The Reality of Depression

It's easy to find Scripture passages that speak of joy and the role it is to have in the Christian's life. Nehemiah declares that “the joy of the Lord is your strength”, while the Psalms speak often of the joy of our salvation, exhorting us frequently to make a joyful noise to the Lord. Reading these passages alone, it's possible to come away believing that the Christian should always be happy. Well-meaning Christians believe that to be depressed indicates the presence of some sin, perhaps a lack of faith or refusal to claim the joy that rightfully belongs to the believer. But the reality is that Christians are not exempt from the pain and suffering that is plentiful in our fallen world. Many Christians experience sadness, and many find themselves dealing with depression at some point in their lives. How can a Scriptural view of joy be reconciled with the reality of suffering and depression?

It can be difficult to integrate Scripture with experience, and it can be particularly challenging to understand psychology and faith as being in harmony with one another. There are a variety of ways to reach such an understanding, and it is not feasible to address all approaches to integration here. But if we believe that God is the creator of all things, of all revelation, and of humanity as uniquely designed beings, then we can begin to see how depression might fit into a Scriptural perspective on mental health issues.

Let us remember that God created humans to experience a wide range of emotions; the author of Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is a season for all things, “a time for every matter under heaven” [3:1]. There is a time to weep, and a time to laugh. Because we live in a fallen world, we experience painful circumstances that can precipitate grief, sadness, and sometimes the more severe symptoms of depression. Sometimes, negative feelings are the appropriate response to our circumstances.

Fallenness and Depression

As fallen people, our abilities to think and feel are also subject to sin. That is, our perceptions of events and situations may not always be accurate, and the emotions that arise from our perceptions might therefore be negatively influenced. It's not that our thoughts and feelings are necessarily sinful – though, often, they certainly are; we are simply not perfectly balanced in our ability to think clearly and respond with appropriate, regulated emotion.

Many people view events, people, and situations in an overly negative (or positive) light. They might believe that they are the target of some negative action, or think that they are worthless and have no hope for the future. Or, they might believe that they are more skilled, intelligent, or beautiful than others believe them to be. Our capacity for “thinking errors” is almost limitless! And if we do not always think rationally or accurately, think of the consequences for our feelings, which often flow directly out of our interpretations.

For Christians, these “thinking errors” can mean that we do not always remember that our hope is in Christ. We may not always be mindful that the joy of the Lord is our strength. The promises of God might be far from our thoughts when we are experiencing very difficult circumstances. Thankfully, God has created us to function in a predictable, orderly way. He designed us in a complex way, to have both psychology and biology, to operate on rational, emotional, spiritual, and physical levels. Depression might be viewed as a dysfunction involving each of these levels: there can be cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and biological factors that contribute to depression for any particular individual.

Scripture and Depression

Given that depression is a reality for many Christians and flows from disordered thoughts, feelings, and biology, how can we address depression from a Christian perspective? Following the
Psalmist’s example, we see that it is perfectly appropriate both to experience a full range of emotions and to express them to others. David pours out his heart before the Lord, creating beautiful songs of both mourning and rejoicing. He acknowledges his sufferings and is honest about his feelings of persecution, frustration, and hopelessness (at least, the appearance of hopelessness in his worldly circumstances).

Yet even while his circumstances appear to be hopeless, David also serves as an example of the principles we can apply to help comfort and encourages ourselves and one another in times of depression. Many of these principles coincide with therapeutic principles found in psychology. This should be unsurprising, given that, as mentioned above, the Lord created us to have complex rational and emotional layers of functioning.

For example, we see throughout Scripture the exhortation to meditate upon the Word day and night. From a psychological perspective, we have found that what we repeatedly think about certainly influences our automatic thoughts and behaviors on a day-to-day basis. Those who are depressed often become stuck in negative thought patterns, but we can lovingly encourage these dear brothers and sisters to spend time in the Word (see “Equipping Helpers: Depression” for ideas on how to do this). It’s important to keep in mind that the Biblical flavor of meditation on the Word suggests a long-term pursuit rather than a “quick fix” for feeling blue. Just as patterns of negative thoughts might take a long time to become ingrained, learning to dwell positively upon the rich promises of God can be a lengthy process that involves new habits of the heart and mind.

We also find in Scripture many guidelines concerning relationships. We are to care for one another, edifying and building one another up. Believers are not to forsake meeting together [Heb 10:25]. When this happens properly, brothers and sisters in Christ are able to find the practical social support that they need in order to function well. From psychology, we know that depressed individuals often withdraw from social relationships, retreating into isolation and nursing their negative feelings by themselves. Isolation often creates feelings of loneliness and sadness that further contributes to a sense of worthlessness and depression; a depressed person's tendency toward isolation can ultimately perpetuate the cycle of depression. Thus, Scriptural principles for social relationships are consistent with what we know from psychology about emotional wellness. When we seek opportunities to draw others into loving, supportive relationships, particularly those who are struggling with depression, we are acting on God's designed pattern for healthy living.

As we gently point those who are depressed toward the spiritual habits that cultivate joy, we realize one of the many great benefits we have as believers. We have the great advantage of God's Word against which to compare our experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Our hope is certain, fixed outside ourselves and upon the finished work of Christ. For Christians who experience depression, there is a sure Foundation upon which to build, a solid Rock upon which to rest. The truths of Scripture are eternal, in contrast to the ups and downs of our emotions. And even if feelings and experience of depression continue to be a long-term struggle, as they do for many people, we as believers in Christ look forward to the day when every tear shall be wiped away and our emotional and spiritual functioning restored to perfection.

**Treating Depression Biblically**

Finally, it is important to remember that, while much comfort can be found in Scripture, there is no Biblical prohibition against the believer seeking professional help for problems that are beyond his ability to cope. Jesus validated the role of the physician in helping the sick when he used the illustration of physical healing to illuminate our need for righteousness [Mark 2:17]. Scriptural principles can often be incorporated into the therapeutic process, particularly those outlined above with regard to changing thought patterns and seeking social support. When professional counsel is
sought, therapy might be seen as a natural extension of the Biblical commands to love one another.

Medication is sometimes appropriate to heal the physical components of depression. To use a common metaphor, when depression feels like drowning in the ocean, medication can be a way to stay afloat so that one can learn to swim to shore. It is often not a permanent solution, but rather a temporary way to loosen the grip of depression so that the individual can work more effectively on changing depressive thoughts and behaviors. For some people, the biology of depression is so strong that medication might be a longer-term solution. As Christians, we can acknowledge the effect of fallenness on our bodies, and sometimes need to accept medication as a necessary way to restore health both physically and emotionally.

The Christian Care Center:
A Mental Health Resource for Christian Communities
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