
UNDERSTANDING AND WITHSTANDING DEPRESSION

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Depression is a huge subject—one that cannot be covered completely even in academic or medical volumes, much less in a brief lecture. Despite years of research and dozens of theories, the causes and effects of this mental/spiritual/emotional epidemic are neither clear nor easily singled out from all the other things of life. That people—many people—become depressed is beyond question; why they do so, and how they can be relieved from its debilitating ‘heaviness’ is still very much in question.

With so many technological and medical advances going on in the 21st Century, we’re easily frustrated when we encounter a problem that is not easily diagnosed and treated. Like cancer and other multi-variety, multi-cause ailments, depression is best viewed like global weather—there are some patterns that we can detect, some fairly clear correlations, and we have names for things like “*El Nino*” that affect the climate. But who can say that they understand the weather? The poor experts are ‘*wrong*’ nearly as often as they are right because “there’s no telling about the weather.”

But if we can relieve ourselves of the pressure of having to definitively say everything there is to say about depression, then we can approach this condition with a few hopeful and helpful perspectives—concepts and understandings for you to add to other things you have learned. Since I am not a trained or licensed mental health professional, I want to be very clear that my comments are rooted in a book that is not often studied on the subject, an ancient volume that is surprisingly in tune with the present-day inner workings of the human mind and heart. That book is the Bible.

I believe it is nearly impossible to understand psychological ‘problems’ and personality disorders without first understanding human beings in light of who we were meant to be and why we even exist. Our origin holds huge clues to our fundamental design and the better we understand God’s intentions when He created us, the better we will grasp the nature of our inner distortions. Psychology, as a science, searches for the natural and physical causes—and subsequent treatments—for personality disorders.

Without minimizing the benefits of that search, I want to offer you an additional dimension of understanding, a supplemental spiritual model that can help diagnose (and treat) some depressions.

BIBLICAL STUDY OF THE PSYCHE

1. God intentionally created us with unique and distinct qualities of being and personality. We have particular design, identity, and purpose in life (Psalms 139:14-16).
2. The world in which we live is no longer in sync with its original design, and its derelict impact damages and diseases our psyche with many different maladies of the heart and mind—much like toxins in the physical environment can cause physical abnormalities and illnesses (Ephesians 5:16).
3. We ourselves, as free agents of choice, elect to do and think things that are damaging to us. The “side-effects” of those inappropriate uses of our mind, heart or body can often affect our personality (Psalms 38:3-8). Additionally, there are invisible, spiritual forces at work in the world, and those powers set themselves in direct opposition to every aspect of God’s plan for us and for our lives, bringing distortion to our personality and mentality (Ephesians 6:12).
4. Our total being consists of three distinct, yet inter-related components: body, soul (psyche, mind, will, emotions, conscience) and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23). These relate to the three dimensions of reality—physical, natural and spiritual (James 3:15). Problems in the body can be caused by difficulties in the soul, and vice-versa. Depression might have physical, natural and/or spiritual symptoms and causes.

SYMPTOMATIC CONDITIONS

Although there is no exact diagnostic test for depression, most experts agree on common symptoms that stem from depression; the more of these symptoms that are present in people’s lives, and the more severe (and long-lasting), the greater the certainty of diagnosis.

THE BODY

Appetite loss, overeating.

Sleep problems.

Exhaustion, severe fatigue.

Chronic pain (head, stomach, back, muscles).

THE MIND

Loss of concentration, memory.

Inability to think, make decisions.

Obsessive recycling of scenarios.

Self-hatred, suicidal thoughts.

Intense feelings of blame or guilt.

THE WILL

Inability to feel intense pleasure or pain.

Addiction to food, alcohol, adrenaline.

Loss of motivation or drive.

Loss of interest in sex and intimacy.

Helplessness, hopelessness.

THE EMOTIONS

Overwhelming sadness.

Internal collapse, sinking.

Anxiety, panic.

Fear of responsibility, blame.

Isolation, withdrawal from friends.

Loneliness.

One of the best approaches to treating depression is the process of elimination—starting with whatever ‘changes’ you can make (yourself or with others’ help). Usually, depressed conditions develop due to multiple, interconnected factors. While it’s often hard to distinguish the “chicken from the egg,” we can identify several factors strongly correlated with depression (some of which are likely catalysts or triggers):

PHYSICAL

Hormonal levels; times of month/life (PMS).

Chemical imbalances.

Medical conditions / faulty immune system.

‘Bad’ diet (caffeine, sugar, alcohol).

Lack of exercise.

NATURAL

Loss, rejection, disappointment.

Chronic demands, pressures—the super-fast pace of life.

Prolonged stress (even good).

Deficient, abusive upbringing.

Emotional self-defense (*Learned helplessness*, victim-mentality).

SPIRITUAL

- Unacknowledged sin.
- Unforgiveness, fear, bitterness, resentment, etc.
- Demonic lies (“*You are a vile, despicable person.*” “*There is no hope for your future.*”).
- Spiritual bondage.

...But for Cain and for his offering He [God] had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."
~Genesis 4:5-7

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON DEPRESSION

1. Just as physical ailments can be caused by physical, natural and spiritual forces (Matthew 4:23-24), "soulish" disorders, like depression, can be due to different factors. The more that the depression changes, distorts or diminishes someone's unique personality, as opposed to mostly affecting someone's mood, the more likely its cause is spiritual. The more that the depression leads someone to disbelieve God's word and His promises, the more likely its roots are spiritual.
2. Many Bible personalities wrestled with depression and despair, and many famous Christian leaders through the centuries have had their own severe battles with it. Strong Christians who are full of the Holy Spirit can be depressed in exactly the same way that they can be sick or in need in other areas of their life. Suffering with depression is suffering! It is not a small thing ("*Just get over it*"); it might not respond to your most sincere efforts to resist ("*Just try harder*"); it is not something to hide or be ashamed of ("What's wrong with you?").
3. God's heart and the entire tone of the Bible toward people who are depressed is one of tremendous compassion and empathy—not of stern disapproval. He reaches out to embrace us, not to wag His finger at us.
4. God sent His Son, Jesus Christ into the world to save us—to rescue, restore, and deliver us from every cause/effect/symptom of "wrongness" (John 3:16, Acts 10:38). His goal is to aid us, make us whole, and bring us to health and wellbeing.

SAMPLE SCRIPTURES AND TRUTHS ABOUT DEPRESSION

"Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence. O my God, my soul is in despair within me; therefore I remember You from the land of the Jordan..." ~Psalms 42:5-6

"When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your consolations delight my soul."
~Psalm 94:19

“Say to those with anxious heart, ‘Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; the recompense of God will come, but He will save you.’” ~Isaiah 35:4

“And the ransomed of the Lord will return and come with joyful shouting to Zion, with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” ~Isaiah 35:10

“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” ~Psalm 34:18

“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” ~Psalm 147:3

“For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; nor has He hidden His face from him; but when he cried to Him for help, He heard.” ~Psalm 22:24

“Look upon my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.” ~Psalm 25:18

“So the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed low and worshiped.” ~Exodus 4:31

“This is my comfort in my affliction; that Your word has revived me.” ~Psalm 119:50

“If Your law had not been my delight, then I would have perished in my affliction.” ~Psalm 119:92

“Judah has gone into exile under affliction and under harsh servitude; she dwells among the nations, but she has found no rest; all her pursuers have overtaken her in the midst of distress.” ~Lamentations 1:3

“I will go away and return to My place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek My face; in their affliction they will earnestly seek Me.” ~Hosea 5:15

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” ~2 Corinthians 1:3-4

“For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death,

and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us...” ~2 Corinthians 1:8-10

“He delivers the afflicted in their affliction, and opens their ear in time of oppression.” ~Job 36:15

“When they are diminished and bowed down through oppression, misery and sorrow, He pours contempt upon princes and makes them wander in a pathless waste. But He sets the needy securely on high away from affliction, and makes his families like a flock. The upright see it and are glad; but all unrighteousness shuts its mouth.” ~Psalms 107:39-42