heaven to become a human being,
to experience the pains and disappointments of this depressing world.
Yet He never sinned, and when He suffered on the cross,
it was for me and all sinners that He offered up His life.
Thank You for giving me faith to trust in Christ alone to free me from guilt.
Therefore, I am confident that I now stand before You,
Holy Father, spotless and clean.
Assure me, Lord, of Your promise of everlasting life,
and Your promise to always be with me.
Thank You for giving my life meaning and purpose.
Empower me, by Your Holy Spirit, to serve You
and to encourage others who are depressed. Amen.*

If this prayer expresses your sincere belief, you have come to know God as your greatest friend. With His help you'll be able to deal with the emotional and spiritual problems that cause depression. And you will be equipped to help others who are downhearted as well.

Concluding Advice

One of the best therapies for a depressed person is to read the Bible, not just brief snatches here and there, but a solid study of God's Word. By such activity, you will take your mind off of your depression and come face-to-face with the God who loves you.

We at Lutheran Hour Ministries invite you to enroll in our Bible course entitled, *Real Life*. This course is designed to help you communicate with God, your friend, by learning to understand and value His Word. If you have found the Bible difficult to understand in the past, don't worry. *Real Life* will make the Bible's message simple and clear.

Some readers of this booklet may still be questioning whether it's wise, or even possible, to know God as a close friend. While it may sound appealing, they hesitate to commit themselves. If this is how you feel, we encourage you to enroll as well. Use the course as a way to further investigate the Bible and determine whether God is a friend worth trusting. For more information about *Real Life* call **1-800-876-9880**.

ENDNOTES

1. Richard Dobbins, *Your Spiritual and Emotional Health*, (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1984), 118.
2. Dobbins, 132.

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