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Depression

What it is, what it looks like, and what you can do -

For many people...

the idea of “*Depression*” suggests they will have failed spiritually, mentally or emotionally, and so they say, “Not me!” But that’s not necessarily true!

Depression is different than discouragement or a short period of sadness. It’s more like a state of chronic sadness, self-criticism and hopelessness that **can’t be simply “shaken off” or defeated by sheer will power.** It can develop as a result of relentless discouragement, rejection or loneliness. It can come upon a person in response to ongoing fatigue, unresolved grief, self-pity, guilt or lingering bitterness. It can even occur in reaction to a single tragedy or traumatic experience, or appear in the aftermath of a number of cumulative traumas or losses. Some depressive episodes can be the result of too many high level stressors in a one’s life, *especially* if that person is not getting adequate rest, support from others, physical exercise, or time to talk about and debrief their life challenges. Some people are more vulnerable to this condition because there is a history of depression in the family, in their childhood or past, or because of a chemical imbalance: for some reason the body is not producing the right levels of norepinephrine or serotonin - chemicals necessary to proper brain functioning and emotional management.

Its antecedents or beginnings may vary, but its grip can be vicious in any case. It is the number one mental health issue affecting women, and may be near the top for men

as well, though many men manifest it differently: with episodes of anger, irritability and overall fatigue instead of withdrawal or obvious sadness. **It’s most common and recognizable symptoms are:**

- *A sad depressed mood almost every day, most of the day*
- *Loss of motivation, loss of interest in inability to enjoy normally important or pleasant activities*
- *Feeling hopeless (“things will never get better”), worthless, alone and disconnected*
- *Excessive guilt and self criticism*
- *Fatigue, feeling unusually tired, lethargic & w/o energy*
- *Hyper sensitivity to other’s words or criticism*
- *Increased emotionality, irritability, or feeling emotionally numb*
- *Significant increase or decrease in appetite w/weight gain or loss*
- *Inability to concentrate or maintain focus, uncharacteristic indecisiveness*
- *Social disinterest, tendency toward self-isolation*
- *Sleep disturbance (either insomnia or excessive sleepiness)*
- *Excessive worry or anxiety*

Feeling occasionally sad and discouraged is obviously just part of being human. If you’re struggling with feeling deeply discouraged, or intensely sad, you’re not alone. Jeremiah, Elijah, David, Ezra, Nehemiah, Solomon, Daniel

and Paul, Charles Spurgeon, and many others all had their own battles with such feelings. Thinking that this is “something that only affects the weak-minded” would be naive.

Why can some people be placed in what most of us might consider terribly difficult or stressful conditions and still remain content, or even thrive, while others feel overwhelmed? Why are some prone to complain or find fault, & become mentally locked onto “the way things should be”?

It's like this... Solomon knew what he was talking about when he said, “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.”

Certain thinking patterns make us more vulnerable to depression. These are ways of thinking and perceiving situations, people, and circumstances that have become so frequent or routine that they have now become habit. They are also linked closely to our *aptitude for contentment*.

This is critical for many reasons, but one of them is that **we will generally see what we're looking for**, in others, in ourselves, in life situations. If we're looking for flaws, mistakes, failures, or shortcomings, that's what we'll see most, and remain blind to the bigger pic-



ture. Our negative or distorted (& therefore inaccurate) cognitive set or “mental bent” can bring us to view the world incorrectly. It's like looking through a pair of glasses fitted with an incorrect prescription. Nothing looks quite right.



Here's a few of the thinking errors we must identify within ourselves in order to effectively combat depression:

- 1. “If I share what I'm going through I'll just bring others down too. I can't become a burden to them.”** This isn't true. Allow others to help you- “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Gal. 6:2) Your vulnerability may help someone else to open up as well.
- 2. Negatively interpreting others' words and actions prematurely,** without giving them the opportunity to explain their intentions or motives. Instead, gather more info before making a judgement.
- 3. Devaluing or deprecating/belittling thoughts (or “self-talk”) about a) yourself -** “Boy, you sure are dumb!” **or b) the future** - “I don't know why I even try. Nothing will ever get any better. There's no hope. This is terrible, I can't handle it any longer!” Feelings of loneliness, discouragement, frustration, weariness, anger, guilt, and fear are common to us all, but don't accept every thought or idea that may accompany those difficult emotions.
- 4. Consider whether you are comparing yourself with others** who you think are doing better, better off, or treated

better than you. You may want to re-read our letter on the subject of contentment from last November. Comparing yourself with others can become a habit that will ALWAYS lead you downward into depression and bitterness.

Depression can be a very **serious** condition. It can deteriorate every aspect and relationship in a person's life, and it can be life threatening if left untreated too long.

So what can you do about it if you feel yourself slipping downward? **Here are a few things that are essential to overcoming depression:**

- **Admit to yourself any chronic or lingering negative feelings, pain, or guilt** that you may be suppressing, denying, or avoiding. Are there past losses, transitions or traumas you haven't fully acknowledged?
- **Identify what you are telling yourself regularly** - about yourself, others close to you, God, and your life situation. **Ask someone else to help you** recognize where there may be incorrect/distorted perspectives in your thinking.
- Begin to **screen your thoughts for any habitual self-criticism and unrealistic self expectations.** You may very well be blind to these and so you'll probably need to help of another person to see them.
- **Avoid self-isolation**, even if you don't feel much like being with others. Trying to process your thoughts and feelings alone is ALWAYS a mistake when depressed!
- **Take care of your body:** Get some exercise, & try to get at least 8 hours of sleep each night. Also be careful about the amount of sugar you take in. This will usually help significantly.
- **Seek help now** - if this is **impairing your ability to function, study, or carry out daily responsibilities.**
- You may need to **see a doctor.** Be willing to *consider* how an anti-depressant medication may be a great help to you in your recovery. It may not solve whatever sent you into the pit you've slipped into, but it may be the rope you need to start climbing out!
- You may find it helpful to **listen to noted author and speaker, Pastor Tommy Nelson**, talk candidly about his battle with depression. He talks about medication as well. Here's the web address - <http://www.dts.edu/media/play/?MediaItemID=6db48678-0bfc-4b68-bb02-578cb5f41c70>
- **Get plenty of sunshine.** *This is important* - to help your body get the sunlight it needs for good mental health.
- **Women, be intentional about spending time with other women that you trust. This is a vital social need you have as a woman. If you neglect this, your vulnerability to depression and other mental health crises will increase.**
- **Depression can overtake you simply as the result of not having enough “Margin” or down time in your life.** You can crash your body and mind's “hard-drive” by *giving yourself* too much stress. That's a fact.



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