Helping Depression

Believers are exhorted in Scripture to encourage one another, to provide support in times of trial and to participate in caring relationships at all times. When our brothers and sisters are struggling with depression, however, it’s easy for well-meaning Christians to make insensitive comments that can lead to further guilt, shame, or worthlessness. How can we offer Biblical encouragement to those who are depressed, without making these common mistakes? How may we discern when to direct a friend to seek professional services? A few guidelines might help you to help others more effectively.

Compassion

Above all, we can regard our suffering brothers and sisters with compassion. Someone who is struggling with feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness is not in a position to receive further condemnation for a lack of Christian joy or weak faith. Our God is the “Father of mercies and God of all comfort” [2 Cor 1:3], and we are instructed to let our speech “always be gracious, seasoned with salt” [Col 4:6]. Only when a bridge of love and support has been built may we earn the privilege of speaking counsel into the lives of others. We can show compassion by first allowing our brothers and sisters to be honest about their negative thoughts and feelings, and then responding in a sensitive manner to offer support and encouragement. Sometimes, referral for professional services is the most compassionate course of action.

Honesty

We can remember that it is okay to be honest about our feelings and experiences. Think of Job, whose great suffering prompted honest outpourings of emotion [cf. Job 7:11]. Certainly he did not consistently display joy and happiness throughout his tragic circumstances. And the Psalmist confessed to a wide range of feelings in response to his outward condition [cf. Psalm 22]. As we approach our friends who struggle with depression, we can seek to provide a safe place for such an expression – whatever the content. When we validate the experiences and feelings of those who are depressed, we let them know that they have value and worth. We can help these brothers and sisters move toward healing, but it is important to first listen and grant them the opportunity to be honest about their feelings without judgment.

It is easy to fall into the trap of dismissing or arguing with constant negative thoughts. We might respond to such a “complaining” friend with constant reassurances of his strengths and positive qualities. But it is often far more helpful to come alongside a brother in his suffering and to empathize with his pain. Reflective listening skills can be a great asset in doing this; we might listen to a friend’s negative feelings and respond with, “What I hear you saying is….”. We could add some empathy with a comment like, “Wow, it must be so difficult to feel…”. While these seem like simple steps, our responses could become the first time she has felt truly heard and understood!

Social Support

We can draw our brothers and sisters into Christian community. Scripture encourages us to bear one another’s burdens [Gal 6:2], and is filled with commands to meet together as believers. Indeed, Christianity was established as a corporate religion in which the people of God are regularly called together to worship, feast upon the Word and sacrament, and collectively address issues facing the church. God created us to thrive in relationship with Himself and with other believers. Those struggling with depression often withdraw into isolation, effectively cutting themselves off
from the benefits of community. When we observe this happening, we can help to break the cycle of depression by gently and patiently inviting our depressed brothers and sisters into nurturing relationship. It may be helpful to extend an invitation to church, a Bible study, or simply a fun get-together to help lift someone’s spirits. It is important to remember that depression affects one’s desire for social interaction. We should approach depressed individuals with this understanding, and lovingly persist in reaching out even when our invitations are met with refusal.

Though social support does not need to focus on talking about depression in order to be beneficial, it can be helpful to broach the subject directly. We can do this in a sensitive manner by offering observations of our friend’s behavior, noting any particular changes that concern us. We might mention that we’ve noticed a change in demeanor, or that we’ve missed her at recent events, and ask how she’s doing. She might dodge our questions, but she will know that we’ve noticed and that we care. Keep in mind that those who are depressed could interpret caring questions as a sign that they are a burden to others. We might offer reassurances, and do our best to ward off feelings of guilt that might arise.

**Encouragement**

*We can offer regular encouragement to change negative thoughts to positive.* Negative thoughts are a hallmark of depression. When we consistently rehearse the same thoughts and beliefs in our minds, the result is a schema, or mental map. New experiences are filtered through this map, and interpreted using mental shortcuts to the same thoughts and beliefs that created the map. When our schemas include many negative thoughts and beliefs about ourselves and the world, the result is a pattern often seen in depression. One way to combat depression, then, is to combat negative or irrational thoughts by rehearsing positive, balanced ones instead.

We can encourage our friends who struggle with depression by consistently offering positive alternatives to their negative interpretations. That is not to say that we should take a super-sunny “Pollyanna” approach; rather, when we have listened and validated their negative thoughts and feelings, we can gently offer our speculations. For instance, if a friend has shared that he believes he can do nothing right, we might comment on how difficult it must be to feel that way. Then, we could mention something that he has done well recently, and ask whether he remembers it. We might encourage him to make a short list of his strengths, and to keep it in his pocket for moments when he feels particularly discouraged. Spontaneous compliments might also go a long way toward helping a depressed friend feel valued and encouraged. Another avenue of encouragement might be to provide regular notes or reminders of what God promises in Scripture – our hope in Christ, the glorious riches that are ours by grace, etc.

Encouragement should be given gently, and with sensitivity to our friend’s reactions. It is important for us not to become discouraged if we do not see him respond quickly to our encouragement. Positive thoughts and words will not likely be a quick fix for depression – mental maps can be difficult to change. But offering consistent reminders of hope might be a helpful first step to re-writing those maps. We are also not aware of the other factors at work in his life; we may be only one vessel that the Lord is using to bring healing in our brother’s life. Patience and persistence are key to bringing light into the darkness of depression.

**Referral for Professional Services**

*We can serve those suffering from depression by directing them to appropriate professional services.* When we’ve learned to identify common symptoms of depression, we can provide a valuable service to those around us by assisting in the process of emotional triage. When we notice a friend who seems to be particularly depressed, who displays multiple symptoms of depression (see “Depression Checklist”),
or who does not respond to our efforts to provide social support and encouragement, we can serve
as a catalyst for healing by referring for professional services.

Our brothers and sisters who struggle with depression might feel hesitant to seek therapy or
counseling. We can offer hope by reassuring these friends that they are not alone. There are many
others who experience depression and have been greatly helped by special interventions designed to
target symptoms of depression. We might familiarize ourselves with local referral resources – one or
two therapists in the area who are trained to treat depression, perhaps a Christian therapist if
possible – and provide a list of names and phone numbers. Those who are depressed are more likely
to respond to a friend's referral than they are to spontaneously seek a therapist.

Keep in mind that severity of depression affects the type of treatment that is helpful. Mild
depression arising from life circumstances might be effectively resolved by pastoral counseling or a
mentoring relationship. However, moderate or severe depression, whether triggered by life events or
by underlying biological factors, usually requires treatment by a specially trained professional. Seek
the name of a licensed psychologist or licensed professional counselor (LPC) to pass along to a
friend who is depressed. For those close to campus, get in touch with the Psychological Services
Center at 757.352.4488.

Prayer

_We can lift our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer._ God is the great physician, the author of life
and bringer of healing. The most powerful tool we have for helping is to pray for those struggling
with depression. We can pray for specific change in our friend’s life, and we can petition the Lord
for wisdom and discernment as we interact with her on a daily basis. We might ask for God to
illuminate the triggers of her depression so that she can address them in therapy. We can also pray
for healing of the biological underpinnings of depression. God is sovereign over our joys and
sufferings, and He is faithful to work all things together for the eternal good of His children [Rom
8:28].

Become Equipped

Campus Ministry exists to serve as a biblical Barnabas, encouraging students on their spiritual
journey. We believe in the biblical process of equipping (Eph. 4:11-16) and long to see students use
their God-given gifts and abilities to care for others. If you feel drawn to helping others deal with
their problems, contact the Campus Ministry office for specialized coaching and training.
[Ministry@regent.edu or 757.352.4840]

The Christian Care Center:
A Mental Health Resource for Christian Communities
Elizabeth A. Pearce, M.A. & Joshua A. Scheidle, M.S.