

+ EMERGENCY RESPONSE

TO

DEPRESSION

+ SHARE THEIR BURDEN

HANDBOOKLET

Group's
EMERGENCY RESPONSE
Handbooklet:
DEPRESSION



Loveland, Colorado
www.group.com

Group's Emergency Response Handbooklet: Depression

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Introduction

It's not easy suffering with depression. But it doesn't have to be lonely.

Christians should never have to face trials on their own. Those around them—their Christian brothers and sisters—should rise up and support them.

“Share each other’s burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

Although it isn't easy to go through depression, it's also tough being on the outside and trying to help.

You don't know what to do. You're worried about hurting their feelings or stepping on their toes or saying the exact *wrong* thing.

Of course you care—you love them! It isn't that you don't want to help—it's just that you don't know how.

Group's Emergency Response Handbooklet: Depression will help you come alongside your friends and those in your small group who are facing tough times. From care and counseling tips, to practical ideas for your small group, to what to say and what not to say, this booklet offers insight after insight into how to care for those who are struggling with depression.

Of course, it'd be great if you never had to pick up this booklet! But the reality is that many people deal with depression—including your friends and the people in your small group. And they need your help.

So when someone you love is struggling with depression, it's time to pick up this guide. Use the table of contents to find the specific section that gives you what you need to be successful in helping them.

In this handbooklet there is a **real life narrative**—a story from someone who's been there. You'll find a section on **care and counseling tips** that will give you practical ideas for reaching out in love. The practical ideas in the **group tips** section will help your entire small group support your hurting friends during their trial. An invaluable section on **what to say and what not to say** to your friend. This section will help you avoid the hurtful comments and use the helpful ones.

You'll also find useful boxes that offer Scripture help, guidelines for referring your friends to a professional counselor, and additional resources, such as books and Web sites, that you can use as you support your hurting friends.

Our prayer for this booklet is that it will help you help your friends during a difficult time.

Depression

Supporting Your Friend in the Darkness

with counseling insights from

REBEKAH KNIGHT-BAUGHMAN, PH.D.

+ ministry tips from AMY WEAVER

I've always had a personality susceptible to depression. Depression isn't a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be willed or wished away, despite what many people think. People like me who struggle with depression can't simply "pull themselves" together and get better.

The first time I experienced a deep depression, I felt lost. I was dealing with issues I'd never dealt with before. I'd essentially lost my dad through a divorce, and the feelings surrounding that experience created the depression that plagued me. Those feelings of being lost and alone were compounded when I lost the support of my mother and sister—I moved across the country to go to college, and I became a Christian—two things they really didn't like. I felt abandoned when I needed support the most.

It was during that first year of college when I realized I had a serious problem. That was when I started failing...for the first time in my life. I'd always been successful in everything I did—I was an A student in school, a star on the track team, the editor of my school yearbook. But I just couldn't make myself do any of it anymore, and it wasn't long before I was on academic probation. Sure, I was discouraged about school, but it wasn't

enough to get me out of the slump I'd sunk into. Eventually, I just stopped going to classes. Everything seemed like too much work.

My sophomore year of college, I promised myself I'd do better in school. But before the semester even began, I felt those familiar thoughts creeping in. I was overwhelmed before I even started. I felt unworthy of another chance, unworthy of love. I felt sorry for myself, like things were unfair and like nobody around me understood how I felt. I needed to know I was loved, so I tried to draw attention to myself. I tried to be funny, spiritual, encouraging—anything to get people to acknowledge me. It didn't last long—the effort was too much. So in the end, I just started avoiding people.

During this time, I didn't sleep or eat for days. And then at other times, I slept or ate way too much. I was a case of extremes. I cried a lot and then felt numb. I didn't want to bathe or get out of bed for days on end. I wrote in my journal that I wanted to be alone because no one understood me or knew what I needed. People felt fake. I wanted it all to go away. I felt helpless and hopeless.

For the most part, people in my small group didn't have a clue about what I was going through, and that hurt. Some people tried to fix me. When I didn't get better immediately they either got frustrated with me or gave up on me. They told me I wasn't seeking God or I needed to try harder to get over my depression—as if all it would take was a simple “attitude adjustment.”

But that wasn't everyone. There were those who were there for me. They listened to what I had to say. They sincerely cared about understanding what I was going through. They didn't simply offer quick fixes; instead they prayed for me and with me. They encouraged me by speaking truth into my life, writing notes, showing me how important I was to them. Those unexpected gestures were done out of love, and they meant the world to me.

They pursued me when I thought I wanted to be alone. Getting out of my room and out of my bed was a positive thing, even if only to help me focus on something besides myself. When I said “no” to going places, they gently insisted. They told me they wanted me with them and expressed that I was important to them with their words and actions. It was what I needed.

And, really, it was those little things that got me out of the depression: prayer, love, meaningful actions, simple activities, a gift for no reason, an offer to watch my favorite movie, a listening ear, a special dinner made for me by special friends. God's love offered to me through God's people. They reminded me that God still loved me even if I didn't see him.

God worked through the people in my small group, and I gradually began to come out of my depression. It took time and effort on the part of the people around me. I started to take part in all the daily activities that I'd been avoiding, and my mood improved little by little. Some days were harder than others. And though I'll most likely always be susceptible to depression, I know that I have friends who will help me through it.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

+ Books

Tan, Siang-Yang and Ortberg, John. *Coping with Depression*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004.

Worthington, Everett, L., Jr. *When Someone Asks for Help: A Practical Guide for Counseling*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982.

+ Online Resources

www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/friend.cfm
(National Institute of Mental Health)

www.healthyminds.org (American Psychiatric Association)

www.suicidology.org (American Association of Suicidology)

www.dbsalliance.org (Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance)



Care and Counseling Tips

THE BASICS

Depression is a dark and oppressive mood problem that can feel unbearable to the person suffering from it. The burden of depression drags the person down as he or she tries to carry on with life as usual when life is not “as usual.” Yet there is hope. By understanding the basic symptoms and causes for depression and learning to express care in ways that will be received well by the person who is depressed, you can share the burden of depression with your friend, and he or she will begin to feel the weight of depression lift. Look for the following symptoms if you think a friend may be depressed.

+ Emotional Symptoms of Depression

A depressed mood is usually characterized by hopelessness, sadness, discouragement, anxiety, and/or irritability all day, nearly every day for two weeks. These internal feelings may manifest in behaviors such as frequent crying, sharp and hurtful comments, a pessimistic outlook, and statements that reveal a sense of being overwhelmed by life.

+ Physical Symptoms of Depression

The body has a way of manifesting symptoms when a person is suffering emotionally. Depressed people may experience a change in appetite and in sleep patterns. In addition, depressed people tend to have several physical complaints and often take more trips to the doctor than usual.

+ Cognitive Symptoms of Depression

People who experience depression tend to think negatively about themselves. You may notice your friend making self-deprecating comments such as, “You’re a great leader. I could never lead without messing the whole thing up.” Moreover, the person may have difficulty thinking clearly, concentrating, or making decisions. If untreated, depression can lead to thoughts of death or, in the worst case, suicide. Be sensitive to comments such as, “I just want to fall asleep forever” or “I can’t go on like this anymore.”

+ Behavioral Symptoms of Depression

Decreased energy, tiredness, and fatigue are characteristics of depression. You may notice that your friend's house has not been cleaned in some time, personal hygiene has declined, he or she is sleeping much more than usual, and your friend isn't enjoying things he or she normally loves.

+ Spiritual Symptoms of Depression

When a person is depressed, he or she may have a hard time connecting with God and believing in God's goodness and providence. Prayer may become difficult for the person, as he or she may feel hopeless or guilty for not praying enough, in the right way, or about the right things. If the person's individual spirituality suffers during depression, corporate spirituality is likely to suffer as well. That is, he or she may have difficulty getting to church due to fatigue, and once at church worship may be difficult.

+ Reasons for Depression

Most mental health practitioners agree that the combination of internal and external factors affect a person's mood. Here are some common influencers of depression:

- Genetic, biochemical, and hormonal factors
- Family history of depression
- Loss within relationship—death, divorce, or geographical relocation
- Feeling unsafe and insecure in relationships
- Change in employment status
- Dissatisfaction in work and/or work environment
- Negative thinking



Care Tips

When a person is experiencing depression, it's difficult to know how to be present with him or her in the darkness. You want to let your friend know that you are caring and supportive, but you may feel drained by the heaviness and pessimism when you are with the person. Here are some tips to help you serve your friend in the struggle to get out of depression.

+ **Actively listen.**

Encouraging your friend to talk about his or her sadness will foster understanding, which can help the person feel a sense of control over emotions instead of feeling controlled by emotions. Although the feelings may frighten you, don't be afraid; just listen as you would to any friend of yours.

+ **Spend time with your friend.**

When a person is depressed, the natural tendency is to hide from others and try to recover on one's own. Your friend may be hiding because he or she is afraid of appearing weak or disturbed. But that's exactly the opposite of what is needed. A depressed person needs other people! Your presence will help shoulder the burden of depression, allow for rest, stave off loneliness, guard against suicide, and provide strength.

+ **Suggest enjoyable activities.**

Your depressed friend may not be able to come up with enjoyable activities due to a lack of excitement and joy. So share your joy! Suggest activities that he or she once enjoyed or those that you enjoy. Even if your friend seems resistant, there is a part of him or her that longs to do enjoyable things—it's simply buried under depression. Be persistent—human contact and enjoyable activities are good for the person!

+ **Exercise.**

It's a vicious cycle. The fatigue and lack of motivation caused by depression significantly impairs a depressed person's ability to exercise...but

regular exercise has been shown to be a buffer against depression. You will be helping your friend immensely by committing to regular exercise with him or her. Do it once a week, twice a week, or even once a day—any little bit will help! Play a sport, take an exercise class, or walk together after dinner.

+ Prepare meals.

When a friend is depressed, he or she may lose the motivation to cook and the desire to eat. Offer to prepare meals for your friend or to cook together. The food and the fellowship will be invaluable!

+ Be nonjudgmental.

Depressed people judge themselves every day, so the last thing they need is a friend who judges them, too. Communicate patience and grace. By doing this, you may help your friend become more patient and gracious toward him or herself.

SCRIPTURE HELP

These Scriptures can help you and your friend as you face the depression together.

+ Psalms 31; 32:1-7

+ Psalm 42:1-5

+ Psalm 139

+ Isaiah 40:29-31

+ Jeremiah 17:5-8

+ Romans 15:13

+ 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

+ 2 Corinthians 4:8-9

+ Ephesians 6:10-18

+ Philippians 4:4-8



Counseling Tips

Many times depression calls for a professional counselor. Even so, there are many ways you can personally help counsel your friend through this tough time.

+ Build and maintain trust.

Trust takes time—it takes positive experiences built on more positive experiences. But once trust is built, it's easy to break—especially when things said in secret are later shared with others. As you counsel your friend, be sure to keep a policy of confidentiality—the *only* time you should talk to someone else without your friend's permission is if your friend is abusing him or herself or another person.

+ Validate and normalize emotions.

Without crawling into the pit of depression with your friend, you can validate his or her emotions by expressing understanding and care. Normalizing depression can also help the person feel less alone in the process. By recalling another friend or family member who struggles with mood problems, you may bring the depressed person a sense of relief that he or she is not the first or the last person to go through such a struggle.

+ Challenge faulty thinking.

Depression impairs people's thinking. Depressed people often feel unworthy of good relationships, success on the job, or a peaceful lifestyle. They often think that God has cursed them and that life is hopeless. If your friend expresses these feelings, gently challenge him or her, and speak the truth of God's love for him or her. Remind your friend that recovery from depression is a process, but it's treatable through professional counseling, fellowship, prayer, time, and medication if necessary.

+ Create positive affirmations.

Depression clouds the ability to think positively. One way to counter this is to help your friend come up with positive affirmations about him or herself. For instance, he or she may state, “I am treasured by God and worthy of love” or “I am a good artist.” It doesn’t matter if your friend wholeheartedly believes the affirmation or not, it will still serve as a reminder of who one is—a beloved creation and child of God. Encourage your friend to repeat the affirmations daily.

+ Trust God for your friend.

Don’t be afraid to make mistakes! Trust God as you learn to care for and counsel your friend. Pray for your friend regularly, and ask God to give you wisdom and insight into your friend’s heart.

WHEN TO REFER

+ When your friend becomes suicidal—If your friend expresses a desire to end his or her life, get help.

+ When your friend is a danger to others—If your friend expresses a sincere desire to harm another person, refer him or her to a mental healthcare worker, and notify the person whom he or she has plans to harm.

+ When a child is endangered or neglected—If your friend has children or works with children and he or she is unable to care for them, encourage the person to get help, offer to take the children for a time if you’re able, or notify child protective services.

+ When your friend’s daily functioning is impaired—Depression can impair a person’s social, occupational, and personal functioning. If you know that the person is not engaging socially, their work performance is suffering, or your friend is unable to get out of bed, eat, groom, and/or bathe, get help.



Group Tips

A small group can be a *huge* source of support and strength to a friend struggling with depression. These tips will help your group minister to your friend.

+ Talk about it.

Every person in a group influences every other person in the group. Together, identify ways in which the depression has influenced the group. Some people may notice that they're feeling depressed, frustrated, compassionate, or even angry. Take time to help people understand and empathize with the depressed person. As a group, talk about and research the dynamics of depression. Ask your depressed friend to share how he or she is feeling. Encourage others to share their own experiences with depression. Promote compassion, empathy, and knowledge within your group.

+ Pray together.

Prayer can be one of the most important factors in fighting depression. Encourage your friend to share specific prayer requests during the group time. Pray together as a group, and also ask group members to pray daily for their friend.

+ Show your support in fun, practical ways.

Create care baskets—Include cards, encouraging Scripture verses, herbal tea, music, movies, energy bars, gift certificates, and other fun things!

Regularly have group fun nights—Tailor them to your friend's liking by doing the things you know he or she used to enjoy.

Check in on the person—Organize a visit and phone call list that covers the person for a month at a time. Be sure that someone is either calling or visiting that person every day—especially in the early part of the depression. Once your friend has found a counselor and stabilized emotionally, the frequency of visits and phone calls could decrease to once per week.

Affirm your friend—Regularly send encouraging notes, “out of the blue” gifts, and funny e-mails. These will serve as reminders of your love and support.

+ Remember...

Reaching out to a person who is swimming in sadness and hopelessness is the best thing you can do! Don't give up—your efforts are making a huge difference.

HELPING A FRIEND FIND HELP

+ Assess your friend's openness—You need to establish where your friend falls in terms of his or her openness to seeking help from a professional.

+ Deal with resistance—If your friend resists the idea of seeking help, ask why. Point out that people who have physical pain see a doctor. It's as natural for people with emotional pain to seek professional help.

+ Educate—Together, research what counseling is all about.

+ Follow up—As your friend ventures into counseling in order to manage depression, he or she will likely appreciate your continued support—ask general questions, pray for your friend, and affirm him or her regularly.



What Not to Say

+ **“As Christians, we should show the joy of the Lord.”**

This statement leaves no room for the spectrum of emotions common to the human experience. By making statements like this, you'll only cause your friend to feel further away from God than he or she already does. Your friend is probably aware that depression is not God's emotional design for anyone, and yet he or she still can't stop being depressed. As Christians, we should be human and show support and love when our brothers or sisters are struggling to find joy.

+ **“Stop being so negative, and look at the positive.”**

This statement may be said with good intentions, but looking at the good things in life isn't the answer for a person with serious depression. While negative thought patterns are one aspect of depression, it's a more complicated matter—depression isn't a choice and can't just disappear with an attitude adjustment. If your friend could simply “not be so negative,” he or she would. Saying something of this nature would be like telling a blind person to not be so blind.

+ **“I know that you're better than this—don't give in!”**

Saying this suggests that your friend is falling short and somehow failing to control his or her emotions. Your friend is likely already dealing with issues of self-worth and feelings of failure—this statement will only confirm those feelings.

What to Say



+ **“God is with you in this dark time.”**

By telling your friend this, you're reminding him or her of the relentless presence of God in all emotional states. You're telling the person that

God is no stranger to depression and he won't leave or disappear when life is tough.

+ “How can I pray for you?”

In this statement, you're communicating that you wish to accommodate your friend spiritually as he or she journeys through this darkness.

+ “I love you.”

Although this may seem too simple, when it's said often enough and demonstrated, it can make all the difference.

+ “If you ever need anything, I'm here. I'll call you on Friday to see how you're doing.”

Someone struggling with depression has a hard time taking a first step with friends and needs to be pursued. Letting someone know you'll be there can be powerful. Be sincere, and then follow through on your words.

+ “I've been thinking about you today.”

This statement reveals that you care. Follow it with thoughtful questions. Anything that shows you listened to a previous conversation and remembered what your friend said will demonstrate that you believe he or she is worth listening to and paying attention to.

+ “You're doing a great job with...”

Again, you're confirming that the person with depression is worthwhile, despite what he or she may be feeling. You're focusing on positive things even if he or she is incapable of doing so.

FINDING A COUNSELOR

Below are some things to consider when looking for a therapist.

+ Gender—Most people will know whether they want a male or female counselor. Be sure to ask your friend this, and help to find a counselor of that gender.

+ Fee—If your friend has financial constraints, he or she may need to find a counselor who works on a sliding scale. This means the counselor will charge a fee based on the person's income. Your friend may wish to utilize any mental health benefits provided by insurance. Community mental health centers tend to charge very little in comparison to private practitioners. However, these centers are designed to serve the masses, including persons with severe mental illnesses. Your friend would need to feel comfortable with that setting.

+ Theoretical orientation—Counselors vary in their approach to working with clients. Counselors can focus on any of the following: (a) changing maladaptive thoughts and behaviors, (b) looking at the family of origin and developing healthy relationships, (c) providing support and unconditional positive regard, (d) making meaning out of life and problems, or (e) a combination of methods. You may help your friend determine one goal for treatment and seek a counselor whose approach can help him or her reach that goal.

+ Spirituality—For some people spirituality is an important component to the therapeutic relationship. A Christian person who struggles with depression may desire a Christian counselor so that the beliefs inherent to the faith can be used in healing.

+ Education and training—Counselor education and training can be just as varied as theoretical orientation. *Biblical counselors* are typically lay leaders who have biblical knowledge and gifts of mercy and exhortation. *Masters-level counselors* have spent two to three years in a graduate program for counseling or clinical psychology. *Clinical psychologists* have five to seven years of graduate schooling and can perform psychological testing and diagnosis of problems. *Psychiatrists* have gone to medical school and are able to prescribe medication.

YOU WANT TO HELP, BUT DON'T KNOW HOW...

Supporting your friend in the darkness

*There's a woman I know who feels completely hopeless.
One of my classmates doesn't enjoy any of the activities he used to love.
My next-door neighbor is filled with negative thoughts.
Our small-group leader has anxiety about everything.*

Depression is real. And whether it's brought on by a job loss, a family history of depression, a bad breakup, or just plain negative thinking—your friend-in-need requires your support more than ever. Inside you'll find powerful ways to share God's love and comfort with hurting friends.

You'll also find Scripture connections, guidelines for referring your friend to a professional counselor, and additional resources.

EACH TOPIC INCLUDES

Real-life narrative

—learn from someone who has been there

Care & counseling tips

—practical ways to offer individual and group support

What to say & what not to say

—positive encouragement and advice on what *not* to say

Other handbooklets available:

- Addiction
- Divorce
- Financial Crisis
- Rebellious Child



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