

Dealing with the Dark Times

Helpful insights about depression from counselor Ingrid Trobisch

By Ingrid Trobisch with Ann Allred

“I am so weary.”
“This is a really low point.”
“It’s a dry and lonely period.”
“I’m not interested in people.”
“I cannot imagine ever loving again.”
“I know God must fill my deepest needs but just now it’s not working!”
“I’m in a rebellion.”
“My emotions are screaming.”
“I feel nothing.”

In our travels around the world, my late husband, Walter, and I were struck by the number of depressed Christians we met. These short excerpts, taken from letters my co-workers and I have received, show a little of the despondency that Christians experience. These people don’t lack faith nor spiritual depth. They’re sincere believers living in close fellowship with the Lord. Nor in honesty could we exclude ourselves from their ranks, for every person has experienced depression at some time or another.

Knowing this, Walter took a closer look at depression and recorded his findings in a little book entitled *Love Yourself* (InterVarsity Press). Together we came to see that there can be hope in the midst of depression and a way to avoid those prolonged dark periods.

What causes depression? At the root of every depression is the feeling of having lost something. It could be disappointment in the loss of hope, bereavement in the loss of a loved one, or loneliness in the loss of fellowship. (There is an age depression with the loss of youth; a retirement depression with the loss of work; a moving depression with the loss of a familiar locale; an overwork depression with the loss of physical and mental reserves.) And there are the countless depressive moods for which it is difficult to find a reason, except for the general feeling of losing out on life.

The Bible, that tremendously human book, tells of those who had these feelings. The one who prayed **Psalm 31** for instance, certainly knew what depression was:

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also.
For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. (vv. 9-10)

The Psalmist well expresses the feelings of being spent, consumed, “eaten up.” What psychosomatic medicine has only recently discovered the Psalmist experienced long ago: Grief of the soul means grief of the body.

Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbors, and an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. For I hear the whispering of many-- terror on every side! -- as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life. (vv. 11, 13)

The Psalmist feels threatened and trapped. Everyone is against him. No one understands him, accepts him, or loves him. He has no more strength to defend himself or ambition to seek friendship. He is hopelessly alone.

I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. (v. 12)

The Psalmist cannot contain himself, hold himself together. He is being poured out; everything is flowing out of him and he is losing, losing, losing.

The Psalmist had hit bottom. Yet for him, and for any other Christian who has been in his place, there is reassurance. God realizes that we have these feelings and he understands us when we do. Christ also experienced these emotions. There were moments of mild depression when he was dismayed with the lack of faith in his followers, with their slowness in discerning the heart of his message (Luke 8:25 and 18:8b). Looking down over the city of Jerusalem, before his triumphant entry, he grew even more despondent. The ignorance of the people and the gravity of his mission overwhelmed him (Luke 19:41, 42). Finally, in the garden of Gethsemane Christ experienced the depths of despair. “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (Matthew 26:38). He begged God to spare him from the approaching ordeal. And he desperately chastised his disciples for being unable to support him.

If Christ lived triumphantly despite depression then we need not be defeated by it. Many men of great faith have had depressions: the apostle Paul, Martin Luther, Soren Kierkegaard, the French philosopher Pascal, and the Russian writer Dostoevski, to mention only a few. All of them were sincere Christians.

Martin Luther, who was deprived of warmth and love as a child, wrestled his whole life long with self-acceptance and depression. To help himself when in the throes of deep doubts; he scrawled in large print on his desk, “I have been baptized.” He also compiled this...

List of helps for overcoming depression:

1. **Avoid being alone.** Luther states that isolation is poison for the depressed person, for through this the devil attempts to keep him in his power. “Talk among yourselves, so that I know I am surrounded by people,” requested Luther in one of his “table talks.” He supposedly said this at a moment when he felt down.
2. **Seek out people or situations which generate joy.** Joy is always pleasing to God, even though it may not always be of a religious origin. Enjoying a good play or movie or reading a humorous book can be a means by which the burden of depression can be lightened.
3. **Sing and make music.** Here Luther emphasizes that a person should make music of his own, rather than simply listen to it. Again, he refers not only to religious music here, but to music in general. God is really the listener, and we give him joy by our playing and singing, a joy that returns to lighten our own heavy hearts.

4. **Dismiss heavy thoughts.** Luther warns us of the danger of becoming engrossed by gloomy or despairing thoughts which tend to keep us awake at night or assail us the first thing in the morning. He advises us either to laugh at the devil or to scorn him, but by no means to give in to him on this matter.

5. **Rely upon the promises of Scripture.** They encourage our mind to think positively. Especially helpful are the verses known by heart because they have helped us in a specific situation. To put it in the words of Psalm 23, they are like rods and staffs comforting us when walking through the shadow of death.

6. **Seek consolation from others.** In a state of depression we often make a mountain out of a molehill. A friend, however, can see things in the right perspective and recognizes the positive side to which we are temporarily blind. Just as it is impossible to pull ourselves out of a swamp, in the same way we need the assistance of others to rescue us from the grip of despair.

7. **Praise and thanksgiving.** These are powerful weapons against depression. It helps to make a list of the things one is thankful for and then praise God for them audibly.

8. **Think of other depressed people.** This is a rather surprising suggestion from Luther, but it does make sense. It shakes the person out of his self-centered sorrow in which it is all too easy to believe that no one else in the world has suffered as much as he.

9. **Exercise patience with yourself.** The word exercise is important here and can also suggest the idea of practicing or training. Physical exercise is also very helpful.

10. **Believe in the blessing of depression.** There can also be a positive, fruitful side to depression. It should not always be looked upon as something negative. Walter and I were once deeply comforted when one of our counselors told us, "All people of worth and value have depressions." It takes a certain inner substance and depth of mind to be able to have depressions. Children, for instance, do not normally experience depression. Their mental and emotional development has not reached the stage to permit it. Shallow, superficial people also seldom have depression. Many times when faced with painful situations, they will simply cut the thread of life. The philosopher Landsberg says, "Often a man kills himself, because he is unable to despair."

The German word for depression is "Schwermut." This means the courage to be heavy-hearted, the courage to live with what is difficult. I can think of no better example of this than the life of Marvella Bayh, late wife of former Indiana Senator Birch Bayh. Facing a continuous struggle with terminal cancer she nevertheless asserted, "I have never, ever said I was dying of cancer. I am living with the knowledge that I have cancer. And my life is rather normal."

Normal? Listen to this excerpt from her journal after she had visited several doctors and listened to one prognosis after another; been encouraged then discouraged; been advised and re-advised: "By the time you sit and listen to all this...you feel like some duck that's been held under water until it is just about dead, and thrown out on the grass. And you have to just lie there until you get a little strength back."

Two months before her death she wrote: "I think that I would have gone stark raving mad this year, faced with the medical report I was handed, if God had not come to me. He has been my rock, my anchor, and my salvation. If I have been able to survive emotionally...God has all the credit. He

has reached out to me - often through other people doing his work here on earth. (Marvella, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich)

That brings up another point: **What can we do to help others experiencing depression?** First it must be clear that the Christian's function is that of emotional and spiritual supporter. There are cases of deep depression which are pathological illnesses and in no instance would attempts at "healing the soul" be of benefit here. Someone who is extremely neurotic or mentally ill can be done irreparable harm if he is led to believe he is ill simply because his faith is weak. Instead, he should be encouraged to seek medical help and to persevere in his treatment.

But in the case of general depression where the layman can help, clues can be taken from Luther's suggestions.

1. **Spend time with the person.** Let him sense that you do not feel "put upon" but truly want to be with him. One Christian woman who still experiences extreme periods of depression wrote: "The care given by other people when my life was of no value to me signified that they valued it more. When life itself is a burden, and I despair of holding on until the end, I remember that someone else has prayed, 'Lord, you hold her.' Words may help, but at times they have no effect at all; what does penetrate is an attitude of deeply felt respect and love. Perhaps the greatest single thing that Christians can do for a depressed person is to give him a sense of the value of his own life."

2. **Listen to what the person says but do not sympathize with him.** Instead, encourage him to look outside himself. If you've read *The Diary of Anne Frank* you'll remember how Anne practiced this advice on herself. Whenever she became despondent about being cooped up in such a small apartment with little privacy and not much hope for the future, she reminded herself of the circumstances of Jewish people on the outside. It quickly brought her life into clearer perspective.

3. **Engage in physical and mental recreation.** How about a good game of Scrabble, dominos, bowling, or miniature golf? Maybe the person would enjoy a walk together, or a swim. A change of environment for a few hours can be a help. The possibilities are as great as your imagination.

4. **Read God's Word together and praise Him.** This will help the person to relate his depression to God. "Worldly grief" produces death. On the other hand - **believing in the blessing of depression means recognizing that God uses it to fulfill His plans.**

Tim LaHaye once said, "People are like steel; they are soft unless tested." No one likes to suffer. No one wants pain. Yet it is depression working upon us that produces change. And realizing we are held by God, we can find the courage to love ourselves with our depression. It reflects a depth of faith which the apostle Paul expressed in this paradoxical statement:

"As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: ...as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing"
(2 Corinthians 6:4, 10).

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Retyped by Tina Tripp – January 2009