

“Coping With Depression”

Psalm 102:1-4 & Romans 7:15-25; 8:26-28

July 8th, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Depression is more easily defined by talking about what it leads to in real life. For instance, there is a difference between discouragement and depression.

One day I was sitting in a restaurant with some friends and a high school student in a nearby booth made a comment about a certain tie being “a five stripe tie.” Did you know about the secret striping system in men’s ties because I didn’t.

Apparently tie manufacturers put a strengthening fabric in many ties and this lining is designed with up to 5 stripes woven into it. “The best ties,” according to one of my friends at our table, “have five stripes and the less stripes, the poorer the quality.”

Now back in my youth, when my dad was telling me the facts of life, he never mentioned this one. Somehow I had made my way through most of the span of my life and hadn’t gained this piece of information. So I sat there throughout the meal amazed by my naiveté but I laughed off this stripe business as just a clever marketing gimmick. When you stop to think about it, if the government won’t even mandate a safe level of staffing at hospitals as we come to the brink of death, how much money are they going to put into regulating, patrolling and enforcing the level of truthfulness of tie striping production? I haven’t seen any headlines that said:

President and CFO of Great Lakes Neckties Jailed For Fraudulent Tie Striping.
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When I got home, that evening, the first thing I did was rush to my closet and turn all my ties inside out.

Discouragement is when you discover that none of your ties are five strippers. I had a couple 3’s and one 4 but no 5’s. That could be because all my ties came from garage sales. My favorite tie has a tag on it that says, “Manufacturer not

responsible for the health of the wearer of this tie.”

Life has it’s discouragements but our daily experiences do not result in depression. Depression is a common mood disturbance where there are feelings of sadness, intense disappointment or loneliness that leads to specific behavior. (*Yea, I know, you’re saying I don’t have to tell you about depression.*)

Depression causes people to withdraw from people and activities. It causes a loss of pleasure and enjoyment of life. It results in physical discomfort, aches and pains, fatigue, poor digestion, sleep disturbance, restlessness and boredom. Depression makes us unable to concentrate and causes us to feel worthless and hopeless. In fact, there are different types of depression: mild, moderate or chronic.

Mild Depression

Mild depression is the most common. It is brief and doesn’t seriously interfere with normal activities. Anniversaries, new jobs, a move, boredom and holidays cause us all to get “the blues.”

By now, most of us know that Christmas is predictably the most depressing time of the year for most adults. Professionals working in the helping professions see more depressed people near the holidays than any other time of the year. You know this. It’s because of the false picture of Christmas we learn as children.

Throughout the Christmas’s of our youth, the whole family was smiling at one another under the tree and everyone was getting gifts. When we are older, if we don’t smell the turkey in the oven and get our more sophisticated adult gratifications met and have a wonderful relationship with all relatives, Christmas just isn’t the same.¹

¹ Realistically speaking, there should be some tension in our feelings about Christmas time. I agree with the psychologists

As Christians, we should rejoice over the incarnation of Jesus Christ but when it comes down to planning the extra meals and paying the bills for all the obligatory gifts, the company parties and events and the cleanup of the season, I think for most of us, the holidays are more demanding than they should to be. We seem to have no control over our lives at that time of the year and frankly, we're quite relieved when it's over.

Moderate Depression

When you experience moderate depression you feel more of a sense of hopelessness. This is similar to mild depression but more intense and more prolonged.

An unhappy event, such as a loss of a loved one, a career setback or a problem with a family member – all of these can trigger moderate depression. Obviously you can see that these types are not hard-and-fast and these descriptions of types of depression are only relative. But moderate depression can make our daily activities harder.

Conflicts seem more daunting and difficult. The depression drains our energy and because we're approaching our lives with less of our natural enthusiasm, creativity and drive, all of life seems to be diminished; yet we come out of moderate depression in the passing of time.

Chronic or Clinical Depression

Chronic, or even deeper clinical, depression is a state of being where one can actually feel separated from reality. You can come to feel so depressed that you feel as if life is passing you by – as if you are watching a cartoon and you see yourself in that cartoon. These are feelings of extreme detachment from life and everyone and everything feels like “them” and “out there.”

If people become unable to get back into reality and if they can not get themselves to perform their daily adult living tasks, then they are in need of intervention. When people are

who say that it is more healthy and realistic to feel some sense of Scrooge's bah-humbug skepticism about the glitter and artificial gaiety of the consumer-driven holidays.

simply unable to cope and become dysfunctional; or they engage in dangerous or self-destructive behavior; professional medical and psychological help is needed.

From time to time, though, and to various degrees, everyone experiences depression and it is healthy and normal to recognize this.

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As Paul was writing this morning's text, it seems as if he was depressed. Kings Saul and David were depressed at various times. Jesus, at one point, said “The sorrow in My heart is so great that it almost crushes Me.”² I don't know about you but if I were Jesus and was spending all of my energies teaching those disciples and was about to lay down my life – but saw that after three years they still didn't quite get it about what it all was about – I'd be depressed.

Throughout my youth, I kept hearing the idea that Christians never get depressed or have any emotional or psychological problems. It was said that only non-Christians get depressed. This implied that if a Christian is “in right fellowship with God” they should never experience despair or depression. To do so would be evidence of a lack of faith and a life distanced from God.

I believe that kind of teaching has caused more illness than any other misinformation in the Christian church. If you have problems, and everyone around is smiling and supposedly feeling fine, you come to think that you must be abnormal. So you cover it up and don't deal with it and it only gets worse.

You should hear some of the fundamentalist Christian-sounding rhetoric that comes from some of the poor souls who have been committed to mental institutions.

Let's face it, we are fragile people and our lives are filled with complexity. No matter how religiously focused we are, we continue to experience hardships and pain and frankly we get depressed sometimes. Life is sometimes harsh and our own fears end up causing a lot of our own pain.

² Matthew 26:38

People's inability to cope with their pain can become so severe that they develop schizophrenia. This is that long and scary word for not being able to realistically perceive reality and act accordingly. A person could suffer from delusions. One could come to believe that everyone in life is "out to get them."³ Another person could have regular mood swings from high elation to deep despair, causing them to be dysfunctional.

Causes

What are some of the causes of depression? From my reading I've found about five.

① Personality

One cause is a person's personality type. People who are highly self-critical and very demanding experience disappointment in themselves and in others. Depression can be a frequent visitor with perfectionists because their impossibly high standards are often unrealistic and unobtainable. Not only do they fail but so does everyone else when they are measured by this judging and overly critical set of standards.⁴

Another segment of the population feels that most of life is tragically unfair and angst is a regular part of their personality. They feel that if anything bad is going to happen, it is likely to happen to them and that it will be worse for them than for most people who have to go through it. Because they are very artistic, they feel that their life is unique and their experiences are usually more unusual than those of others. The unfairness of it all and the expectation that their sorrows and tragedies will be somehow worse than others is an open door to depression in their lives.⁵

Lastly, think of the passive and dependent person who constantly depends on someone else to tell them what to do with their lives. They may experience the depression that is a result of their anger turned inward. Often the anger is against

³ paranoid

⁴ This pattern corresponds to 1's on the Enneagram scale. See Helen Palmer's *The Enneagram* ISBN: 0062506838

⁵ This corresponds to the 4 pattern in Palmer's Enneagram personality scale.

themselves for not being more assertive and self-directing.

② Environmental Influences

There are environmental factors at the root of depression. You may find yourself in an dysfunctional family, social or working situation. You could be depressed from the serious interpersonal conflicts that cause pain and anxiety. Being married to an alcoholic could cause depression.

A change in your life-style could cause depression. For instance, a woman gives birth to a baby and is surprised to find that her whole life is engulfed by someone who is now demanding something of her around the clock. That temporary situation could cause depression and even some guilt for feeling that disappointment.

③ Biochemical Conditions

Biochemical functions of the human body cause depression. Our body has mood-influencing hormones, like Serotonin, that affect our emotional states. When there are these chemical imbalances, our moods are directly affected. Even some medications we take for other problems cause depression as a side-effect.

Besides our bodily chemistry, our metabolism has a lot to do with depression. Check this out for yourself. Next time you notice that you feel down about something or you're awake in the middle of the night worried about a person or an issue, notice something.

Compare your feeling states at night with how you feel during the day. Notice that at one time you felt worried about it and at another time you didn't feel worried but had it in perspective. The difference was *not* that the troubling item itself had changed but your energy states changed because you were tired. That's why, on some days, you feel that you can handle anything that comes along. At other times, when you're tired, you feel hopeless about it. The extent of our worry is all in our head and our low bodily metabolism affects our thinking.

④ Genetics

A biochemical tendency to depression may be genetic. Depression is not inherited but the

tendency to suffer from some types of depressive illnesses does run in certain families.

⑥ Unmet Needs

Depression can occur when our needs are not being met. The influential psychiatric scholar, Abraham Maslow, taught that all people have a list of important needs which range from survival to fulfillment of higher types of needs. Starting at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs and moving upward, some of them are:

① Food, ② shelter, . . . ③ love, ④ belonging, ⑤ achievement, ⑥ competence, ⑦ feeling confident, . . . ⑧ respect and recognition from others and ⑨ a feeling of place in society.

Sometime when you're alone, think about each of these items on this list. If you're feeling depressed, it could be that one or more of these needs are not being met in your life.

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So far, we know what depression is and that everyone experiences it. We see some of the things that cause depression and the types of depression that are caused. But how can you tell if a loved one or colleague is suffering from depression?

Signs of Depression

Depressed people could exhibit one or more of these symptoms:

- A general slowing down and neglect of responsibilities and their appearance.
- Loss of appetite
- Doing pointless over-activity
- Poor memory or inability to concentrate
- Irritability
- Emotional flatness or emptiness – an inability to find pleasure in anything
- A loss of sexual desire or warm feelings for family and friends
- Exaggerated self-blame, guilt or low self-esteem
- Sleeping disturbances, such as early-morning wakefulness or sleeping too much
- Chronic fatigue and lack of energy
- Unexplained headaches, backaches, digestive upsets or similar complaints

Resolving Depression

Moving on from the biology and psychology, what can we do about depression as Christian adults? Here are six areas of developmental growth but as we find in working through anything, whether it is in fixing a machine or trying to heal a hurting relationship, it takes discipline and some sense of orderliness in the hard work. If you feel depressed but consider these as areas of your own growth, you will likely identify areas of work that would be helpful to your healing.

① Your Self-Worth (Is it determined by comparison?)

First, take a look at what you think of yourself but try to do so not taking yourself too seriously. We've got to learn to laugh at ourselves sometimes and expect ourselves to fail in certain areas. I don't know about your career experiences but in mine, I feel that ministers who take themselves too seriously are bound to go off the deep end.

As individuals, we should realize that there is always someone who is better than us, whatever we are doing in life. We have to strive for our own ideals of excellence but avoid obsession with always winning.

In terms of our own self-concept, we ought to realize that other people who have exaggerated confidence and aggressiveness are probably signaling their feelings of inferiority. Someone once said that we should never be perfectionists simply because we've never met one whom we liked.

Additionally, in terms of our self-concept, we ought to view our failures as an opportunities for learning. If we are not failing somewhere or making mistakes in any part of our lives, we're not growing.

In terms of ourselves as individuals, we should not expect everyone to love or like us. We should live in the present with an eye to the future and not spend too much time living in the past. All these things are hard to do but worth trying.

② Your Support System

Crucial to combating depression is the support system of our family and friends. No

matter what commitment we have made in our careers, we should spend as much time with our family or closest supporting friends as we can. Some of those moments of sharing will come only once in a life time. We certainly need one another not only for emotional support but for keeping our sense of reality up to date. Our friends help us see more of reality and tend to let us know if we are worried about something small that actually should be considered worrisome. Our friends give us different camera angles on the things with which we are seeing only in a close-up view with our own lens.

If you don't have one or more people with whom you can totally be yourself, on a regular basis, expect to be experiencing depression. If you can't safely be yourself with someone else, you don't have intimacy. Life is lonely and sometimes harsh and we need one another to protect us from the harshness of life.

③ **Your Diet**

Thirdly, watch your diet. Remember that our energy and emotional states are very much tied to our metabolisms. Adelle Davis is right: "You are what you eat." Our nutrition is one of the closest companions of our health.

④ **Your Exercise**

Closely related to diet is exercise. You will find a daily walk will make your body feel better and your times of feeling blue shorter and less intense.

⑤ **Some Things To Which You Can Look Forward**

Having realistic short and long range goals is helpful. You might have just finished remodeling your house, completed a degree or gotten your last child off to college. Perhaps it is common sense that we should feel as if we are doing something with ourselves as far as possible. Do you have something to which you can look forward?

⑥ **Prayer**

Something that should be done in concert with all of these other things is prayer. Do you take time to express yourself to God about your experiences? Do you have times when you tell

God the way you feel and how you think things ought to be? David certainly did three thousand years ago and if you haven't read Psalms lately, do it but be prepared to see his feelings expressed to God in ways you might never dare.

The beauty and the comfort of God's Spirit living within us is powerfully expressed by Paul in Romans 8:26. Hear this again as a paraphrase in words Paul might have used if he wrote this in our own modern idiom. As you hear this, be mindful of the compassion of God's presence in the midst of our anguish.

'Likewise, God's Spirit, within us, helps us when we are weak with depression. When we don't know how to pray (or even feel like praying about something, . . . feeling like throwing punches in the air and telling everyone where to go) . . . it is then that the Holy Spirit personally intercedes with the One Who made us. This intercession is done in ways that go beyond mere words.

God knows what is in our hearts and minds – our aches and anxieties – because of the interceding of God's Spirit within us. So we know that God works out everything toward ultimate good for those who love God.'



You see, each of us is called into this life for a purpose. It could be that you may try to work through all of these suggestions for depression and find that you are still at your wits end.

There are certain causes of depression that are biological and can be helped. But as you work in a disciplined way through these several areas, you will come to see that they represent most of what life is about.

All of us go about our lives and try to find balance. All of these areas of mindfulness should be supported by our faith community. We should be helping one another. But what a difference the presence of God makes in our lives.

No matter how rugged life can become, no matter how severe a depression can become, we can make it with God by our side and the support of compassionate friends who are willing to do the work of making life safe enough that we can be all

whom we are. After all, that's exactly the way it will be for us once we cross over into the fully realized presence of God in eternity. ☩

