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Eight Biblical Strategies for Counseling Depression

by Sam Williams on Monday, December 16, 2002

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The public media are filled with so-called experts. Whether on talk shows, help lines or even personal conversations with people who profess to know how to deal with depression, you're likely to hear pop-culture comments such as

- We now know that depression is a medical problem.
- Depression stems from an inability to love oneself.
- Depression always has a lack of self-esteem in the background.
- Depression is a result of irrational belief in self-defeating lies.
- Depression often results from demonic activity that oppresses our spirit.
- Depression comes from unresolved anger, hurt, loss, rejection, or deprivation.

Is depression a medical problem, a mental problem or a "me" problem? Confusion and frustration can grow out of the chorus of voices in the public square from people who claim to understand depression. Neuroscience and psychology offer many theories. Unfortunately, not all of them are based on facts and others are void of faith.

Depression is not simply a medical problem or a mental problem, depression often is a being human problem. While medical and emotional problems can and often do contribute to depression, for others this illness has very significant spiritual components.

What does the Bible say about depression? Proverbs 12:25 mentions it directly, "Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad" (NKJV). That's a good place to begin. In this little couplet God, via the wisdom of Solomon, provides both a diagnosis and prescription that can help people grow beyond depression. A heart full of anxiety is the culprit. A good word is the cure.

Jesus: A cure for depression

Jesus said, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). Like John the Baptist, we must say to depressed people, "Here is the Lamb of God!" (John 1:29).

In broad strokes, many Christians will overcome depression when they truly grasp some biblical foundations.

- *Realization of the hope we have in God.*

He encourages us to "call upon [Him] in the day of trouble; I will deliver you" (Psalm 50:15). Hopelessness is one of the hallmark symptoms of depression. The grace of God in Jesus Christ is the sum of all hope (Colossians 1:5-6, 23, 27; 1 Timothy 1:1). Paul, a man who had more than his share of tribulation and suffering, proclaimed, "We have placed our hope in Him that He will deliver us again" (2 Corinthians 1:10b).

- *Restoration of the joy of salvation.*

We live in a fallen world, one in which good things may come to an end. The tragic dimension of life will be present until the kingdom of God comes fully in Jesus' return. The joy of salvation comes from realizing, again and again, that our sins have been forgiven and that we will live forever with the eternally happy God, who desires that we share in His joy. We should never "get over" the gospel.

- *Active love for God and others.*

Love for God and others is essential because depressed people often find themselves sucked into a vortex of morbid self-involvement, which keeps them from following the heavenly prescription given by the Great Physician, the medicine that many depressed people need above all else (Matthew 22:36-40). When depressed people begin to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and demonstrate love for and to others, their depression often begins to evaporate.

Counseling strategies for depression

Here are some practical strategies for counseling the depressed. However, never assume there are no medical issues that need attention.

1. Describe the experience. Ask people to describe their experience of depression in vivid detail. People are different, so depression comes in many shapes and sizes.
2. Identify the causes. Depression often is not just something we have, it is something we do. Invite people to examine their own hearts with this question: If your depression could speak, what would it say? What does it say about you? To others? To God? Depression is an active experience and can result from many sources other than the physiological: guilt due to unconfessed sin, false guilt, misplaced shame, ungodly fears, suppressed bitterness or hatred, hopeless grieving, and unbiblical expectations.
3. Read and observe Scripture. Ask people with whom you work to study Psalms 42-43. How does the psalmist address God? What does he preach to himself?
4. Act on the truth. Explain that the road out of depression is often "by faith" for the first few weeks. Depressed people who come to Christian leaders for help first must accept the challenge of faithful obedience, even though they do not feel like it and are skeptical that anything will make a difference. Also, explain to them that progress out of the pit is step-by-step, bit-by-bit. Small, practical, consistent faith-based change occurs in the details.
5. Look at lifestyle. Evaluate and provide recommendations for lifestyle problems, such as overworking, lack of exercise, sleep difficulties, procrastination, unresolved stressors, absence of spiritual disciplines.
6. Resolve conflicts. Deal with troubled relationships, past or present.
7. Get to work. Assign active loving tasks performed for the benefit of others. Helping others can pull depressed people out of introversion and self-pity.
8. See a doctor. Refer depressed persons to a Christian physician to rule out physical causes if a physician has not been contacted already. Persons who are already taking multiple medications may need a physician's care to avoid further complications. Also consider referring depressed seniors and persons with serious medical conditions.

Robust faith, living hope and wholehearted love will combat and cure many - if not most - cases of depression

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