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How to Help the Depressed

What hope can you
offer those who are
struggling?





How to Help the Depressed

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Click on an article you'd like to read:

3 INTRODUCTION

Understanding Depression

By JoHannah Reardon

5 LEADER'S GUIDE

How to use "How to Help the Depressed" for a group study.

6 A PRIMER ON CLINICAL DEPRESSION

Practical tips to help those who are depressed

By Christy Lindsay

11 THE BEAUTY OF WEAKNESS

Spiritual growth seldom happens on the platform of our strength.

By Mary E. DeMuth

15 CONNECTING TO HOPE

How local churches can handle—and prevent—depression.

Interview by Derek R. Keefe

19 LIGHT WHEN ALL IS DARK

Our theology makes all the difference in fighting depression.

By Kathryn Greene-McCreight

24 ON THE LOOKOUT

How can we best comfort and care for women who struggle with depression?

By Kelli Trujillo

27 DOWNTIME

Could God have a sanctifying purpose for the sadness I feel?

By Holly Vicente Robaina

31 RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Articles, books, and Bible studies to help you further



Introduction

Understanding Depression

By JoHannah Reardon

When I was a teenager, my older sister began to experience severe depression. I felt both sad and frustrated around her. I was sad because her sadness permeated everything. And I was frustrated because I didn't think she had anything to be depressed about. Her life was good. She was married to a kind and faithful husband and had two darling children. What more could she want? To my teenage eyes, she seemed to be living a dream life. I had friends whose circumstances were far worse. Why couldn't she see that and count her blessings instead of wallow in self-pity? I didn't understand why she couldn't "decide" to put her sadness behind and begin moving ahead. But I loved my sister, so I spent much time talking with her and began to understand something about hormone imbalances over which we have no control.



How to Help the Depressed

Understanding Depression

There are so many who battle depression all the time for a myriad of reasons. Whether it is from a chemical imbalance, circumstances, or past experiences, the specter of depression weighs heavily on them. If you've experienced depression yourself, or have lived with anyone who has, you know how difficult it can be. To make matters worse, many Christians feel that they shouldn't be depressed. They have the false idea that if they were just more spiritual, they would not have these dark thoughts.

The articles we've assembled for you try to give perspective on this complex topic so that you are able to understand and help those you love who are depressed. Author Christy Lindsay gives us a glimpse of what it's like to live with depression and offers practical ways to begin to help those who are depressed. Mary DeMuth helps us see that weaknesses can become strengths. Derek Keefe helps us recognize the church's responsibility in handling and preventing depression. Kathryn Greene-McCreight takes depression out of the medical field and puts it in the theological realm. Kelli Trujillo offers ideas of practical comfort and care, and Holly Vicente Robaina suggests that God may have a sanctifying purpose for sadness.

Blessings,

JoHannah Reardon

Contributing Editor, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN downloads
Christianity Today



Leader's Guide

How to use “How to Help the Depressed” for a group study

“How to Help the Depressed” 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.



A Primer on Clinical Depression

Practical tips to help those who are depressed

By Christy Lindsay

A gentle touch woke me. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and saw my dad standing beside the bed.

"Sweetie," he said softly, "your Grandma Louden passed away this morning."

A door slammed in my mind. The hollow echo left me in a dark, hopeless place.

Eighteen years later, I see this watershed with new eyes. You know that old saying "Hindsight is 20/20"? It must be true, because I now see that Grandma's sudden death triggered my first bout of major depression.



How to Help the Depressed

A Primer on Clinical Depression

I've battled major depressive disorder, commonly known as clinical depression, for 18 years. I have periods of low mood that last for two weeks or longer. I used to become deeply depressed for four to ten months without relief. Then one day, I'd feel hopeful. I'd be well for three or four months, but when anything in my life changed, I'd plunge back into darkness.

Getting Help

It was a long journey before a physician wrote an 11-month prescription for an antidepressant. My eyes burned with tears of relief. I knew that I was going to get better. My doctor knew I was sick and needed long-term treatment.

Within minutes of taking the antidepressant, I started seeing colors more vividly than ever before. I spotted an emerald green shrub and took in the ice blue sky. I hadn't noticed anything but dull grayness in the weeks before.

In spite of that encouraging beginning, I didn't get better right away. It took six months to find the right medication and dosage. After treating my depression for two months, my OB/GYN flat-out told me she was not qualified to treat me. She urged me to see a psychologist.

But I didn't want to see a psychologist. Couldn't I just take a pill and get well? I numbed my depression for another month with alcohol, movies, and books. But I recognized that I was lashing out at my kids and that my drinking might put them in danger.

So I got out my insurance provider's manual and prayed over each of the psychiatrists' and psychologists' names. The psychologist I finally chose helped me hold on to sanity, even though I was taking the wrong antidepressant. Then it took three different dosages before we figured out how much I needed to take, but we finally got it right.



How to Help the Depressed

A Primer on Clinical Depression

Finding Hope

My husband recommended getting a part-time babysitter so I could write and let my mind rest. Writing, exercising, and driving while my children were at the sitter's helped me miss them and look forward to picking them up. I started believing I was getting better.

One day a friend called and asked if I would lead a women's Bible study. I prayed about it and then accepted the post. I believed I could lead a Bible study and handle the weekly teaching responsibility. I knew my kids would have fun playing in our church's nursery while I taught. I had found hope.

Despite the exhausting nature of depression, I now thank God for this disease. He has given me three ministries as a result of my depression. I now lead both an adult Sunday school class and a women's Bible study, and I write. God sustained me when no one else could.

I cling to Psalm 139:7–8, 10: "Where can I go from your Spirit? . . . if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. . . . your right hand will hold me fast."

Practical Tips for Living with Depression

- Try writing in a journal. Get your toxic thoughts down on paper and out of your mind. And don't read what you've written.
- Try walking, bicycling, or swimming. Breathing deeply, getting some sun, and moving your body will relax your mind.
- Escape into novels. Stories change your mood.
- See a psychiatrist and/or a psychologist. They are trained to understand mental illness. They know exactly what you're



How to Help the Depressed

A Primer on Clinical Depression

describing and how to treat it. There's no shame in it. If you had heart disease, you'd see a cardiologist, right? See the doctors who can help you.

- Don't make major changes—don't move or change jobs, start dating, or get divorced.
- Read Jeremiah and Psalms. These men of God battled depression, and David was called a man after God's own heart. Read Isaiah 53, too. Here Jesus is called "a man of sorrows."

Is Your Loved One Depressed? These Are Tell-Tale Signs:

- Anxiety, irritability, mood swings, rage, and hopelessness.
- Changes in sleeping patterns. Are they sleeping too much? Not enough?
- Changes in eating habits. Are they overeating? Not eating enough?

Tips for Living with a Depressed Person

- Ask God to help you believe your loved one isn't lazy. He isn't selfish. She isn't trying to ruin everyone's happiness. He's sick. She can't just snap out of it.
- Ask God to help you understand that you can't reason or encourage yourself or anyone else out of depression. Can you reason or encourage someone out of diabetes?
- Cling to the promise that Jesus won't leave you. He promised, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).



How to Help the Depressed

A Primer on Clinical Depression

Finding Hope in Depression

- Get help. See a psychologist and/or a psychiatrist. Jesus wants to see you get better so you can serve him. He made you for a specific purpose, and you can't serve him if you're so depressed you can't get off the couch.
- Hold on to the truth that depression isn't your fault. You've done nothing wrong. Believe that it isn't anyone else's fault, either. It's a disease, like cancer or diabetes.
- Ask God to open your mind to the possibility that he may be taking you through this isolation and misery so that you can help others who suffer as you do.

Christy Lindsay is a freelance writer who wrote this article for ChristianBibleStudies.com.

Reflect

- *Have you or anyone you love battled depression? If so, what do you think triggered it?*
- *Do you agree that depression is a disease like diabetes or cancer? Why or why not?*
- *Of the practical tips mentioned in this article, which did you find most helpful? Why?*
- *Read **Psalm 139:7-8, 10**. How might these verses be encouraging to a person battling depression?*



The Beauty of Weakness

Spiritual growth seldom happens on the platform of our strength.

By Mary E. DeMuth

My life verse is an oddball one: "But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen . . ." (1 Corinthians 1:27–28, NASB). Unlike the apostle Paul who recounts his rise of fame in Judaism, in Galatians 1, my history reads far differently.

I was foolish. I spent my early life trying to protect myself from predators.

I was weak. I couldn't fend off those abusers, particularly when they outnumbered me when I was five years old. Two brothers and their friends took their turns with me my kindergarten year.



How to Help the Depressed

The Beauty of Weakness

I was base. What they did to me confirmed what I felt was unworthiness.

I was despised. In my chaotic, unsafe home, though I know my parents did the best they could, I had a hard time understanding their love for me. I felt in the way.

Recounting all this isn't my way of hoping you'll feel sorry for me. In contrast, rejoice with me. Because the circumstances I count as weaknesses and pain are the very things that drew me to Jesus Christ. These are what I call *thin places*. The Celts see thin places as physical places on the earth where the veil between God and us is veneer, ethereally thin. I bend the metaphor a bit to apply to our lives: "Thin places are snatches of holy ground, tucked into the corners of our world, where we might just catch a glimpse of eternity. They are aha moments, beautiful realizations, when the Son of God bursts through the hazy fog of our monotony and shines on us afresh."

It's in these weak moments I've experienced God's presence. Because I felt the sting of abuse, I longed for a world someday that would be made right—a holy desire for a new heavens and a new earth. Because my father died when I was ten, leaving a daddy-shaped wound, I thirsted for a Daddy who would never leave. Because I walked through life feeling in the way, God's surprising affection and grace flabbergasted me, making me love him all the more. All these deficits have morphed into huge spiritual benefits.

As women of God, we often try like crazy to look holy, to appear spiritually astute. We spend time managing our reputations, wasting energy on proving to the world that our strengths are worth applause. Can we let go of that for a moment? The truth is, spiritual growth seldom happens on the platform of our strength. Look back on your life. When have you grown the most radically? When has your heart hungered and



How to Help the Depressed

The Beauty of Weakness

thirsted for God? During times of beauty and joy? No, usually during times of devastating fear and weakness.

That's why I love the Phillips translation of James 1:2: "When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends!" It's counterintuitive, kingdom thinking that can honestly welcome trials as friends, that can see how difficulties are the soil in which our hearts grow.

Paul, though he had an impressive résumé, learned the power of viewing weakness as strength and a vehicle to God's presence. He wrote, "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9–10, NIV).

Paul understood the paradox of God's power in the life of the believer. It isn't that we conjure up strength and go forward. It's that we recognize our weakness and lean on Christ. In fact, it's our weakness that leads us to him! Could it be that the things in your past you conceive as weaknesses are instead the very things you can delight in?

Even Jesus experienced weakness. Paul asserts, "For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you" (2 Corinthians 13:4). It's time we stop concentrating on living in our own paltry power. It's time we relegate that to its proper place. Instead, glory in our weakness so that we can finally understand the power of Christ at work.

In retrospect, I can see how my childhood story became a thin place for me to recognize the power and worth and beauty of



How to Help the Depressed

The Beauty of Weakness

Jesus Christ. I no longer see the past as something to lament, but part of God's sovereign way to bring me to himself. I don't think I'd be clinging to him the way I do (by his strength) had it not been for those trials and my neediness in the midst of them.

Like Paul, you can learn to rejoice in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties by seeing your weakness as an asset. May we all find thin places today, understanding that our weaknesses are the portals to the strength and power of God.

*Mary DeMuth is an author, speaker, and book mentor who helps folks turn their trials into triumphs. Her recent book is *Thin Places: A Memoir*, www.marydemuth.com. This article first appeared on TodaysChristianWoman.com in 2011.*

Reflect

- *How about you? Where in your story can you see God's redemptive plan?*
- *When have you seen God's power overpower your weakness? When have you grown most keenly?*
- *How can you see your current situation (or your past struggles) as opportunities for delight?*
- *Read **James 1:2**. How might you welcome trials as a joy or a friend?*



Connecting to Hope

How local churches can handle—
and prevent—depression.

Interview by Derek R. Keefe

John Ortberg is a popular preacher and author. What many don't know is that along with holding a M.Div., Ortberg also earned a Ph.D. in psychology from Fuller Theological Seminary—and has penned two books on depression. Who better to ask, then, how the local church can best respond to this debilitating disease than the senior pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California?

How can churches help their people better understand depression?

We live in a day when people tend to use psychological language for spiritual issues. But there are no clear boundary lines between what is physiological, what is psychological, and what is spiritual. Those are language domains that make sense and have integrity but overlap significantly.



How to Help the Depressed

Connecting to Hope

It's important for churches to acknowledge this complexity. What influences our behavior, and what our level of responsibility is, are very complex issues. And anytime we try to make this simplistic, we don't serve people well.

How does Menlo Park minister to depressed persons in the congregation?

One of the most appreciated ministries in our church is our HELP ["Hope, Encouragement, Love, Prayer"] ministry for people who are suffering from mental or emotional health issues. It has evolved into a support group for them and their families. These people will say that the single most important thing for them is to be a part of a community where other people share the same struggles, speak the same language, and are able to bear each other's burdens. Awareness of this ministry has spread mostly by word of mouth, although periodically someone who is part of HELP tells their story for our church.

Why do you have folks tell these stories publicly?

Anytime you name the human condition, the human experience, and the reality of suffering, it has a way of being illuminating and helpful for each person who hears it, even if he or she may not struggle in that way. When you hear the story, when you see a face, the depression epidemic goes from being a statistic or an article in *Time* magazine to a real person, and it expands your heart.

Does Menlo Park have a formal counseling program?

We have the HELP ministry, a Stephen ministry, and a deacon ministry, which provide various levels of care. We also refer people to professional counselors and will provide funding from



How to Help the Depressed

Connecting to Hope

our benevolence committee if that is needed to help people get started. In general, churches have been moving away from trying to do a lot of one-on-one work to doing more small-group work, both because they are able to help the most people that way, and because it's just more scalable.

So you think local churches are best served by outsourcing one-on-one work?

I think it's necessary. If churches get too heavily involved in trying to provide one-on-one care for severely distressed folks, it is so resource-intensive that it greatly limits the number of people you can help. And developing a strong referral network is a significant part of church ministry.

What preventive measures can churches take?

When churches are being effective, creating authentic communities where intimate connection is offered, this is the single biggest contribution they can make. A medical sociologist named Janice Egeland has done some really interesting research on depression among the Amish. One of her findings was that rates of reactive depression are significantly lower among the Amish than among all other segments of the population.

In comparison, among evangelicals as a whole, there is virtually no difference in the incidence of reactive depression as compared to the general population. Part of the explanation is that we evangelicals are much more a part of our culture, and have a ways to go to create a community where people are so connected that there is a significant difference in the incidence of depression.

The Amish, of course, take great pains to separate from the broader culture. For evangelicals as a whole, a separation that radical is probably not likely. We see our calling to be "in the



How to Help the Depressed

Connecting to Hope

world but not of it." But is it possible to be in the world, as most evangelicals are, but still part of a community that is alternative enough that it would actually change the incidence of depression? That would be a really interesting experiment.

At the time of this interview, Derek R. Keefe was on the staff of CHRISTIANITY TODAY. This interview originally appeared in a 2009 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.

Reflect

- *What ideas from this article might be useful for your church?*
- *Why might extensive one-on-one counseling in the church be a drain on its resources? Why might small groups be a better approach?*
- *How could a public testimony of someone gaining help over depression be encouraging to the congregation?*

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Light When All Is Dark

Our theology makes all the difference
in fighting depression.

By Kathryn Greene-McCreight

*Lord Jesus Christ, you are for me medicine when I am sick;
you are my strength when I need help;
you are life itself when I fear death;
you are the way when I long for heaven;
you are light when all is dark;
you are my food when I need nourishment.*

—Ambrose of Milan (340-397)



How to Help the Depressed

Light When All Is Dark

In his *Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis says that suffering is uniquely difficult for the Christian, for the one who believes in a good God. If there were no good God to factor into the equation, suffering would still be painful, but ultimately meaningless, because random. For the Christian, who believes in the crucified and risen Messiah, suffering is always meaningful. It is meaningful because of the one in whose suffering we participate, Jesus. This is neither to say, of course, that suffering will be pleasant, nor that it should be sought. Rather, in the personal suffering of the Christian, one finds a correlate in Christ's suffering, which gathers up our tears and calms our sorrows and points us toward his resurrection.

In the midst of a major mental illness, we are often unable to sense the presence of God at all. Sometimes all we can feel is the complete absence of God, utter abandonment by God, the sheer ridiculousness of the very notion of a loving and merciful God. This cuts to the very heart of the Christian and challenges everything we believe about the world and ourselves.

I have a chronic mental illness, a brain disorder that used to be called *manic depression*, but now is less offensively called *bipolar disorder*. I have sought help from psychiatrists, social workers, and mental health professionals; one is a Christian, but most of my helpers are not. I have been in active therapy with a succession of therapists over many years, and have been prescribed many psychiatric medications, most of which brought quite unpleasant side effects, and only a few of which relieved my symptoms. I have been hospitalized during the worst times and given electroconvulsive therapy treatments. All of this has helped, I must say, despite my disinclination toward medicine and hospitals. They have helped me to rebuild some of "myself," so that I can continue to be the kind of mother, priest, and writer I believe God wants me to be.



How to Help the Depressed

Light When All Is Dark

During these bouts of illness, I would often ask myself: How could I, as a faithful Christian, be undergoing such torture of the soul? And how could I say that such torture has nothing to do with God? This is, of course, the assumption of the psychiatric guild in general, where faith in God is often viewed at best as a crutch, and at worst as a symptom of disease.

How could I, as a Christian, indeed as a theologian of the church, understand anything in my life as though it were separate from God? This is clearly impossible. And yet how could I confess my faith in that God who was "an ever-present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1) when I felt entirely abandoned by that God? And if this torture did have something to do with God, was it punishment, wrath, or chastisement? Was I, to use a phrase of Jonathan Edwards's, simply a "sinner in the hands of an angry God"?

I started my journey into the world of mental illness with a postpartum depression after the birth of our second child. News outlets are rife with stories of women who destroy their own children soon after giving birth. It is absolutely tragic. Usually every instinct in the mother pushes toward preserving the life of the infant. Most mothers would give their own lives to protect their babies. But in postpartum depression, reality is so bent that that instinct is blocked. Women who would otherwise be loving mothers have their confidence shaken by painful thoughts and feelings.

Depression is not just sadness or sorrow. Depression is not just negative thinking. Depression is not just being "down." It's walking barefoot on broken glass; the weight of one's body grinds the glass in further with every movement. So, the weight of my very existence grinds the shards of grief deeper into my soul. When I am depressed, every thought, every breath, every conscious moment hurts. And often the opposite is the case



How to Help the Depressed

Light When All Is Dark

when I am hypomanic: I am scintillating both to myself, and, in my imagination, to the whole world. But mania is more than speeding mentally, more than euphoria, more than creative genius at work. Sometimes, when it tips into full-blown psychosis, it can be terrifying. The sick individual cannot simply shrug it off or pull out of it: there is no pulling oneself "up by the bootstraps."

And yet the Christian faith has a word of real hope, especially for those who suffer mentally. Hope is found in the risen Christ. Suffering is not eliminated by his resurrection, but transformed by it. Christ's resurrection kills even the power of death, and promises that God will wipe away every tear on that final day. But we still have tears in the present. We still die. In God's future, however, death itself will die. The tree from which Adam and Eve took the fruit of their sin and death becomes the cross that gives us life.

The hope of the Resurrection is not just optimism, but keeps the Christian facing ever toward the future, not merely dwelling in the present. But the Christian hope is not only for the individual Christian, nor for the church itself, but for all of Creation, bound in decay by that first sin: "Cursed is the ground because of you ... It will produce thorns and thistles for you ..." (Gen. 3:17–18). This curse of the very ground and its increase will be turned around at the Resurrection. All Creation will be redeemed from pain and woe. In my bouts with mental illness, this understanding of Christian hope gives comfort and encouragement, even if no relief from symptoms. Sorrowing and sighing will be no more. Tears will be wiped away. Even fractious brains will be restored.

Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one



How to Help the Depressed

Light When All Is Dark

equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity; in the habitations of your glory and dominion, world without end. —John Donne (1572–1631)

*Kathryn Greene-McCreight is assistant priest at St. John's Episcopal Church in New Haven, Connecticut, and author of *Darkness Is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness* (Brazos Press, 2006). This article first appeared in a 2009 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.*

Reflect

- *How do you reconcile depression with a good and loving God?*
- *Why do Christians often struggle with the idea that they shouldn't feel depressed?*
- *How do the Resurrection and heaven give perspective in the midst of our worst sufferings?*
- *What in this article would you find useful in encouraging someone who is depressed?*

On the Lookout



How can we best comfort and care for women who struggle with depression?

By Kelli Trujillo

We were all so excited for "Leah's" visit to the office with her new baby. She'd been on maternity leave for four weeks and was coming by at lunch so we could *ooh* and *aah* at her new bundle of joy.

But when I saw Leah, I quickly realized joy was the furthest thing from her experience.

"I'm so happy to see you," I whispered as we hugged. When I stepped back, I saw tears in her eyes—and they weren't tears of happiness.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"This is so much harder than I thought it would be," she told me. "It's so, so hard."

Leah wasn't just tired from pulling an all-nighter with her baby. She was suffering from postpartum depression.



How to Help the Depressed

On the Lookout

I saw Leah again a few weeks later. She'd met with her doctor and was now on medication, she confided. It was helping a little, but she still cried all the time. She asked me not to tell anyone—she felt like she'd be judged by other Christians, especially for taking medication.

Leah's struggle helped me begin to see depression for what it is: an extremely serious issue, often with biochemical components, that's a lot more than just feeling down. And sadly, as Leah experienced, talking openly about the problem often feels taboo.

But the reality is that one in four women, both Christians and non-Christians alike, will suffer through clinical depression at some point in her life; many others struggle with other biochemical problems like anxiety attacks, bipolar disorder, or extreme PMS. Whether you realize it or not, you'll encounter women suffering from depression or similar mental and emotional illnesses in your family, in your Bible study group, or even in your mirror. These are complex problems that touch a woman's emotions, physical well-being, relationships, and even her spiritual life.

It's been several years since my friend Leah's bout with postpartum depression. It wasn't a quick fight—she was on antidepressants for nearly two years and is still being closely monitored by her doctor. But she made it through—and is back to her bubbly old self. But one thing's different about Leah: she's now on the lookout for other Christian women who are struggling with this same, often secret, problem. Whenever she congratulates a pregnant friend, she always pulls her aside for a quick hug and tells her very briefly about her own struggle with postpartum depression so that her friend will be aware in case it strikes—and, more important, so that she'll feel okay about reaching out for help.



How to Help the Depressed

On the Lookout

So how are we to care for those who are depressed or paralyzed by anxiety? What are we to do if we find ourselves in a face-off with a serious emotional problem? Is it okay to take antidepressants or anti-anxiety medication? How can faith survive this type of challenge? How can we, like Leah, live "on the lookout" for others who may need our encouragement?

Kelli B. Trujillo is the Managing Editor of TodaysChristianWoman.com downloads. This article first appeared on the TodaysChristianWoman.com in 2010.

Reflect

- *Postpartum depression is most often a hormonal imbalance. What help and advice might you offer a woman who is suffering with it?*
- *How is depression worse than just feeling discouraged or "down"? Why must we be careful not to dismiss it as something everyone goes through?*
- *How can we help those who are depressed look beyond the moment they are in, which seems so hopeless? What Scriptures might help while not piling on guilt?*



Downtime

Could God have a sanctifying purpose for the sadness I feel?

By Holly Vicente Robaina

Earlier this week, I realized I've been really depressed. I've had no appetite. I couldn't sleep at night—though I did manage to sleep all day a few times. It felt like my greatest accomplishment was to get out of bed, take a shower, and dress in something other than my bathrobe.

I realized it was Week Six of feeling like this. And I figured it was time to start thinking about my feelings.

Of course, I've known all along that I was down. But there was always a reason. Exhaustion from working non-stop. Stress. Seasonal changes. The daylight saving time change. Hormone fluctuations. The way my hair and skin get simultaneously oily and dry in the winter and make me feel yucky looking. I rationalized: *This is situational depression. Things will change.*

But after six weeks, I was starting to wonder, *Will things change?*



How to Help the Depressed

Downtime

I was about to make an appointment with a therapist when it hit me: I hadn't told God about my sadness. Not once during my prayers of the past six weeks.

Clinical depression and other mental illnesses are real—I have several friends and family members who've benefited from counseling and medication. But I knew this probably wasn't my case: I don't have a history of depression or the symptoms that indicate something physical needs to be treated.

So I prayed. I immediately realized that I've come to expect the occasional blue day that everyone experiences at times. Yet I wondered, *Should I totally ignore my feelings just because everybody's sad sometimes?* I began to pray, confessing to God that I doubted whether he had plans for me. Or perhaps I'd misunderstood his plan? Maybe I hadn't done well enough lately, so he'd put me on the bench?

Praying about my feelings comforted me, though I still felt sad. But oddly enough, I didn't want to feel instantaneously happy. I didn't want to create some kind of feel-better system, where a specific prayer—or reading a certain Scripture passage, or doing a devotional exercise, or fasting, or singing a worship song, or asking Christian friends to pray—made everything all better. (Yes, I've actually tried all those things before, hoping for happiness! It doesn't work.) I realized that downtime was exactly what I needed.

Reading through my recent e-mails, I noticed a lot of my Christian friends are experiencing spiritual "downtime" right now. Their ministries aren't functioning as well as they once did. They feel susceptible to temptation. They feel distant from God. And many sound just like me: questioning whether God has a purpose for their lives. They speak of overwhelming circumstances and unanswered prayers.

I suspect that many of them, like me, desperately want to feel *better*. Admittedly, I'd love to feel the flutters of happiness,



How to Help the Depressed

Downtime

knowing that my eyes are authentically sparkling as the corners of my mouth curl into an easy smile. But I need sadness much more right now: It's necessary for what God is teaching me.

In the past six weeks, God has been showing me that my prayers don't heal people. My words and actions don't comfort, and I can't personally bless others. God has allowed me to become frustrated and to feel I've failed so I would get it: I don't have the power to fix anyone or anything. He heals. He comforts. He blesses. When I open my mouth or extend a helping hand, it's merely an acknowledgement that I trust in God's power to transform the heart and mind.

And he does things in different ways than I would. Sometimes he lets people sit in their pain—for a purpose (**James 1:2-4**; **2 Corinthians 1:3-4**; **Philippians 1:12**; **1 Peter 1:6-7**). In these weeks of questioning and sadness, I never felt despair because I was certain God was still present, glorious, and good.

I came across this quote, from Oswald Chambers in *My Utmost for His Highest*, which a friend had posted on her Facebook page: "God by His providence brings you into certain circumstances that you can't understand at all, but the Spirit of God understands. God brings you to places, among people, and into certain conditions to accomplish a definite purpose through the intercession of the Spirit in you."

Some of those places are surely dark. Some of those people are broken. And some of those conditions will feel unbearable. In those circumstances, perhaps our prayers need to go beyond, "God, take this pain away and make it all better." Perhaps we need to pray for the real blessing: that God's purpose would be accomplished. After all, the fulfillment of God's perfect and holy will is the one and only way anything will truly get better.

Holly Vicente Robaina is a writer living in California. This article first appeared on TodaysChristianWoman.com in 2010.



How to Help the Depressed

Downtime

Reflect

- *How can you determine whether depression is chemical, circumstantial, or simply wrong thinking?*
- *Read **James 1:2-4**; **2 Corinthians 1:3-4**; **Philippians 1:12**; and **1 Peter 1:6-7**. What perspective do these passages give to a person going through depression?*
- *How can prayer and communion with God be useful as we battle depression?*

Additional Resources



Articles, books, and Bible studies
to help you further

Articles

Should Christians Take Antidepressants?—*Medication can help, but it can also hinder our reliance on Christ.*

By Monica Selby, available on Her.meneutics.com

Should Christians Take Antidepressants?—*A Response—I've never heard Christians protest relieving the pain of childbirth. So why would they protest relieving major depression?*

By Rachel Stone, available on Her.meneutics.com

Spiritual or Psychological—*Dark nights often have many dimensions.*

By Chuck DeGroat, available on LeadershipJournal.net

We're All a Bunch of Losers— *Helping free others from bondage*

By Peri Gilber, available on SmallGroups.com



How to Help the Depressed

Additional Resources

The Depression Epidemic—*Why we're more down than ever—and the crucial role churches play in healing.*

By Dan G. Blazer, available on ChristianityToday.com

Surprised by Depression—*Discovering my enemy had a name helped turn my marriage around.*

By Karen Scalf Linamen, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com

More Than Moody—*7 strategies for recognizing and handling your teen's clinical depression*

By Leigh Fenton, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

Books

Darkness Is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness by Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Baker, 2006). This book takes a compassionate look at mental illness, offering theological understanding and personal insights from the author's personal experiences. It provides poignant glimpses into the mind of a mentally ill person and practical advice for friends, family, and clergy.

Changes That Heal: How to Understand Your Past to Ensure a Healthier Future by Dr. Henry Cloud (Zondervan, 1995). Dr. Cloud combines his expertise, well-developed faith, and keen understanding of human nature in a four-step program of healing and growth that includes how to: bond with others to form truly intimate relationships, separate from others and develop a sense of self, understand the good and bad in yourself and others, and grow emotionally and spiritually toward adulthood.



How to Help the Depressed

Additional Resources

Telling Yourself the Truth by William Backus and Marie Chapiro (Bethany House, 2000). Most of what happens in your life happens because of the way you think. This book teaches you how to handle your thoughts using a life-changing method the authors call Misbelief Therapy. Based on the Bible, it teaches you how to identify your own misbeliefs and replace them with the truth.

How to Handle Your Emotions: Anger, Depression, Fear, Grief, Rejection, Self-Worth by June Hunt (Harvest House Publishers, 2008). Anger, fear, guilt, grief . . . how can we keep negative feelings from getting the best of us? Hunt looks to the Bible for answers, examining the characteristics, causes, and solutions for each emotion. A wellspring of biblical answers and practical applications for individuals, small groups, and ministry professionals.

Bible Studies

“Encouraging the Depressed”— Those who are depressed know something is wrong and feel totally alone. But this study looks at some of the greatest heroes of our faith who battled deep depression. Available from ChristianBibleStudies.com.

“Hope for the Hurting”— There is no quick fix for depression. We can't just tell those suffering among us to snap out of it and expect the pain to go away. As the church, we must surround our brothers and sisters suffering from depression and combat the lies of distorted self-perception by affirming those truths most essential to an identity found in Christ. This study is available from ChristianBibleStudies.com.



How to Help the Depressed

Additional Resources

“Psalms: Managing Our Emotions”— Emotions are both complicated and complex, both mysterious and mystifying. Even the experts are not sure what causes us to experience emotions. Both social science and neurobiology have tried, to no avail, to explain the origin of emotions. And for Christians, emotions can be troubling, frustrating, and untrustworthy. Some emotions seem deeply spiritual; other emotions seem downright sinful. God created us to experience emotions, yet there are still godly and ungodly ways to manage them. This 12-session study on the Book of Psalms will help you sort this out. Available from ChristianBibleStudies.com.

“Depression and Children”— If you've noticed a prolonged difference in your child's actions or mood, your child may be struggling with depression. This Life Guide offers articles on clinical depression, anxiety, emotions and antidepressants to assist you in helping your child. Find out what experts are saying about childhood depression and learn ways you can help your hurting child. Available from TodaysChristianWoman.com.

“Dealing with Depression”— If you haven't struggled with depression, it can be hard to understand. If you have struggled with depression, you know how difficult it is. This guide will offer help and hope for when you or someone you love struggles with depression. Available from TodaysChristianWoman.com.

“Leaders & Depression”— Janine Petry writes, “If you're struggling with depression as a leader, please hear this from someone who's been there: you are not alone.” There is help and hope, and through the pages of this download, you'll find both. Available from TodaysChristianWoman.com.

“The Big Taboo”— One in four women will suffer through



How to Help the Depressed

Additional Resources

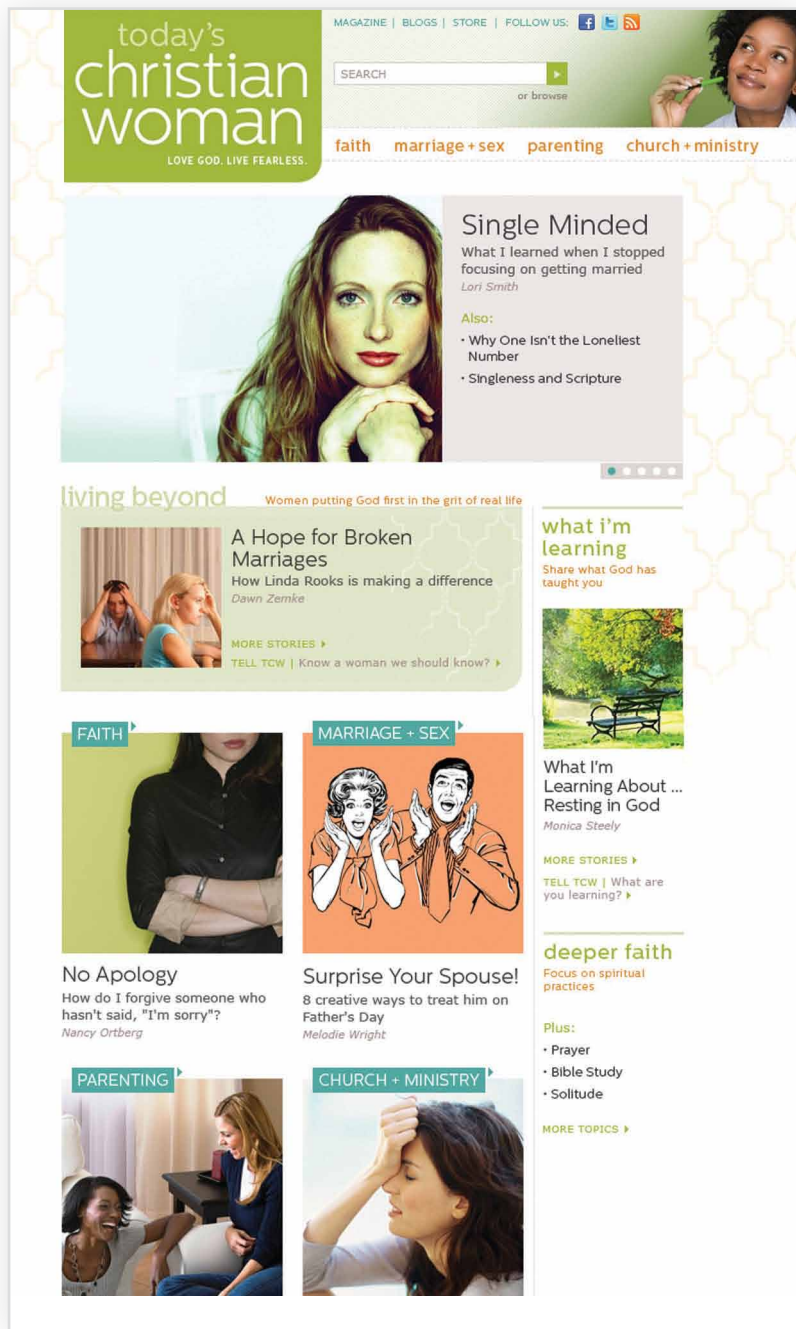
clinical depression at some point; many others struggle with other biochemical problems like anxiety attacks or bipolar disorder. These complex problems touch a woman's emotions, physical well-being, relationships, and spiritual life. This guide offers personal insights from women who've gone through it, wisdom from Christian counselors, and hope from Scripture in its honest portrayal of suffering. Available from TodaysChristianWoman.com.

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