

On Handling Depression - That Emotional Hammerlock

Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service

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What Is It?

To be depressed literally means to be pushed down. When depressed, you are weighed down under a heavy load of bad feelings too heavy to carry. That heavy load includes great guilt, hopeless despair, deep sadness, fatigue and listlessness. As a 'depressed' you are unmotivated to do much other than continue to sag under and possibly complain about that load of feelings.

Certainly all people have depressive feelings at one time or another and yet are not considered to be under the weight of a diagnosed clinical depression, that is, a depression requiring a doctor's care or hospitalization. A truly serious or debilitating depression is one in which you feel very much at the end of the line without any place to go, and so you go no place.

The experience of depression is somewhat like the feelings you would have at being trapped on an ocean floor without any oxygen tank or other means of breathing. It is as if you would not die in several minutes, but have life prolonged while continuing to experience the feelings of panic, imminent death, total despair, utter anguish, fear and misery! These feelings continue to occur and persist with great intensity while stretched out over a long period of time. During all this time at the bottom of this sea, you still think and analyze. Life itself seems remote and far away. It is pitch dark, murky and ominous with no hope of escape. The past then looms large before your eyes and guilt clouds your mind. As a depressed person, you very much feel this way. The feelings are genuine and the experience real. It is not a pretense nor playacting for someone else's benefit. You really feel you are at the bottom of the ocean without an oxygen tank!

If you have prolonged periods of depression or continue to have bouts of depression off and on at different times in your life, the latter bouts can be like the experience of being lost deep in an unfamiliar part of a cave you once knew. You have wandered back into the cave and cannot find your way out. Although it is black and scary, filled with all the familiar feelings of fear and despair, it becomes a safer refuge than trying to find your way outside of the cavern into the light of day. Thus depression becomes a self-perpetuating cycle out of which it is extremely difficult to break. You are indeed lost in the cave and in deep dark despair. Yet you hesitate to try to grope your way out of the cave, fearing all the dangers - the spiders, snakes, sink holes and secret animal lairs - away from your so-called "safe spot of terror", clinging to a cave wall. Better a known horror than an unknown catastrophe.

What Causes It?

The onset of depression can come suddenly like an explosion or gradually like drifting away at sea. It almost always involves a loss of some kind. Depression can be touched off by some severe loss. Examples of such severe losses which trigger depression are: loss of a loved one through death, divorce or separation of some kind; loss of job or vocation; loss of home, possibly by a move; great financial loss; and loss of health. Depression can also be set in motion by a lesser sequence of stresses, little losses so to speak, which contribute to a fear of major loss. A string of more minor stresses such as loss of promotion, loss of family closeness through problems or hostilities, loss of contact with friends, loss of hobby or enjoyment outlet, or nagging physical problems can push you beyond your tolerance limit. Then depression can set in.

Guilt feelings surround you in depression. They may be a cause of depression and certainly contribute to its perpetuation. You feel guilty about the things you did or failed to do which brought about your loss. For example, you feel guilty about what you judge to be your failures in a marriage relationship, your failures at work, your failures with friendships, your lack of exercise or poor eating habits which led to poor health, etc. Or perhaps you feel angry about the loss of a loved one through death, or angry about an injury in an accident for which you can blame no one but God. Then you feel guilty about being angry with God! Guilt feelings are an integral part of depression. Anger is also very much present. The equation may read like this: when guilt dominates it is anger turned inward; when anger dominates, it is guilt projected outward. You may become angry with everyone else and blame them or God for your misfortunes. In depression you tend to swallow this anger but certainly feel it as well as the guilt.

Is this guilt justified? Is sin at the bottom of depression? Sometimes yes and sometimes no! There may be a very real cause to feel guilty. For example, you commit adultery. You cover it up from your spouse and friends. You carry on as if it had never happened. Guilt feelings overwhelm you. You fear the loss of family and friends should your adultery be revealed. You have already lost self-respect. Depression may certainly result from-such an act and guilt feelings in. this case would be justified.

On the other hand, there may not be a real cause to feel guilty. You may set standards for yourself which are impossible to achieve and then you feel guilty when you fail to reach those goals. As a student in school, you set the goal of keeping an A average, making the school's basketball team and gaining a part in the school play. Perhaps because of your extracurricular activities you get a few B's on your report card and you feel guilty. As a perfectionist, you become so disappointed with not reaching your unrealistic goals that you are almost obsessed with your guilt and failure. Your depression is not a result of breaking God's law but failing to meet your own standards and is a false guilt.

Most often the guilt feelings can be a mixture of real guilt and false guilt. Your marriage ends in divorce and you feel guilty about all the angry words, the lack of love, and the selfishness you exhibited, even though you worked vigorously for reconciliation. Still you blame yourself for the divorce and for all the things you failed to do, even though the other party rejected your reconciliation efforts and obtained the divorce over your opposition. There would be a mixture of real guilt for real wrongs you had committed and false guilt for expecting the impossible of achieving a reconciliation with the spouse totally opposed to it.

Depression, then, is brought about by loss of some kind, stress that eventually overwhelms you, guilt that may cause and will certainly perpetuate it and anger that is swallowed up inside.

What To Do About It?

Four words provide a simple and concise summary for dealing with a depressed person. These four words are listen, acknowledge, love, and assure.

The first thing to do when dealing with a depressed person is listen, really listen, to them. Remember that this means a process is involved, the developing of a relationship, which usually cannot be accomplished in one session. Listening may not be very easy to do. One problem may be in getting them to talk in the first place. Some depressive's are so subdued that getting anything out of them may be as difficult as pulling teeth. You ask a few questions and you get slow, short, monosyllabic answers. But remember that they are at the bottom of that ocean without oxygen and carry a heavy load of guilt feelings. Persist in approaching them and in trying to establish a bridge over the chasm into their little corner of the cave. It may take any number of attempts before they feel confident about really confiding in you.

Others, be aware, may be of the angry type whose deep-seated guilt feelings are projected outward as anger toward anyone and everything they blame for all their problems. This type may be ready to speak at the drop of a hat and spew forth an angry torrent of abuse at all of their alleged antagonists. Again the advice is the same - listen to them. If you are able to persist patiently in listening long enough, their first flood of anger may dissolve into real revelations and conversations closer to the actual source of their problems. This reaffirms the implication that the relationship needs nurturing and results are not accomplished in just a few short moments with that person.

A critical consideration in the listening stage is to be careful not to criticize or preach to them. Remember that they have much bottled up within them and are not aware of the meaning of it all themselves. To lecture or criticize at this point, even if you do not agree with much of or anything they say, only heaps more weight on their shoulders and destroys their confidence in opening up to you. You would become for them like the friends of Job, useless and a source of increased pain.

If you cannot preach to or argue with them, what can you do? You can acknowledge their feelings. As you listen to them, agree where you can. This should be possible, especially where the pain and suffering are concerned. Since depression is almost always connected to some loss, try to pinpoint that loss or series of losses for

yourself in your own mind. Then as you listen to your depressed parishioner or friend, acknowledge that it is natural to feel sad, depressed, angry or guilty at the loss of spouse, health, job or self-respect in the case of sin, such as adultery. Keep the acknowledgment low-key. Don't go into long bouts of analysis of their problems and offer a lot of advice as to how to correct their situation. Let them come to the point of acknowledging their own loss to themselves. Let them discover and express how they feel about their loss and then you can confirm the validity of those feelings. Even if they express an extremely angry attitude with which you cannot agree, let it wash over you for the time being. Just acknowledge that you can see how very upset they are without arguing as to whether their feelings are totally justified or not.

As you listen to them and acknowledge their feelings, communicate your love to them. This is the most important part of all! What will really come through to the depressive is whether their friend, pastor, counselor or relative really cares about them. You want to communicate to them that you love them and accept them just as they are. That is, you love them as God loves all of us. He gave his Son to die for us when we were his enemies living in rebellion and sin. God loved us unconditionally and freely forgave us all because of Christ's sacrifice. God's love for us does not change but remains constant in spite of what we have done and continue to do. God's love does not depend upon our feelings. God loves us and accepts us just as we are. To acknowledge that is what finally motivates us to change our way of life and live as He wants us to live.

In dealing with the depressed Christian, you want to get them to see and accept themselves as they are. They need to acknowledge to themselves that they are the adulterer, or student perfectionist or divorced person or whatever their current status might be. Whatever it is, God still loves them and accepts them, forgiving their faults and offering opportunities for their future. Conveying your love to them and acceptance of them as they are can be the key to open the door for them to see God's great love for them, the ultimate and true cure for depression.'

Then you reach the point where you can assure them of a future. When they accept themselves for what they are and know that others still love and support them, and best of all, that God loves them, then they can start to look ahead and begin to change. They may now begin to accept God's promise spoken through Jeremiah: " 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' " (Jer. 29:11)

They can learn about themselves from their past experiences. They can turn that knowledge to their advantage as they focus eyes forward on where they want to go. Then the pastor's or counselor's advice is more likely to be useful and heeded. For each depressive the amount of assurance and advice may vary. Some could recover quickly, and soon not need continued counsel and assistance. Others may be in constant need of the regular reassurance of advice, love and support. Some may need medication to help stabilize their moods. As a competent counselor, you will have to judge the individual case, but usually the indications of need will come from the recovering person himself.

These are important points to keep in mind when dealing with a depressed person: Establish a rapport so that the depressed person feels comfortable enough to speak freely with you. Really listen to them, pinpoint for yourself the loss, and acknowledge the feelings of pain, suffering and guilt. Be certain to communicate to them that you accept them and love them as they are. As this love melts their walls of depression point them to and assure them of their future.

Remind them that God keeps His promises. Others may let them down. They may let themselves down. But "God is not a man that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Numbers 23:19)