

Finding a Way Out of Depression

*“For Your
lovingkindness
toward me
is great,
and You
have
delivered
my soul
from the
depths
of Sheol”
(Psalm
86:13).*

When you have lost a love one, a dark mood can settle on you like the blackest of nights. Nothing can brighten the shadows. A heavy cloud covers your life. The night is long; you think morning will never come.

The darkness that infects the heart of the bereaved is called “depression.” “Depression” is the state of feeling “blue” or sad. While losing a loved one may lead to fear or anger or guilt, you will almost certainly, sooner or later, experience depression. Therefore, it is important to understand what depression is and how it can be remedied.

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Depression is common among those who have experienced loss. It is natural and understandable to feel sad when someone or something you love is taken from you. The state of depression which follows the initial shock of your loved one’s death is the mind’s way of insulating itself against further hurt while it adjusts to the reality of the loss it has experienced. A person who is depressed acts the way an animal does when it withdraws from a fight to lick its wounds.

Often, depression is connected with loneliness, discouragement, and a sense of failure. It may or may not be accompanied by other emotions—such as fear or anger or guilt—but it will almost always manifest itself in feelings of despair and hopelessness.

The depression connected with grief has been described as follows:

“What’s the use?” “How can I go on?” “Life is the pits.”

You hurt so much. Sometimes you just sit. The sadness seems heavy. It is difficult to concentrate, be with other people, enjoy things. You feel a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. At times you have suicidal thoughts. (“How can I go on without him/her?”)

Depression can also manifest itself physically: appetite loss, troubled sleep, fatigue, headaches, backaches, stomach distress.¹

People can experience different degrees of depression. Those who are severely depressed may need to see a doctor or a counselor; sometimes medi-

¹Jerry Braza and Kathleen Braza, *Coping with War and Its Aftermath* (Hawthorne, N.J.: Career Press, 1991), 51.

cines called “anti-depressants” can be prescribed for the problem. The feelings of helplessness and hopelessness experienced by a depressed individual may be so extreme as to lead to suicide.²

Depression usually manifests itself not so much in what the depressed person does as in what he does *not* do.³ He is likely to feel like doing nothing; he may seem to have no energy or motivation for getting out of bed in the morning, eating, going to work, or going to church. My wife’s mother looked after her ailing husband for fifteen years until he died; not long afterward, she moved in with her 101-year-old mother and looked after her for about five months until her mother died. Later, when my wife asked her if she felt depressed after the deaths of her husband and her mother, she said, “I’ve never been depressed a day in my life! I just don’t feel like doing anything.” “But, Mother,” my wife replied, “that is depression.”

WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT DEPRESSION?

After the loss of someone close to you, depression is to be expected; but it should not be allowed to linger. What can you do to overcome depression?

Do Not Feel Guilty

First, tell yourself that you need not feel guilty because you are depressed. As with the feelings of fear and anger, sadness is a natural reaction. We experience loneliness and depression because that is how God made us! Even though the Bible says, “Rejoice . . . always” (Philippians 4:4), great men of the Bible often felt disappointed, discouraged, and depressed. Elijah was so depressed that he wanted to die. God did not punish him for being depressed;⁴ instead, He met the prophet’s needs (1 Kings 19:1–18). God does not count feelings of sadness as sin.

²Obviously, not all depressed people commit suicide, but many people who commit suicide are victims of depression.

³While this statement is true of adults, it is not true of children, who are likely to misbehave when they are depressed.

⁴Bill Flatt, *Since You Asked* (Abilene, Tex.: Quality Publications, 1983), 145–46. Paul spoke of the “daily pressure [or anxiety] [he felt for] the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:28), and Jesus was “grieved and distressed” (Matthew 26:37).

Expect to Get Over It

Second, expect the depression to end. Depression is a natural consequence of a serious loss. While experiencing it, you may feel stuck in a night that will never end; but you need to recognize that, just as morning comes, so your depression will eventually dissipate. You can be comforted, even in the midst of darkness, by thinking, “This is normal and temporary!”⁵

Take Care of Yourself

Third, to find your way out of your depression, take care of yourself. When Elijah was depressed, God provided him with food and drink and encouraged him to rest (1 Kings 19:5–8). If you are depressed, you need to take care of your physical needs or have someone to look after you, as God looked after Elijah. Evidence indicates that proper nutrition and regular exercise can speed the recovery from depression.⁶

In addition, people who are depressed are likely not to worry about their appearance. They may feel that the tasks of taking a bath, putting on clean clothes, fixing their hair, and (for some women) putting on makeup are just too much trouble. They lack the energy and the motivation to perform such activities.

To overcome your depression, resist the tendency to neglect your appearance. *Even if you do not feel like doing so*, get up at an appropriate time. Dress attractively, and brush or comb your hair. A woman should put on the makeup she usually wears, and a man should shave as he routinely does. By making yourself look as if you are feeling better, you will begin to feel better; you will begin to feel less depressed.

Seek Help

Fourth, in a time of depression, seek help. Seek help from others. While you are depressed, you will not feel like being around people. However, you must try to overcome your resistance to human companionship. God made us to be social creatures. Sharing your problems with

⁵If, after a reasonable time—and no one can say for sure what a reasonable time is—you do not recover from depression and resume your normal daily functions, you may need to see a doctor or a counselor about the problem.

⁶Nancy Elliot, “The Abilenian: You have the power to change,” *Abilene Reporter-News* (20 December 2006): 5.

others will make those problems more manageable.⁷

Above all, seek help from God. God can and will help, comfort, and strengthen you. Confess your feelings frankly to your Father, and He will enable you to find reasons to live again.

Reinvest Your Life

Fifth, overcome depression by developing new interests and attachments. Harold Hazelip gave the example of a thirty-six-year old woman who unexpectedly lost her husband and became severely depressed. Her whole life had been tied up in her husband and his ambitions. Hazelip wrote, "Before his death, her life was full. A part of her has been ripped away, leaving a terrible vacuum. There are no more dreams."⁸ What can a person do in such a situation?

A counselor might tell a woman in these circumstances that, while she loved her husband very much, she must actively try to break out of her depression. In order to do this, she must discover an attachment that will make her want to live again. She will always treasure memories of her husband, but she has to refocus on something else.

The most powerful weapon against depression is "a strong attachment that turns our attention away from ourselves." To avoid living in depression, you need "a sense of self-worth," "a relationship with God," and "a relationship with others."⁹

The person who is depressed centers his thoughts on himself; all he can think of is "me, my, mine": "I lost my wife; I am so unhappy; why did this happen to me?"¹⁰ Such feelings are excusable for a time.¹¹ However, to help end

⁷"Talking it [depression] through with others is extremely therapeutic" (Jim Hughes, "Common Grief Responses," *Good Grief and How to Experience It*, Class Notes, Ministries with Senior Adults, Abilene Christian University, 9–13 January 2006, 9).

⁸Harold Hazelip, *Lord, Help Me When I'm Hurting* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), 113.

⁹*Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁰It is in this time of depression and withdrawal that one feels sorry for himself. Irreversible loss has been sustained, and it was a personal loss. "My loved one has died. It hurts ME deeply. Part of MY life has changed. I don't know what to do. Notice the words: I—ME—MY. These are the pronouns of grief" (Earl A. Grollman, *Living When a Loved One Has Died* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1977], 12).

¹¹After losing a loved one, "you are going to be selfish," in that "you will think of yourself almost all of the time";

depression, you must broaden your attention. You must begin thinking of something or someone other than yourself. The physical and emotional energy formerly devoted to a lost loved one needs to be redirected. If you will get busy with worthwhile activities, depression will probably begin to disappear.

When Elijah was depressed and feeling sorry for himself, God said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9, 13), as if to say, "You have been inactive long enough; it is time for you to go back to work." Then God gave Elijah a course of action, a positive task to accomplish (1 Kings 19:15–18). When Elijah answered God's call and began again to devote himself to God's work, he triumphed over his depression.

Focus on Hope for the Future

Sixth, when you are depressed, try to focus on the future. One characteristic of the depressed person is that he sees no hope for the future. He may—with either regret or enjoyment—relive the past, but he takes no pleasure in the future. His hopes and dreams died with his loved one. To begin finding a way out of your depression, you must rediscover hope for the future.

How can you, in the pit of despair, find hope? For the Christian, the answer is obvious. If your loved one was a Christian, you have hope regarding his future; you can expect him to go to heaven; you can believe that for him "to depart and be with Christ, . . . is very much better" (Philippians 1:23). The expression "he is better off" or "he is in a better place" is not an empty phrase; rather, it is a matter of faith, a belief as sure as one's belief that the sun will come up tomorrow. Such hope unlocks the gates of the dungeon of depression.

Further, if you are a Christian, you can look forward to seeing your loved one again in heaven. Jesus has prepared a place for you to spend eternity with Him (John 14:1–3), and there you can rejoin your loved one. You can both be with all the saints throughout eternity.

In any case, you can believe that "all things . . . work together for good" (Romans 8:28) and that God can and will be with you as you face the future

but "this turning to your own needs is not selfishness—it is survival" (Doug Manning, *Don't Take My Grief Away: What to Do When You Lose a Loved One* [Philadelphia: In-Sight Books, Harper & Row, 1979], 78–79).

(Hebrews 13:5, 6). While it may be difficult to believe these truths in a time of grief, with God's help you can live again. You can look to the future with optimism because God can help you to be and do all that He has in mind for you (Philippians 4:13).

CONCLUSION

These suggestions will be difficult to put into practice. Usually, one who is suffering from depression does not feel like doing anything! How can you find the strength to follow these six suggestions? You have already taken one step in that direction by studying this lesson! Knowing that you have taken that one step may encourage you to continue by taking the next step, and then the next, on the road to recovery.

Faith is the answer to fear, forgiveness is the antidote for anger, grace is the remedy for guilt,

and hope is the best medicine for depression. When you are depressed because of loss, you need to believe that God can give you hope! Depression is like a mass of clouds darkening your days. While you must live under those clouds for now, the sun is still shining above them. Although they may seem stationary, the clouds are really moving—slowly perhaps, but moving nevertheless—and the sun will eventually appear.¹² You will get through the darkness. With God's help, you can find your way out of your depression. The sun will shine on you again, especially if you let the Son live in your life.

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¹²These figures of speech were adapted from Granger E. Westberg, *Good Grief* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 30–32.

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