



Dealing with Depression

Help and hope for when you or someone you love struggles with depression.



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Introduction

Trying to Understand

By Caryn Rivadeneira



A few weeks ago, in a state of first-trimester exhaustion and despair, I Googled *pregnancy exhaustion* to seek confirmation that I really was just incredibly tired and not losing my mind. I was struck by one of the things I came across. In a Q&A column on a popular pregnancy website, an OB talked about how often in the early stages of pregnancy the physical and mental exhaustion can lead to a depression of sorts.



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Trying to Understand

Reading this helped make sense of why I had recently told my husband that my new dream in life was to stay in bed all day, every day, and do nothing and see no one. But more importantly, it shed light on what many of my friends and family who've experienced depression of one level or another must have gone through.

To be honest, before my brief walk through the dark world of apathy and exhaustion, I had a hard time wrapping my head—and my heart—around depression. While I understood the physiological as well as emotional elements of it, a part of me always wondered what exactly it is these people I love are dealing with.

I know I'm not the only one who's felt this way. If you suffer from depression or if someone you love does, you've probably run into people like me. We try to understand, but don't quite get it. This can be especially true in Christian circles, where the gamut of understanding runs from those who view depression as a spiritual crisis to be treated with prayer only to those who view it as something to be medicated and gotten over. That's why you'll find this packet so helpful. In it, we've included tons of great articles that not only deal with the why's and how's of depression, but the deeper heart issues that can help you or your loved ones understand more fully what depression is all about.

Blessings,

Caryn Rivadeneira

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International



kyria

Leader's Guide

How to use “Dealing with Depression” for a group study



“Dealing with Depression” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. **Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
2. **Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
3. **Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
4. **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
5. **When working through the “Reflect” questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
6. **End the session in prayer.**



Surprised by Depression



Discovering my enemy had a name turned my marriage around.

By Karen Scalf Linamen

My husband came home from work and found me, as usual, huddled in one corner of the sofa listening to the clock tick. Our five-year-old daughter, Kaitlyn, was playing Barbies by herself in the cold kitchen. No smells of dinner beckoned from the oven. In fact, crusty dishes from yesterday and the day before filled the counter and sink.



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Larry spent several minutes picking up the worst of the clutter, then prepared a quick supper of canned soup and crackers. Over dinner he tried to engage me in conversation, asking about a book deadline I was facing. I told him I was still lagging behind, offering no further explanation.

After dinner, I felt too exhausted to help clean up. I was relieved when it was finally time to put Kaitlyn to bed. I lay down next to her under the guise of keeping her company until she fell asleep. But in reality, I couldn't wait to close my eyes and give in to sleep myself.

I had been exhausted for months. I slept long hours every night—and during the day as well. In fact, at any given time of day or night, I found myself able to sit on the couch, close my eyes, and drop immediately into the deepest of sleeps.

I wasn't completely sure what was happening to me. All I knew was that something was terribly wrong. But perhaps the most frightening development of all was that I didn't care.

Clueless in Texas

I had always been an optimistic person with lots of friends. I'd been married for 10 years and had a successful husband, a beautiful daughter, and the writing career of which I'd always dreamed.

I should have been on top of the world. Instead, for nearly a year I had been unable to cope with even the simplest of tasks. I seemed to have virtually stopped functioning.





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I never cooked or cleaned house, and I went days without changing my clothes, combing my hair, or brushing my teeth. I was unable to concentrate or think clearly, and even the smallest decision left me feeling overwhelmed.

When I wasn't feeling overwhelmed, I wasn't feeling anything. Not angry or sad or happy or hopeful. Nothing. It was as though all of my emotions had simply clicked into the *off* position. Typically, a passionate person given to zany brainstorms and can-do dreams, I suddenly couldn't think of a single thing in my life to look forward to.

Larry later told me that he just figured I was under pressure with a book deadline. He assumed I was too busy writing to take care of myself or our home. His solution at the time was to do more things around the house, to try to pick up the slack. He now realizes he should have been asking more questions instead of just washing more dishes. But he'd never seen anyone suffering from depression before. He didn't know how to respond.

As I continued to spiral, Larry tried on several occasions to draw me out of my shell. I remember one evening in particular.

"Remember how you always said you wanted to start a magazine?" he asked. "When we got married it was all you talked about. I know I said at the time it would cost too much money, but I've been thinking and I know you could do it. It would be worth the investment. What do you think?"





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He tried other tactics, dangling all the dreams that had driven me in the past like a carrot, but nothing caught my eye. He even volunteered to quit the job that he loved—the job that had prompted our recent relocation from California to Texas—and move our little family back to California where I could be near friends and family.

"I'll do anything, Karen," he pleaded. "Just tell me what I can do to help."

I began to cry. "I think we need counseling. Please go with me to counseling."

He winced and shook his head. "I'll do anything, Karen. Anything, but that."

Looking back, Larry says that he should have agreed to counseling when I asked. "Somehow I'd gotten the idea that counseling was for folks who were socially unbalanced or who didn't have their act together," Larry says.

Of course, I also should have gone for counseling for myself, with or without my husband.

But around that time, I made an appointment to see a family doctor in our area, hoping he might be able to recommend some vitamins to help me feel better. Instead, he gave me a checklist to fill out. He evaluated my answers, then said the three magic words that brought both terror and hope into my life: "You're clinically depressed."





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Depression is a scary word. And yet a wave of relief surged over my numb and exhausted spirit. My enemy had a name. And if it had a name, maybe it had a cure. I felt the first stirrings of a fragile hope. Maybe I could lick this thing yet.

The doctor handed me a prescription. He also gave me some advice: "Exercise for half an hour, three to five times a week. As much good as the medication will do, the exercise will do that much or more."

I thought Prozac and sweat made an odd combination. I know now that it's not so strange after all. Long-term depression can occur as chemistry in the brain gets out of whack. Think of a swimming pool: With the right balance of chemicals, a pool stays clear and clean. But when the chemistry gets out of balance, the pool becomes cloudy and algae-filled, and it can take months to get things balanced and clear again.

Both medication and exercise impact brain chemistry in a positive way. Medication can replenish serotonin, while exercise releases feel-good endorphins.

I wish I had listened to my doctor. Instead, I only followed his advice for about a week—my concentration was so bad I never remembered to take my pills.

As a result, my downhill slide continued. One day I was driving on the freeway when I zoned out and began to drift into the next lane of traffic. A horn blast from the car on my left jolted me back into reality. I jerked the steering wheel hard to the right, overcompensating and





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sending my little Honda into a spiral. I spun across three lanes of cars and ended up facing oncoming traffic as I slid sideways onto the muddy shoulder of the freeway.

I sat stunned for several minutes until, trembling, I got the car turned around and headed home. I didn't tell my husband about the close call; I just went home and went to bed. It just didn't seem to matter anymore.

At the Crossroads

That June my daughter and I traveled to California to spend a month with my parents. Perhaps it was the change of scenery. Perhaps it was seeing my parent's shock over my numb and lifeless state. Perhaps it was the fact that my folks dragged me with them every morning for a brisk walk. (At first, I was hard-pressed to walk 10 minutes. Before long, we were up to 45!)

Whatever the reason, a little of my stupor began to lift, and I knew I had to do something drastic—though not necessarily positive—to reclaim my life.

Larry remembers just getting home from work when he got my phone call. I told him I was at the end of my rope and that I wasn't coming back to Texas. "It took me 20 minutes to throw a few things in a knapsack and hit the road," Larry says. "I drove through the night and the next day as well."

By the next afternoon, he was on the doorstep of my parent's house. He didn't know what was happening to me. All he knew was that he loved me and that he was willing to do anything to save me and his marriage.





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This time when the topic of counseling came up, we were both in agreement. We would return together to Texas. And we would work together to get whatever professional help was necessary.

Not a Quick Fix

We went to counseling for two years. Sometimes we went together and worked on some of the issues in our marriage that led to my depression. Other times I went by myself and sorted through layers of anger and hurt that, compressed and unresolved, had robbed me of my zest for life.

I went back on Prozac. My battle strategy was two-fold: I turned to counseling to deal with my past issues while relying on medication to correct the resulting chemical imbalances that had kept me there.

There were many days I thought we were getting nowhere. I alternated between depression and anger. Some days I felt worse than ever. Still, I kept my appointments with my counselor. I cried. I wrote in my journal. I went for walks, sometimes to exercise, sometimes just to reflect.

I wish I could say that I spent hours in prayer, but the truth is that I felt too numb to pray. I remember sitting in my parked car one night and sobbing, "Jesus, I can't take it anymore. You've got to do something. I don't care what or how, but you've got to help me, please!" Other than that, I felt too wounded to pray. I know now that Jesus hears us even when we're hurting too badly to say the words.





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Late one night I stepped out onto the back porch to feed our golden retriever, and I suddenly had this urge to run.

Our house sits on an acre, and the backyard is bordered by evergreens that loom tall and black when the sun goes down. Chased by our dog, I ran toward the trees at the back of the lot. Overhead, the stars glimmered like diamonds against black velvet, and the cold January night air stung my face and arms and lungs. The moon, hung like a silver earring in the sky, illuminated my crazy path as I ran circles in the grass. I stopped then and watched my breath hang misty and white before me. I smelled promise in the air. I heard the panting of my dog beside me.

That was the first time I knew, *really* knew, that I was going to be okay. Looking back, my wild midnight run was marked by an awakening of my five senses, but it was also marked by the first stirrings of hope and joy that I had experienced in a very long time.

There's Good News and Bad News ...

Unattended problems in my marriage led to my depression, but in an odd twist of events, my depression may have helped save my marriage. After two years of counseling, I felt more alive than I had in a long time, and Larry and I were closer than ever before. It felt, in fact, like a new marriage. I teased him, saying, "My first marriage was horrible. But my second marriage is great!"

The bad news is that people who have experienced clinical depression are at great risk of experiencing it again. Indeed, twice in the past eight years, I have felt myself beginning to slide back into the abyss that claimed my life for several years.





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Fortunately, Larry and I are better equipped this time around to recognize the symptoms before things get out of hand. One night I went to him and said, "The depression is right behind me and it's gaining ground. I'm feeling overwhelmed and I'm slipping. Please help me."

We brainstormed together and came up with five significant changes to reduce stress in our lives. Another time we turned back to counseling.

Marriages have struggles. So do individuals. At least in my life, these problems were very treatable. The real culprit was denial. Larry and I both wish we had obtained help sooner for both our marriage and my depression.

In my writing and speaking, I sometimes talk about depression. As a result, I get emails and letters all the time from women saying, "What a relief! I thought I was the only one going through this."

I always write back with this message: "There is joy and hope and life and laughter after depression. But you can't beat it on your own. Get smart. Get help. Get well. I survived The Great Depression—I know that you can, too."

Are You Depressed?

The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that 80 percent of people with clinical depression can now be successfully treated, usually with medication, psychotherapy, or a combination of both. Use the following checklist to determine if you or someone you know is suffering from clinical depression. If five or more of the following symptoms have lasted for more than two weeks, call a doctor as soon as possible:





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- Feelings of sadness and/or irritability
- Loss of interest or pleasure once enjoyed
- Changes in weight or appetite
- Changes in sleeping pattern
- Feeling guilty, hopeless, or worthless
- Inability to concentrate, remember things, or make decisions
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Restlessness or decreased activity noticed by others
- Thoughts of suicide or death

For more information, call the National Mental Health Association at 800-228-1114 or visit their web site at www.nmha.org.

Karen Linamen is a frequent speaker and the author of eight books, including, Just Hand Over the Chocolate and No One Will Get Hurt (Revell). This article first appeared in the Fall 2000 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.





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Reflect

- *What parts of Karen's story can you relate to? What did she do that might help with your own depression?*
- *She writes that her depression saved her marriage. What are ways you can see dealing with depression actually having a positive impact on your life?*



‘What’s Wrong with Him?’

How to know if mental illness is affecting your spouse.

By Jim Killam

Look around you. At work, at church. Chances are very good you’ll see someone who’s battling mental illness. Maybe you only need to look as far as the other side of the bed—or the mirror.





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'What's Wrong with Him?'

Many Christians don't figure that mental illness could affect their marriages. But it does—in about the same proportions as with the general population. Each year, more than one in five Americans suffers from a clearly diagnosable mental disorder. And, Christian therapists add, more couples need to confront the whole issue rather than assume it's solely a spiritual problem.

Psychiatrist Ken Phillips treats many Christians who at one time thought a solid faith made them invulnerable to mental illness. Phillips is founder and medical director of Alliance Clinical Associates, a Christian mental health center in Wheaton, Illinois. He points to three red flags in determining whether a person needs psychological help: degree, or severity, of the problem; duration of the problem; and level of disability inflicted.

To examine the issue of mental illness in Christian life, here are the true stories of three people: Dennis, Linda, and Maggie.

Dennis' Story

Dennis and his wife, Pat, had worked for much of their adult lives as missionaries in the Caribbean, where they ran a Christian radio station. After years of service, the time came to close and sell the station.

At about that time, Dennis started feeling strange pains. He'd battled chronic back trouble for years, but this was different. Now the pain had spread. His stomach and abdomen hurt. His arms and hands tingled sometimes. His skin was flush on his face, neck, and chest. Sleep was hard to come by. Some days, the pain was so bad he couldn't sit up for more than 10 minutes at a time.





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Two neurologists came up with no definite answers but prescribed various pain medications. When those created more problems than they solved, Dennis was hospitalized to straighten out his medications. Soon he felt better and went home. A month later he was back in the hospital.

This time, a third neurologist, who doubled as a psychiatrist, saw him.

"He took one look at me and he said, 'You're depressed,'" Dennis says.

Pat had suspected something, especially since things got worse physically for Dennis as the radio station didn't sell. "I saw some indications that it was partially psychological," she says, "but you don't tell your husband, 'I think it's all in your head.' He appeared to be handling it well, but internalized a lot of things."

"I didn't feel depressed," Dennis says. "I didn't consider my work stressful, but obviously it is."

Dennis was sent back to the United States for psychiatric treatment. Through counseling and a period of medication, his physical and emotional problems leveled out.

Today, life isn't pain-free for Dennis. The back problem remains, and there's no guarantee he won't become depressed again. But he and Pat see the warning signs much more clearly now. Physical pain might mean there's something going on emotionally.





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Dennis's illness might be an extreme example, but it fits Phillips's admonition to recognize when an unexplained condition interferes with normal life routines. It might be a symptom as simple as having chronic trouble getting to work on time or taking too many sick days.

When symptoms like these interfere with a normal routine, that's when you start to think a more serious condition needs to be looked into and treated, Phillips says.

Linda's Story

Linda had been a single parent for 12 years before remarrying. The adjustment from being the single head of a household to sharing those responsibilities jolted her, though she didn't realize it immediately. Attending a new church and making new friends brought more stress.

One weekend pushed Linda over the edge. Her husband was away on a business trip, her daughter was home from college for the first time, and an intense rainstorm had flooded part of her house. When her daughter awakened her at midnight to tell her about a car problem, the dam broke.

"I had a hot feeling. It started at the top of my head and went all the way to my toes, and it tingled," she remembers. "I didn't know if something was shutting down inside or what. I tried to stay calm and not scare my daughter, and I think that aggravated it."

Linda was experiencing a panic attack. Hyperventilating, she was rushed to the hospital. "I thought they were going to open up my chest and pull my heart out and pump it," she says.





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Emergency room doctors told Linda there was nothing physically wrong. But the experience sounded an alarm for her and her husband: She needed psychological help.

"It put me into the shock of asking, 'What am I doing to myself internally from all the stress I wear on the outside?'" she says. "I guess I'm one of those people who doesn't want to admit that it is depression. But I believe it was probably there a lot longer than when I first acknowledged it."

Not everyone with a mental illness receives an indicator as unmistakable as a panic attack, but Phillips mentions other signs. Simple discouragement isn't necessarily clinical depression, but watch closely if it's paired with physical symptoms, such as insomnia, appetite change, weight loss or gain, drop in energy level, or change in sex drive, for more than a couple of weeks.

Maggie's Story

Maggie and John enjoyed a happy marriage. Through several moves to various parts of the country with John's sales job, they had adjusted easily. But after the last move, from the sunny South to the frozen upper Midwest, Maggie got the blues.

Deep feelings of sadness, sometimes mixed with anger, began dominating her days. She wasn't sure why. "Coming up here was the first time I realized I was depressed," she says. "It seemed like any time I came in the front door that grief was just waiting for me."





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Being a Christian kept Maggie from seeking clinical help right away. "I would tell myself that there were people who had it so much worse off than I did, and that I have a good marriage and the children are doing well," she says. "My husband is a kind and giving man, a good provider, and a good father, so I was thinking that I didn't have a right to be depressed. So I kind of ignored it."

Long winters with short days were the worst times. John traveled more in this new location, too, leaving Maggie feeling abandoned. Their new church offered a counseling program, and she eventually made an appointment. The counselor suspected serious depression and referred her to a psychologist, who confirmed that suspicion. Contributing to her depression were low self-esteem and seasonal affective disorder.

Maggie's case is common: When the blues don't go away, but spiral deeper, it indicates that a person needs help. "If someone gets distressed," Phillips says, "and that distress lasts for two weeks or more, we start thinking about a condition that is taking on a life of its own." And it may need treatment.

"That's not to say they won't recover without it," Phillips says, "or that it's not understandable. But it is to say they might be able to cope better if they had treatment."

Confronting a Spouse

Phillips believes too many Christian couples ignore warning signs and wait for a crisis before seeking counseling. That's no different, he says, than neglecting regular car maintenance and then wondering why it suddenly breaks down on the expressway.





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Measuring a spouse's problem in terms of degree, duration, and disability will help determine how serious it is. And of course, angry outbursts or abuse—emotional or physical—need immediate, outside attention.

Often when there is something wrong, only the "well" spouse initially sees it. Phillips advises that person to take action.

"A lot of times," he says, "someone will call me and say, 'I think my husband's got a problem, but he doesn't want to come in.' I'll say, 'Why don't you ask him to come in with you, so the two of you can have a checkup together?' That way, you're saying to your spouse, 'I think you're sick, but would you please help me out. Maybe this is my problem.' That way, it's 'we' instead of 'you.'"

If your spouse is in denial about his or her problem—especially an addiction—Phillips advocates the biblical model for discipline.

"Sometimes it involves getting a few trusted people together—whether that's a couple of family members, a couple's small group, or a few trusted friends—and with one voice, saying to the person, 'We're concerned about you. You don't seem yourself.' Or, 'We're worried about what we're seeing in you. Will you please have an evaluation? We want to support you.'"

This requires trust and tact—and doing things in the biblical order.





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'What's Wrong with Him?'

"People get into trouble when they talk to others before they talk to their spouse," Phillips says. For instance, talking to parents, in-laws, or friends about a spouse's problem can erode trust in a marriage.

"I'm not saying that you never share things with parents or others," Phillips says. "But to make a habit of bad-mouthing your spouse can be pretty destructive."

Knowing if there's been mental illness in your or your spouse's family may provide early warnings of danger. There's strong evidence that mental illness does run in families.

Your spouse's personal history factors in even more heavily. If your new husband was clinically depressed four times before you married him, the fact that you're in his life now and he's happy is no guarantee it won't happen again, Phillips says. Neither does mental illness's occurrence before someone became a Christian make the person invulnerable after.

Sometimes, especially if a spouse is unwilling to seek help, drastic measures may be required. In cases of addiction and/or abuse, that may mean separation. Keep in mind there's a big difference between separation and divorce.

Phillips says, "Sometimes we have supervised separations, under the eye of a pastor or a counselor, while they're working to improve their marriage. Sometimes if it's a severe situation, separation can be the only thing that gets the attention of the abusing spouse."





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Is All of This Biblical?

Wait a minute. Doesn't the Bible tell Christians to trust God with their problems? Doesn't getting psychological help, let alone mood-altering drugs, mean we're not praying like we should or trusting God enough?

Phillips doesn't see an either/or conflict here.

"I try to see these as two sides of the same coin," he says. "Satan can use a significant medical condition to bring spiritual discouragement. And certainly we pray for God's help in that, and for the medicine and the doctor, and for our attitude. I see things like medication as instruments of God's grace."

People like Linda have heard many "spiritual" reasons from well-meaning Christians about why not to seek medical help for mental or emotional struggles. She counters that God also gave us discernment and medicine. After all, Christians see a doctor when they're physically sick. Why should an emotional illness be any different?

"I'm upset at people who think you shouldn't get help," she says. "Too often, people don't admit their weaknesses or accept that they've hit a speed bump they need to get over—whether it's their own or in their marriage. I think it's very critical to admit a weakness that Satan's attacking and allow it to be cared for by a professional."

Not that counseling or medication means giving up on prayer.





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"I would say maybe your answer to prayer is right here," Phillips says of initial encounters with patients. "I want you to keep praying. We're going to work on this together."

Christians also tend to forget that God works through trials. Dennis hesitates to blame the forces of evil for his ordeal, mostly because he can point to so many good things that have come from it. He's been able to encourage many other Christians battling depression and be an effective witness to non-Christians in his therapy groups who were impressed by his honesty.

Taking a Balanced View

No Christian couple enters marriage with the hope of entering psychological counseling together. And in some quarters, any remedy beside prayer is frowned upon as not trusting God enough. But in the past quarter-century, at least some of the stigma has been removed from mental illness and more Christians are getting help.

"For conservative Christians, it used to be that psychology was of the devil," Phillips says. "Then the pendulum swung, in the 1980s, to the idea that psychology is a savior, and maybe the pastor of the church didn't have much to offer. So you'd go to church and hear sermons on pop psychology.

"But in the last five to eight years, I think the pendulum is swinging back in a nice way: saying some things that are part of our spiritual life and spiritual heritage—prayer, sacraments, the power of the Holy Spirit—are unique. And there's power there that psychologists can't offer, no matter how effective they are."





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"A lot of pastors are less intimidated by psychologists now, and a lot more psychologists are referring people to their churches," he says. "It's really a much healthier balance."

Jim Killam teaches journalism at Northern Illinois University. He lives with his family in Poplar Grove, Illinois. This article first appeared in the Winter 2001 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine.

Reflect

- *What roles have you seen spouses or close friends play in another person's recovery from depression?*
- *As a Christian, what's your impression or view of psychologists? Why do you feel this way?*



Making Peace with My Emotions



After months of crying, I realized I was depressed.

By Nancy Stevens

Eight months ago I sat in my office, tears gathering in my eyes. "Not again," I said aloud to myself. "Not here." I blinked back the wetness in my eyes and tried to focus on my computer project. No luck. More tears. With a deep breath I headed for the ladies room, trying to keep my composure until I was safe within the privacy of a stall. Once inside I let the tears spill, dabbing them carefully with toilet paper. Sadness welled up from deep inside, snuffing out my normally upbeat personality. *Why can't I keep my emotions under control?* I wondered in frustration and embarrassment. This scenario had become all too familiar in the last





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Making Peace with My Emotions

several months. I'd be enjoying a perfectly fine day only to be unexpectedly overtaken by sadness or hopelessness. Some days I even awoke feeling sad. These emotions usually overwhelmed me when I was alone—in my car, in my office, in my bed as I tried to fall asleep. While I'd always been an emotional person, this was different. I couldn't find any apparent cause for these emotions—which only made me feel worse. After all, I had a good job, dear friends, a nice apartment, a wonderful church. Nothing seemed wrong. Why was I crying so frequently?

When the crying first started, I tried some practical remedies. I drove around in the sunshine during my lunch hour, listening to fun '50s music or uplifting Christian songs. When I read dehydration could lead to sluggishness, I began drinking more water. I tried to eat balanced meals when I learned certain vitamin or protein deficiencies could affect moods. And I cried out to God to restore my usual joy in life. Yet no matter what I tried, my sadness persisted.

Finally, when I explained my chronic sadness to my mother over the phone, Mom begged me to do whatever I needed to do to get better.

I made an appointment with a Christian counselor I'd seen a few years back to help me with a strained relationship. As I sat on my counselor's couch, I revealed how I'd leave the office under the auspices of "running errands" only to drive around crying through my lunch hour. Sure, there was stress at work. Sure, there were days when being single was a drag. Sure, we were having a dreary





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spring. But I'd never responded to these kinds of stressors this way before.

When my counselor first mentioned the word *depression*, it sounded so serious. Wasn't that something people who were alcoholic or suicidal suffered from? I wasn't *that* bad off! But I had to admit, some of its symptoms fit: hopelessness, crying, feeling emotionally empty and lonely.

My counselor explained that sometimes depression is caused by circumstances, such as the death of a loved one, and sometimes it's the result of a chemical imbalance, usually low serotonin levels. Since she'd worked with me in the recent past and figured out through the course of our conversation that there seemed to be no other extenuating circumstances, she suggested we treat the problem medically. She assured me it sounded like a mild case of depression and suggested an herbal over-the-counter antidepressant, St. John's Wort, which I could buy at the local health food store. I'd need to take it for at least a month to see if it worked. Since the pills had few side effects, I figured I had nothing to lose—except, hopefully, my depression.

I continued to pray, chat with close friends and family members about the problem, care for myself, and meet with my counselor. Several months later, I felt a bit better, but not much. I flew to visit my family one weekend and felt the nagging sadness even in the comfort of "home." As we sat in the airport chatting before my plane was to take off, big tears rolled down my face. Strangers noticed me crying, but I didn't care. This wasn't





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sadness to leave, this was really—I began to admit to myself—depression. My wall of denial came down as I realized my counselor was right. I dried my face with a Burger King napkin as my parents stared at me in anguished helplessness. "Promise us you'll see about getting more help," my mom said before I left. I did.

At my next appointment with my counselor, I mentioned my crying spell in the airport and my continued feelings of depression. She suggested a prescription antidepressant, such as Prozac, about which I'd need to speak to my medical doctor. I made an appointment that week.

When I told my nurse I was visiting the doctor to see about being put on a prescription antidepressant, my face grew red and hot. The nurse scribbled something on my chart, smiled at me, and told me my doctor would be right in. As she left the room, tears welled up in my eyes. It was embarrassing to admit this aloud to someone, even a health-care professional. I took a few deep breaths, prayed for strength to explain myself clearly without "losing it," and blinked back my tears. After a brief conversation with my doctor in which she suggested a blood test to rule out any other medical problems, I walked out of her office with a prescription for Prozac.

I put away the remainder of my St. John's Wort and began taking the small twocolored pills. In my weak emotional state, I couldn't seem to get beyond praying, "Help me, God!" While I knew God loved me, that he—the Great Physician—knew what was wrong with me and could heal me emotionally, God still felt far away and painfully silent. Slowly, however, as the days went by, I began recognizing





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his fingerprints. Didn't I have a supportive family? A trusted Christian counselor? And as I shopped, chatted, and lazed in the sun with a close friend while on vacation in California, I felt my joy returning. My trip was truly a gift from God—but I feared returning to my normal routine. With more prayers and a sad good-bye, I headed back home.

I returned to my normal routine by strategically propping up photos of sandy beaches and lush rolling hills around my bedroom and office to cheer me on. I trudged back to work, volunteer meetings, the gym—and slowly realized I was feeling better. About three weeks after I'd returned from vacation, it dawned on me I was back to my "old self"—happy and hopeful. The Prozac was working! No more tears, no more sadness, no more emotional lethargy.

But I continued to pamper myself a little, realizing I may have been running myself ragged with a too-full schedule. I dropped a few things out of my schedule and moved my target bedtime up an hour. On sunny days I made sure to go outside and enjoy the scenery, even if it was just for a stroll or a peek at my friend's garden. I read for pleasure and became more faithful to do my morning quiet time. I realized how easy it had been for me to care for others over the years and how little time I'd invested in caring for myself—a detrimental mistake. Now, I treat each joyful day as a gift and fully relish God's blessings.

I'm still new at this depression stuff, and I don't know what the future holds. But I intend to keep praying, leaning on trusted friends, and savoring the good days. I'm more honest with people now, sharing my mistakes and flaws, letting others see the "real me." I've learned being a godly





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woman isn't about perfection, but about knowing my strengths and weaknesses and entrusting them all to God. I find myself telling more friends about my Christian counseling and mild depression. As I share, I'm amazed at how many women reveal they've been struggling with this problem in silence. These are the people with whom I hope I'm candid. Maybe together—with honesty and God's help—we can find our way back to joy.

Nancy Stevens, a publicity coordinator, lives in Illinois. This article first appeared in the March/April 1999 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.

Reflect

- *Nancy writes that "God still felt far away and painfully silent" during her depression. What's been your experience with God while dealing with depression?*
- *She ends by saying that being "godly" isn't about being "perfect." How do you think Christians may differ than non-Christians when it comes to a view of depression? What did you do? Was it effective? If you were to plan another (or your first) retreat, where would you go? What would you do?*
- *A contributor said, "I pray short prayers as I go through my day." What can you pray for right here, right now?*



Depression Dilemma



'Do Christians need counseling to deal with depression?'

By Gary and Carrie Oliver

Q: *I've struggled with depression. To make matters worse, I think my husband is ashamed of me and doesn't believe I should seek help. He says I can take care of my "problem" without counseling. What if he's right?*



Dealing with Depression

Depression Dilemma

A: It's unfortunate that some Christians find it difficult to admit they—or their spouse—experience depression. Many have the wrong idea that the Bible teaches that Christians shouldn't be depressed and so depression must be a sin. Instead of identifying and dealing with it, many Christians prefer to say they're sad, discouraged, or just feeling a bit low.

A wide variety of factors can contribute to depression. Regardless of the cause, it's essential to deal immediately with it so it doesn't become worse. There's a lot of help and hope for Christians who struggle with depression.

Healthy people experience depression. Christians experience depression. Smart Christians seek help for their depression and allow God to use it as an opportunity for growth in their lives.

*Carrie Oliver is a marriage and family counselor. Gary J. Oliver Ph.D., co-author of *A Woman's Forbidden Emotion* (Regal), is executive director of *The Center for Marriage & Family Studies at John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Arkansas. This article first appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.**





Dealing with Depression

Depression Dilemma

Reflect

- *Have you ever received the message that good Christians shouldn't get depressed? What's been your response?*
- *What responses have you received from the Christian community regarding dealing with depression?*



When Depression Hits Home



Find the courage to find help.

By Cheryl K. Ewings

One in four women will struggle with depression during her lifetime. That means at least one woman in your Bible study, your neighborhood, your circle of friends—or maybe even you—will wrestle with the energy loss, poor concentration, altered appetite and sleep, hopelessness, anxiety, and sometimes even suicidal tendencies associated with this debilitating condition.

Depression, an imbalance of certain chemicals in the brain, can be brought on by genetic factors or external triggers such as a major loss or disappointment, prolonged chronic illness, and certain prescription medications. While the causes are numerous, so are the treatment options. Through counseling, support groups, antidepressants, prayer, and changes in nutrition, sleep, and exercise, most people find hope and healing.



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When Depression Hits Home

In 1996, the Director General of the World Health Organization estimated that roughly 340 million people worldwide battle mood disorders. Despite the widespread nature of depression, there's still a stigma attached to those who suffer from it—or choose to seek help. Unfortunately this stigma keeps many people from seeking assistance. Yet as more and more women come forward to openly discuss their struggles with depression, others are freed to end their silent suffering and seek the help they so desperately need.

The following is the story of one such woman who had the guts to reach out for help when her life fell apart—and who now shares her story in hopes of helping others.

—The Editors

Have you ever had one of those days when it takes tremendous effort just to drag your body out of bed? I had "one of those days" that lasted months before I determined something was drastically wrong with me.

At first, I told myself I had good cause to be blue. When my marriage of 18 years dissolved in a painful battle, I felt emotionally drained. The disruption in our home caused my children to react negatively both at home and at school. Then my job, usually an island of peace in a chaotic, roiling ocean, added stress because my workplace was moved to a new location that added an hour-long commute to my day. My life was a shambles!

As I dragged myself through each day, I felt as though I were walking through quicksand. Naptime after work became a critical part of my day. But I knew I was in deep trouble when I needed to lie down between showering and getting dressed for work in the morning!





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I felt overcome by hopelessness and despair, and often found myself wide awake at 3:00 A.M., worrying about my future. In addition, my eating habits changed drastically—I had to force myself to eat. I also discovered several stupid mistakes I'd made while writing checks. For instance, I'd write the correct amount on the top, the wrong amount in the middle, then forget to sign the check. Or I'd forget to mail a bill altogether. I was bouncing checks for the first time in my life.

What's wrong with me? I repeatedly wondered. *Am I losing my mind?*

My sister helped me climb out of this muddle by mailing me a book entitled *Happiness Is a Choice*, by Minirth and Meier (Baker). Because she'd suffered a biologically based depression a few years before, she recognized my pain, doubt, and despair. After taking the book's quick depression inventory, I discovered a partial answer to my strange symptoms. I wasn't crazy—I was *depressed!* I needed to see a doctor.

One of the toughest calls I've ever made was for an evaluation to see a psychiatrist at a local Christian clinic. I remember my panic and breathlessness as I talked with the receptionist to set the appointment. Later that week, I forced myself to keep the appointment. After taking inventory of the life stresses and symptoms I was experiencing, the psychiatrist recommended a small dosage of the antidepressant medication Prozac.





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When Depression Hits Home

My life didn't change overnight. But the chemicals my brain lacked gradually built up to the point where I felt normal. While the stresses of being a single working mother were still there, I now felt more able to handle them without deadly despair.

Since experiencing clinical depression, I've discovered many other women suffer from the same condition. In fact, The National Institute of Mental Health reports 10 percent of all adults will experience some symptoms of a depression at least once in their lifetime. In America, that means more than 19 million people will experience depression.

I've also learned depression is treatable. I used to have the misconception it could be cured solely with perseverance, optimism, and prayer. But recent medical research reveals there are real, measurable reasons why people become depressed. Researchers have learned that when there's an insufficient level of the neurotransmitter serotonin, through the frontal lobes of the brain, depressive symptoms appear (the brain). A chemically based depression can last for months, years, or—without treatment—a lifetime. Several studies also have shown a family depression connection. Since my sister had experienced clinical depression, that made me a prime candidate for a bout with depression as well.

Not everyone experiences the same symptoms I had, or needs the same treatment. Some people may have trouble keeping themselves presentable, cry uncontrollably, exhibit extreme anxiety, fear, or worry. Often clinical depression is masked by other behaviors such as alcoholism or drug use.





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When Depression Hits Home

I'm glad I live in an age in which there is widespread knowledge about depression and several known treatment options. Many women in previous generations suffered depressive episodes without any hope. I had an aunt who suffered a severe post-partum depression and eventually took her own life a few days before she was scheduled to be hospitalized. This tragedy doesn't need to happen today, yet sadly, a large number of women remain untreated.

The key is finding the right counselors to help you determine the best way out of the pit of depression. Being depressed doesn't necessarily mean being bedridden with inertia. During my bout, I still worked, cared for my children, and performed as I was required. However, I lost all joy in life and I was tired all the time. My concentration for the smallest tasks disappeared, and my appetite was nonexistent. Life was flatter than flat.

Many things combined to help me climb out of that deep pit. One step out included medicine, counseling, and a steadfast faith in God's love. I clung to several verses in Psalms during this time. I found a friend in the psalmist David, with his honest, gut-wrenching outpourings of despair. One example is his plea: "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" (Ps. 42:5, NASB). Even when God seemed far away, I discovered I was unable to leave his loving care.

Since treatment, my life's taken on new peacefulness. I've developed a newfound faith in God's goodness and grace, despite my circumstances. I've traveled a long way since the deep despair of the early months after my divorce. Yet,





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even while in the throes of despair and hopelessness, I was supported by God's great love. The words the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:37–39 became true for me: "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

If you or someone you know is living in the pits, don't wait to be treated. And remember, even when you can't feel him, God's waiting to help you through your sorrow and pain. He did it for me—and will do it for you, too.

Are You Depressed—or Just Blue?

Symptoms of depression:

- Sleeping all the time or not at all
- Drastic increase or decrease in appetite
- Crying frequently for no apparent reason
- Loss of interest in things that formerly interested you
- Symptoms lasting more than a couple weeks

Other possible conditions to rule out:

- Premenstrual Syndrome
- Thyroid imbalance
- Low blood sugar
- Anemia
- Seasonal Affective Disorder (depression triggered by lack of sunlight)





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When Depression Hits Home

How to Find a Counselor

Ask for a personal referral. Ideally, try to get a recommendation from a therapist's client. If you can't find that, ask your doctor or pastor for a few names. Look for a licensed psychologist, social worker, or family therapist who shares your values and faith (psychiatrists typically don't do much counseling).

Visit a counselor or two. After your first visit, ask yourself: Did I feel heard? Did I feel valued? Did I feel comfortable with this therapist? If you answer no to any of these, keep searching for the right fit.

Consider logistics. Is this counselor covered by your insurance policy? Is the cost doable? (Typically, psychologists are most expensive, followed by social workers and family therapists.) Is the office location convenient for you?

Cheryl K. Ewings is a freelance writer living in the Chicago area. This article first appeared in the November/December 1999 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- Cheryl writes, "Even when God seemed far away, I discovered I was unable to leave his loving care." How have you experienced this?
- Cheryl thinks the best way out of the "pit" of depression is with a good counselor. In what ways has a psychologist or other type of counselor been able to help you?





Understanding a Parent's Depression

Explaining the illness to kids.

By Lisa Whelchel

Q: *My husband is unemployed and battling depression. My eight-year-old son is having a hard time understanding why his dad seems so down and withdrawn at times, even though I try to explain that his dad's discouraged about his lack of a job. How do I deal with the impact of my husband's depression on my son?*



Dealing with Depression

Understanding a Parent's Depression

A: Can you think of a time when your son lost something important to him, such as a favorite toy, pet, or maybe a good friend who moved away? Ask your son to remember what he felt like after the loss. Explain that those feelings are similar to what his dad is going through after the loss of his job. Hopefully, this little exercise will help him understand more clearly why his dad is so down and discouraged.

Sometimes children blame themselves when their parents leave, whether physically, as in divorce or death, or emotionally, as in your husband's withdrawal. It might be a good idea to ask your son if, when he suffered his own loss, he blamed his dad for it. He'll most likely respond, "No, of course not, it wasn't Dad's fault." Take that opportunity to show him the importance of remembering that his father's behavior has nothing to do with his actions, either.

I'm also concerned for you. Your son needs you to be there for him at this time when his father isn't, but you also need to make time for yourself. Hire a sitter or let your son spend the night with a friend. Then you must grab a girlfriend and go out to eat and to a movie. Or enjoy a quiet evening at home reading a good book in a bubble bath.

Find times of refreshing for your soul and receive peace by placing your son in the hands of the "Father of the fatherless" (Psalm 68:5).

Lisa Whelchel is the author of Creative Correction (Focus on the Family) and the mother of three. This article first appeared in the March/April 2005 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





Reflect

- *How have you blamed yourself for your or someone else's depression?*
- *In what ways have you sought to take care of yourself better to help beat or deal with depression?*



kyria

Beyond the Blues



My post-delivery depression
left me feeling alone.

By Carol Lee Hall

Why am I crying so much? Why am I so sad? Tears splattered into the sink full of dirty dishes. I dabbed my eyes with my sleeve as the dishpan filled with soapy water. *Having a baby is supposed to be a happy occasion, so why aren't I happy?*





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Just months before, my husband, Ed, and I'd become the proud parents of Jennifer Else. After five years of trying to conceive, my family, friends, and colleagues were so happy for us they gave me six baby showers! We went through parenting classes and read several books to prepare us intellectually for raising our baby. But nothing prepared me for the emotional crisis that soon followed.

It began with nursing. When I was sure Jennifer was fast asleep, I gently unlatched her from me and laid her down. However, the moment her head touched the mattress, she woke up and started crying. I couldn't stand to let her cry, so I picked her up and started nursing again. After repeating this process over and over with no success, I finally broke down and cried, too.

For the first month of her life, I was home with Jennifer every day. Part of this was due to Chinese tradition (which was to allow the mother to recover from childbirth), and part was to avoid exposing our baby to possible illnesses. I'll never forget what one friend told me: "You'll never be normal again. Get used to it."

Suddenly all my activities revolved around Jennifer's schedule. I couldn't even take a shower unless my husband was home, in case she woke up and needed to be changed or held before I fed her. It seems cruel to compare caring for a baby to being tortured in prison, but that's how I sometimes felt. I was locked up in the house, "breast-cuffed" with sore nipples to a little crying machine.





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Despite my difficulties, kissing and cuddling our baby gave me a wonderful feeling inside. I loved little Jennifer very much; I just couldn't stop crying and feeling overwhelmed by sadness.

God must have known I'd have such a difficult time adjusting to motherhood because he surrounded me with supportive people. He gave me the most loving husband a woman could ask for. Because Ed saw what a difficult time I was having, he did everything for the baby except breast-feed her.

My mother was helpful, too, and came to stay with me when Ed went on a business trip. While she was visiting, I started crying in the shower one morning, overcome by despair. My mother knocked on the door to see if I was okay. After I assured her I was, she encouraged me to stop breast-feeding so I could have a bit of freedom. I still thought breast-feeding was best for my baby, so I chose not to follow her advice.

When Jennifer was three weeks old, my in-laws came for a visit. Suddenly, I had an irrepressible urge to leave the house since there were enough adults around to handle whatever could come up. I went grocery shopping, and even though I was gone only 30 minutes, I felt so relieved to get out of the house and do something "normal."

I unloaded my emotional burdens on my best friend, Karen, who reminded me all mothers feel overwhelmed at times. Karen assured me I was a good mom. Another friend, Ginger, made sure I ate regularly. Several friends





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and relatives inquired about my sleeping habits. Everyone tried to help out when they could, but nobody ever suggested I talk about my emotional state with the one person who really could help me: my physician.

I was loath to discuss my feelings with a physician, even though I cried in front of my daughter's pediatrician and the whole office staff when I brought Jennifer in for her one-month check-up. The doctor called me a few days later to make sure I was okay. He thought I was experiencing post-partum blues that could lead to postpartum depression if my symptoms lasted much longer. He urged me to call if I felt worse. Even though I cried almost every day for the first three months of motherhood, I never called him.

Part of me was too proud to ask for help. I felt bad enough that I couldn't control my daughter's eating and sleeping habits, let alone my own emotions. Seeing a doctor for my problem felt like admitting to failure. And I was afraid if I was diagnosed with an emotional disorder, people would think I was crazy.

Soon after, I went to the grocery store by myself. I was about to cross the parking lot when I thought, *I don't care if a car hits me. It would be going so slow, I'd just get hurt and have to stay in bed. Then someone else would have to care for my baby.* I stepped off the curb without checking for traffic. While not exactly suicidal, these thoughts certainly weren't normal. Despite my foolish act, I made it safely to my car. Obviously, something needed to change.





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Thankfully, God began answering my prayers for strength in some unexpected ways. A friend approached me and said: "My father's dying of cancer. Didn't your father have cancer too? How did you handle it?" I recounted some of my experiences in hopes of comforting her.

That night, while I put my daughter to bed, I thought, *If God got me through my father's bout with cancer, surely he can get me through caring for my baby, which is a much happier situation!* I sighed in relief, and for the first time felt a glimmer of hope.

At her second month check-up, Jennifer's pediatrician said she wasn't gaining enough weight and suggested I supplement breast-feeding with formula. After several attempts, she finally took a bottle and gradually started gaining weight. Slowly I weaned her, and by the fourth month she drank only formula. Not only did this help Jennifer grow, it also freed me from what I thought of as prison.

I gained some control over my daughter's sleeping habits when I "discovered" the pacifier. In the beginning, she wouldn't take it. Later, when she began using a bottle, she readily took the pacifier, too. What a relief! From then on, after feeding her, I gave Jennifer the pacifier and she quietly sucked herself to sleep. Stabilizing her sleeping and eating habits allowed me to regulate my own.





Dealing with Depression

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With time, my lifestyle adjusted to include our baby. I learned which department stores had the best diaper changing/nursing areas in their restrooms. At parties, I gratefully "allowed" others to hold Jennifer while I enjoyed refreshments and adult conversation. I interacted with other moms at a women's Bible study and sought their advice on child-rearing. As I became accustomed to the changes in my life, I had less reason to be sad and didn't cry as much.

A few years later, I was asked to lead a Bible study at my church. As part of the training, I was required to read a book and watch a video series entitled *Crisis Care* by noted Christian counselor H. Norman Wright. In the book he writes, "If you don't recognize something as a loss, then you don't spend time and energy dealing with it and grieving over it ..." When I read that, my eyes watered because I finally understood what I'd gone through emotionally with my daughter's birth years before.

Until that moment, I never dreamed having a baby was a type of crisis. My parenting books said I'd experience great *changes* in my life. No one wants to think of having a baby as a loss. Jennifer herself was a gain. But from reading Dr. Wright's book, I discovered I was grieving my loss of control, freedom, and former lifestyle. Realizing this allowed me to grieve consciously and continue to move forward with a healthy, hopeful mindset.

I also learned that another reason I'd felt so blue was because of my fluctuating hormone levels. My family physician eventually explained that after a woman gives birth, her hormones, such as estrogen, and other





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chemicals, such as serotonin and dopamine (which give the body a sense of well-being), are at low levels. If they're in short supply, situations that wouldn't normally depress a woman might make her feel sad. Lack of sleep and sporadic, sometimes unhealthy eating habits also can contribute to distress.

Although my bout with post-partum blues resolved itself as time went by, I've wondered what would have happened if I'd been struck by a car in that parking lot. What if my baby hadn't taken a bottle? What if no one had helped me? Looking back, I realize I shouldn't have been embarrassed to discuss my feelings with my doctor. My depression could have gotten worse. Some new mothers with extreme post-partum depression commit suicide and/or infanticide. In retrospect, I would have been better off being fully diagnosed by my physician before the situation could have gotten out of control.

Knowing what I know now, I urge any woman who suspects she might be suffering from depression to seek medical advice as soon as possible. You don't have to display all the symptoms of clinical depression to be considered depressed. Don't be embarrassed that your friends might find out. Don't wait until it gets worse. And if you know someone who might be depressed, urge her to see her doctor—even offer to make the appointment for her and take her there.





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When my daughter's grown and perhaps having babies of her own, I know I won't be able to prevent her from going through some of the same difficulties I did. But I hope if she has a similar experience, she'll be able to talk to me about her feelings and I'll be able to help her the way my mom and others helped me. And I pray she'll also be able to confidently rely on God for direction, strength, and peace.

Carol Lee Hall, a freelance writer, lives with her husband and daughter in California. This article first appeared in the July/August 2003 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *Carol found relief when she realized her situation, as joyful as having a baby was, did represent a kind of loss. What losses have you experienced that might trigger depression?*
- *How have you experienced help and grace from others during your experience with depression?*



When Your Husband Struggles with Depression

There's hope for him and you.

By Cheri Fuller

Several years ago, my husband, Holmes, began skipping meals and losing weight, eventually 25 pounds within three months. His laid-back, somewhat pensive temperament turned irritable and moody. Although he typically was quiet about his feelings, Holmes became increasingly withdrawn and didn't seem to enjoy things anymore.





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When Your Husband Struggles with Depression

I knew Holmes was encountering tough times as a homebuilder in a flagging economy and a tanking stock market. But I kept hoping he'd perk up if he got another construction job. In the meantime, being ever the encourager, I tried everything I could think of to cheer him up. I pointed out all the positive things he did, such as being a great dad or helping other people. I encouraged Holmes to look ahead to a family trip we'd planned, but that didn't help, either. As the months rolled into years, neither my encouraging words nor my hard work to take up the slack in our income seemed to make a difference.

In 1995, roughly seven years after I first noticed my husband's struggles, our pastor realized from a conversation with Holmes that he was suicidal. He immediately made Holmes an appointment with a doctor who diagnosed him as having clinical depression. The physician told us Holmes probably had been depressed for years. Situational depression caused by the crushing pressures of Holmes's declining building business in the late 1980s, compounded by a genetic predisposition to clinical depression on both sides of his family, had pushed him to the edge. Perhaps if I'd known the clues, Holmes could have gotten help before his depression had become full-blown.

I've discovered I'm not the only woman who's experienced life with a depressed husband. With an unstable economy and corporate meltdowns, depression in males is on the rise. That means countless wives face the challenge of trying to help a spouse who's in emotional turmoil. But depression doesn't have to bring down your entire family. There is help, there is hope, and there are ways you can support your spouse—and yourself.





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When Your Husband Struggles with Depression

Caring for Your Husband

If the dark cloud of depression overtakes your spouse, how can you help him?

Recognize the signs. It's important to distinguish between *situational* depression triggered by something such as a job layoff or demotion, and *clinical* depression. Situational depression involves some of the same symptoms of clinical depression (see below), but they're of shorter duration and lower intensity. For example, if your husband's depression is caused by discouragement over a job loss, within six months he should regroup, recover his enjoyment of life, and move on. However, according to Michael Navarro, a licensed psychotherapist, clinical depression's symptoms are more pronounced and last far longer. The absence of pleasure in the activities your husband once enjoyed is greater; his malaise, anger, or weight loss more substantial.

If your husband experiences a majority of the symptoms of depression, he needs professional help. Your family physician can determine what's biological and what's psychological; he may make a diagnosis of clinical depression and refer your spouse to a psychologist or psychiatrist for therapy and medication. In Holmes's case, counseling and an antidepressant were helpful short-term, but since we didn't have the money to continue therapy, his recovery process took much longer. (I've since learned many good therapists provide a sliding fee scale depending on your financial condition.)





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When Your Husband Struggles with Depression

How would you know if your husband needs to be hospitalized? If he's seeing a doctor, his physician would make that recommendation. But here are other clues that in-patient help is needed to stabilize your spouse: when he repeatedly cancels or doesn't show up for his outpatient/counseling appointments or refuses help; when he digresses into a more nonfunctional state; or if he experiences severe weight loss or sudden gain. And—most important—if he makes statements such as, "I wish I wasn't around," or "I think it's better if you collect my insurance. You and the kids would be better off without me," which indicate suicidal thinking.

Accept and love your spouse. One of the most important things you can do for your struggling mate is to let him know you still love and accept him despite how he feels about himself. "I'm not saying accepting is easy," says psychologist Archibald Hart, author of *Dark Clouds, Silver Linings*. "But you have to accept the reality of the problem. It's there whether you like it or not, and your responsibility is to communicate love and acceptance in whatever way you possibly can." This could include a loving touch or hug, or gentle encouragement through a card or meaningful gift.

During one of Holmes's darkest days, he said, "We—and I—may never be happy again; you'd be better off leaving." I went in the other room, wept, and prayed for strength and the right response. A short time later, I sat down by Holmes, held his hand, and said, "Even if we're never happy again, it's just not all about happiness; it's about loving each other and being together. I'm committed to you for the rest of our lives. I'm not going anywhere." Although





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we had huge hills yet to climb, that was a turning point for us. And in that particular response, Holmes felt unconditionally loved and accepted right where he was.

Encourage exercise. While physical exercise can be an extra challenge to those struggling with depression, the endorphins it provides create a natural mood-lifter. So gently encourage your husband to go for a walk with you after dinner as many nights as he's willing, or to work out at a gym or do whatever activity he enjoys most when he feels up to it. When my husband and I took our evening walks, he sometimes would open up. One night as we walked, I asked Holmes to give me a word picture of how he felt.

"I feel like a vine's wrapping itself around me; that it began at my feet and now is almost up to my neck, choking me," he described. It was hard to hear how terrible he felt, but it helped me connect with him and understand a little of what he was going through.

Realize anger often accompanies depression. But don't allow your husband to disrespect or abuse you or your children. Be available to listen, but avoid trying to be his therapist. "A mate's role is primarily one of support. The main therapeutic work needs to be done by a professional," says Hart.

Whether your husband's anger is rooted in grief and loss issues, unresolved childhood issues, failure, or job loss, he needs someone with whom to talk. One counselor I know has her clients list 10 things they're angry about when they come in for therapy because she's found that underneath most depression is anger over something.





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Encourage fellowship with other men. When Carrie's husband, Jeremy, went through a depressive period after a job loss, a small group of friends met with him weekly over coffee to be his sounding board for his job-hunting. They also kept him in their prayers during the difficult months. Their support was invaluable to his recovery and the new career direction he found.

Avoid using words that make him feel worse. A man in the doldrums of depression doesn't need to hear, "How can you be depressed with all God has done in our lives?" (He's probably already feeling as though no one understands, and this just confirms it.) Avoid preaching: "Just read your Bible more and get right with God, and your depression will go away."

Refrain from belittling him or comparing him to others as in, "You know, Brian took St. John's Wort and he bounced back from his depression in only three months." Also avoid saying, "Look on the bright side. Count yourself lucky and cheer up," which makes him feel guilty. One woman I know purposed to praise her husband for the baby steps he took in learning to trust God in the darkness, and didn't blurt out, "I thought you already knew that!" when he shared insights with her.

Caring for Yourself

I became so emotionally and physically depleted during my husband's depression that I began suffering from severe insomnia. While working overtime, I parented our teens and worried about our financial situation and my husband. Sometimes I felt abandoned by Holmes —emotionally, at least. Eventually I realized I harbored some anger as well.





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Some sessions with a counselor and later a small support group helped me tremendously.

If you get support and deal with your issues, you'll be healthier emotionally and thus better able to help your husband and children. Here are some ways:

Ask for help. When Brenda's husband, Daryle, needed to be hospitalized for severe depression, she didn't think to ask her brother or pastor to accompany her. She drove Daryle the three hours to the center by herself.

Mile after mile he protested, "I'm going home. I'm not going to the hospital. The bank will pull the loans if I'm gone. The company will go under. We'll lose everything." After Brenda got her husband in the hospital and almost collapsed from exhaustion, she realized she couldn't do everything alone. She found a student teacher to live with her family temporarily to help with her children and take them to school. Brenda learned to ask others for help. In the same way, you may need help from a support group or prayer partners, and assistance with your children.

Consider counseling with your husband's therapist, because frequently the wife feels responsible for her husband's depression. Find one trusted friend with whom you can cry, be real, and pray. Flo Perkins, an elderly friend whose husband had suffered with chronic depression, was my lifesaver. Flo understood, listened, prayed for me, and encouraged me repeatedly. She passed on the comfort with which God had comforted her (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). From her I learned the invaluable truth that I could give the Lord all my troubles and entrust my husband to his care.





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Don't keep secrets. When Liz's husband's life crashed around him due to clinical depression, they went from being pillars in their rural community to being under the lowest rock. He lost his profession, his reputation, his earning power, and his hope as he lived for six long years in a state of depression. One of the best things they did was endeavor to keep open communication with each other and their kids. They held family councils and talked over what was happening in age-appropriate ways, praying together during crises and ongoing struggles.

A word of caution: It's best to clear this kind of family meeting first with your husband, perhaps by saying, "You've always been such a loving dad. Could you help me talk to the kids about your depression to let them know it's not their fault, and that we're all going to be healing together?" Avoid saying, "Your depression's hurting our children, messing their lives up, and making life hard," which only will make him feel worse. If he prefers, you could sit down with your children alone and explain the nature of depression and that you'll help them cope with their dad's condition.

Your kids may need to talk to someone such as a youth pastor or counselor who can help them sort through their feelings. They also need to know they always can come to you to talk about the situation.

Remind yourself of God's truth. When Brenda was beset by fears, time after time she told herself the truths that restored her stability: that God would never leave or forsake her (Hebrews 13:5); that he promised her his grace when she was weak (2 Corinthians 12:10); and that God





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somehow would weave everything—even this depression—into a pattern for good (Romans 8:28).

"So often we try to force our way out of a crisis," Brenda says. "Instead, I began to embrace the situation and say, 'Okay, God, what do you want me to learn in this? How do you want me to change? And what are you going to accomplish in my husband and family through this difficult time?'"

As she focused on God, Brenda saw him working through Daryle's hospitalization, the friends who surrounded Daryle, and the spiritual growth they as a couple experienced. Before, Daryle had been Brenda's rock; through this experience, Brenda learned to depend more on God. And as Daryle recovered, he developed an effective ministry with hurting people and a special sensitivity to those suffering from depression.

Take "mini-vacations." During the six years her husband was depressed, Liz learned to create brief getaways from her family difficulties. Since they were financially challenged, Liz took long walks through the countryside, singing hymns and praise choruses, sometimes crying buckets of tears and other times stopping to journal her feelings. She lit scented candles at home and took bubble baths to relax. She planned fun activities for her children—picnics, outings to the state park, zoo, and movies, and occasional trips to the grandparents—and carried them out without her husband's participation when he couldn't even fake the energy to be involved. These short breaks refueled Liz for the challenges she faced.





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Let prayer be your lifeline. "Praying for those we love who are depressed is our best hope," says Gerry Mensch, who not only survived her own depression but her husband's as well. "Antidepressants can help, but some in the grip of depression refuse to seek help. When God begins to work in their hearts, he'll accomplish more than we or medication ever can." If your husband won't go for counseling, start praying he'll wake up and ask for assistance, or that God will put a man in his life to steer him toward help.

Throughout Holmes's depression, my lifeline was praying Scriptures for him such as Joel 2:25, which asks God to restore the wasted years; Colossians 1:9–12, to give my husband direction; Isaiah 61:1–3, to lift his heaviness of despair and replace it with praise and joy; and 1 Peter 4:8, to fill me with the love that covers a multitude of sins.

It took several years for Holmes to recover from depression, and as we prayed together, we experienced God's grace for every situation we faced. Prayer strengthened our marriage when we were weak, and reminded us again and again of God's love. While Holmes's recovery wasn't quick, God always was faithful. Although medication and counseling helped, God's healing power and his Word kept us together.

Today, when I see Holmes smile as he holds one of our five grandchildren, sense his sheer enjoyment of an American history course he recently took at a local university, or experience the fun of strolling on the beach together, I'm grateful for where he is now. I'm





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thankful for the things we learned and the comfort we received from God and others. I'm also glad we have a chance to share what we learned with others going through depression.

Warning Signs: Your spouse may be depressed if he:

- Sleeps too much or too little; wakes frequently throughout the night.
- Is persistently sad or has a flat, empty mood.
- Experiences increased anxiety, restlessness, difficulty concentrating, fatigue, and/or decreased energy.
- Exhibits physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, or other chronic pain that doesn't respond to treatment.
- Experiences appetite loss, weight loss, or sudden weight gain.
- Has suicidal thoughts.
- Feels hopeless, pessimistic, worthless, a failure.
- Is irrational in his thinking or has difficulty making decisions.

Cheri Fuller is a speaker and author whose latest book is Fearless: Building a Faith That Overcomes Your Fear (Revell). This article first appeared in the September/October 2003 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





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Reflect

- *How difficult have you found it to empathize or deal with depression in someone you love?*
- *Cheri's friend tells her: "When God begins to work in [your spouse's] heart, he'll accomplish more than we or medication ever can." How have you experienced God working in your heart or your spouse's heart?*



Winter Woes

What you need to know about Seasonal Affective Disorder.

By Gary and Carrie Oliver



Q: *Every winter my wife becomes extremely emotional and depressed. The only reason I can figure is that she's affected by the lack of sun and the dreary days and weather. Could that be true?*

A: It sounds as though your wife is suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder Syndrome (SADS). For several years now SADS has been identified by the American Psychiatric Association as a cause of clinical depression. What your wife is experiencing is real.



Dealing with Depression

Winter Woes

An estimated 5 million Americans deal with SADS. It often begins in October/November and lasts for about five months, ending in March/April. One study showed that 83 percent of those who suffer from SADS are women, and the onset of the illness typically occurs in their 30s. Some of the symptoms include moodiness, sadness, changes in appetite and sleep patterns, feelings of guilt, self-blame, and helplessness.

Given the nature of SADS, it should be no surprise that the farther north you go the more common it is. For example, SADS affects about 1.9 percent of the population in Florida and 9.7 percent of the population of New Hampshire.

Although the causes aren't totally understood, we do know that it's related to light deprivation.

The good news is that SADS is treatable. In most cases the most effective treatment is light. But it's important for you and your wife to seek professional help for a definite diagnosis and specific treatment suggestions.

This article first appeared in the Winter 2005 issue of
MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.

Reflect

- *In what ways do you find weather affecting your mood or outlook on life?*
- *What are some other external factors or circumstances that you find lead you toward depression?*



Additional Resources



Unveiling Depression in Women: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Overcoming Depression by Dr. Archibald D. Hart and Catherine Hart Weber (Revell, 2001, 224 pp). Offering a biblical perspective, it explores types of depression, proven treatments, strategies for wellness, and God's plan for wholeness.

What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do: Discouragement & Depression by Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend (Integrity, 2005, 96 pp). The eight "life principles" introduced here will shed light on your sadness and reacquaint you with the One who gives great hope even in the midst of painful circumstances.



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Additional Resources

Getting Over the Blues: A Woman's Guide to Fighting Depression by Leslie Vernick (Harvest House, 2005, 200 pp). Employing godly wisdom and compassionate insight, Christian counselor Leslie Vernick offers you real hope for permanent, lifechanging wholeness.

The American Association of Christian Counselors:
www.aacc.org

New Life Ministries: www.newlife.com



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