

Handling Depression: A Christian Perspective - Rob Steed

Depression is, as Seligman put it, "... the common cold of psychopathology." Today there is a realisation that depression is far more common than previously understood. Recent research suggests that between 10% and 20% of the general adult population has been depressed at some time in their lives. In some communities as many as 50% of the population has a history of depression. Depression is found at times in young children, often in adolescence and most often in older people.

Depression may occur in a number of forms:

- Reactive depression comes as a reaction to some real or imagined loss or other life trauma.
- Endogenous depression seems to arise spontaneously from within and usually is found in the elderly.
- Psychotic depression involves intense despair and self-destructive attitudes, often accompanied by hallucinations and loss of contact with reality.
- Neurotic depression is mixed levels of anxiety.

Recent Studies have shown that depression may run in families through the gene pool. Life's losses experienced by divorce, death, and major changes have been linked to depression. Side effects from medications and even experiences of illness, either sudden or long term, can trigger a depression. Stress can trigger a depressive episode. Many people seek treatment for depression after the holiday season when many individuals are harried, rushed, and overwhelmed. A depressive state can occur suddenly without warning, or may be experienced only once in a lifetime. Others may suffer through recurring episodes. Symptoms can be so severe as to impair a person's ability to function in their daily responsibilities. Some people have ongoing depression with chronic symptoms which keep them from feeling well, although their symptoms do not interfere with their daily functioning. Some people are bipolar, and they experience cycles in which they are euphoric followed by dark depression. Even the seasons affect some people. The good news is that depression is a highly treatable illness and help is available for people wanting to come out of the dark.

Depression and the Christian

Depression is a common experience among Christians! In 1996 a study conducted in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia found that 43% of participants had experienced depression in the last three years and 69% had felt depressed at some stage in their life. Many Christians believe that a person who knows the Lord and is filled with the Spirit should not suffer from depression. Some believe that depression is an indication of spiritual failure.

This simplistic view of depression is destructive and fails to stand up against scripture and the witness of many great Christians. Scripture records many moments of depression that have been experienced by Godly men and women:

- David: “Why are you down cast, Oh my soul....” (Ps 42:5) “... my God, my soul is downcast within me....” (Ps 42:6) “Why are you downcast, O my soul. Why so disturbed within me...” (Ps 43:5)
- Elijah: “...while he himself went a day’s journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. ”I have had enough, Lord”, he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.” (I Kings 19:4)
- Jesus: “Then he said to them, ”My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” (Matthew 26:38)

The Bible is much more realistic and kind to us than some Christians are, they clearly show that depression is part of the Christian’s walk.

Ellen White had a personal knowledge of depression. Writing to a friend she makes this comment:

“You ask me why is it that you awake in the night and feel enclosed in darkness? I often feel the same way myself; but these desponding feelings are no evidence that God has forsaken you or me ... Gloomy feelings are no evidence that the promises of God are of no effect.” (Selected Messages Bk 3 p. 324).

Denial of depression leads to greater difficulty. Guilt is often the end result. People become depressed about being depressed. C.S. Lewis challenges the false belief that depression is a measure of our spirituality. He said, “About half the time we credit ourselves with virtue, its really just a matter of temperment and constitution, and not of spirituality.”

Definition

Depression may be understood as:

When too few of our interactions have positive outcomes and when too many of them have negative outcomes, we start to feel depressed.

Lewinsohn illustrates such negative interactions with the following examples:

Lack of positive outcome:

You spend most of your day doing the housework, preparing dinner, waiting for the plumber (who never turns up) and chauffeuring your children to their various appointments. During dinner, your family is busily engaged in discussing their school or job activities, and nobody compliments you on the dinner or inquires about your day. You feel down and begin to wonder whether your family really cares about you. You

continue to feel this way for the remainder of the evening and have trouble falling asleep.

Negative outcome:

Your wife is critical of you because you come home late from work, read the newspaper during dinner, don't spend much time with the children, and so on. She complains to you about these things frequently.

Vicious Circle

The depressed person will be more severely affected by each additional negative event or interaction than normal. Their depressed state means negative events are exaggerated in their thinking. They enter into a vicious cycle of depression which runs like this: They experience a negative experience which causes them to feel depressed. They then withdraw from their usual interactions, feeling lonely and more depressed. Because they feel so depressed they have no energy to do hardly anything. They then feel extremely depressed.

Characteristics Of Depression

- Prolonged and strong feelings of depression, sadness, dejection, misery and so on;
- Low activity levels: they just don't do much any more; problems in their relationships because of or contributing to their depression;
- Feelings of guilt and a tendency to see the world as making overwhelming demands on them and placing insurmountable problems in their path;
- A sense of hopelessness about the future: things are never going to get better;
- Sleep disturbance, in either direction, either having difficulty sleeping, or spending lots of time sleeping;
- Fatigue and a lack of enthusiasm or energy, even though they may be sleeping more than usual;
- Eating disturbances, either direction, either much less or much more than usual, often resulting in marked changes in body weight;
- A loss of interest in sex;
- And some depressed people will think or even try suicide.

Thoughts, Actions and Feelings

To understand the feelings of depression we need to consider the relationship between thoughts - feelings - actions.

Some people have learned to act and think in depressing ways. For example, we learn to feel happy when our favourite football team wins, and disappointed when it loses, but someone who is not interested at all in football has no feeling. Therefore the way to control depression is for depressed people to learn new patterns than make depression less likely.

There are certain events or situations - *antecedents* - that happen that set the stage for how you will think, act and feel. Examples of antecedents:

- Cemetery = Sadness
- Fun Park = Happiness
- Kitchen = Hunger

Sometimes our depression is learned as a means of achieving positive consequences.

Consequences are events that follow behaviour. Positive consequences, or rewards make it more likely that you will repeat the behaviour - payoff.

An example of consequence depression:

Mary's husband holds an important position in his company that requires him to be away from home often. Mary stays home to provide stability for the children and support to him. Mary's husband is a very caring husband who shows special care to Mary when she is depressed. He brings her gifts and spends lots of time talking with her. However, this level attention is only possible when Mary needs extra support. Mary unknowingly has learnt that if she wants attention from her husband that depression is a good strategy.

THOUGHT FACTOR: Your expectations, beliefs and thoughts can greatly influence your activities and your feelings Eg. if you expect to have a terrible day you probably will. Thoughts can act as antecedents or payoffs.

The Connection Between

Thoughts, Feelings and actions are inextricably intertwined, continually influence one another.

“Actions repeated form habits, habits form character, and by the character our destiny for time and eternity is decided” (COL page 356).

“For as he thinks in his heart, so he is.” Prov 23:7

“Actions repeated form habits, habits form character, and by the character our destiny for time and eternity is decided” (COL page 356).

“It would be well for us to spend a thoughtful hour each day contemplating the life of Christ.” (DA.83).

“No truth does the Bible more clearly teach than that what we do is the result of what we are. To a great degree the experiences of life are the fruition of our own thoughts and deeds” (Education White page 146).

KEEPING A RECORD

An important procedure for gaining understanding of one's depression is to keep a daily record of activities. This information enables us to gain an awareness of what activities and interactions are linked to our moods. The principle is that certain activities and interactions lead to positive moods and other activities and interactions lead to negative moods. The procedure for keeping the diary is to select a time in the day that is convenient. Review in your thinking how your day has been and rate it out of ten. (0= depressed - 10 =happy). Try to review at the same time each day.

Strategies For Handling Depression

1. ***Pleasant activities***: Many people who suffer depression have a very low level of pleasant activities in their day to day life. Their day is made up of jobs to be done. They don't have time to enjoy themselves. Our ratio of pleasurable activities to non-pleasurable will have a direct relationship to one's mood swings. The person who suffers depression needs to increase their level of pleasant activities.

2. ***People problems***: The number of positive interactions that a person experiences is linked very much to their ability to relate to people. If you are a poor communicator, lacking in assertion and unable to deal with conflict; your chance of being involved in interactions with positive outcomes is poor. Difficulties in relationships is a common cause for depression. For further information review sections on communications and assertiveness skills.

3. ***Realistic Thinking***: Often depressed people have a number of negative, self-critical or pessimistic thoughts. These need to be addressed during time of balance moods when one can be analytical.

Inspired Counsel (SM Bk3 325)

“Look away from yourself. Do not think or talk of yourself.”

“Do you not believe the words of Christ?”

“Think of the Saviour.”

“Do not look on the dark side.”

“I will not allow my mind to dwell on the dark side. Jesus has light and comfort and hope and joy for me.”

“Your memory will be renewed by the Holy Spirit.”

“Thus you can educate and strengthen your mind.”