

## Theme: Depression

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*This issue*

- Why we ignore the signs of depression
- How to talk with somebody that you think is struggling with depression

Without getting into a lot of statistics, depression is very common. It is common among doctors, dentists, engineers, housewives, teachers and people working in ministry. Even though it can be found within any group of people, it continues to be something that many people do not recognize, especially in themselves. We do not recognize it for two reasons: we do not want to believe that we are vulnerable to depression, and we do not recognize the signs of depression when it is coming on.

It is interesting to note that among believers, people who grew up in strong religious families often have a much harder time recognizing their depression than do people who have turned to faith as adults. In fact many counselors have made this observation and much has been written on it. In some religious families, the motto is, “*There is no rest for the wicked and the righteous do not need it.*” This may be said as a joke, but in some families and even churches, this statement represents a strongly held belief that rest is self-indulgent and unnecessary, except for the truly weak. This type of thinking, as it turns out, is much less common in families that have little or nothing to do with religion.

Often it is these strongly held beliefs that make it difficult for people to recognize the signs of depression. Here are some of the more common beliefs that interfere with our ability to really understand what is going on in our own life and in the lives of others:

- If I am spiritual enough, I will not have any personal troubles.
- By changing how I behave, I can fix my personal problems.
- I just need to forget about my pain and trust God.
- I will not feel disappointed in others or in life if I am fully satisfied in God.
- I should do what other people expect of me if I am a really loving person.
- If I feel guilty, I can make myself feel better by doing good things.
- It is wrong for me to be angry and to think negative things.
- I just need to be more thankful.

Within our community of people, there are many people who struggle with these beliefs. During times of prolonged cultural stress, ministry challenges and relationship conflict, a person with these types of beliefs will ignore feelings of sadness, loneliness, discouragement and disappointment that can lead to depression. Instead of recognizing how they feel they dismiss their thoughts and feelings by saying to themselves, “I should not feel that,” or “I should not think that.” As a result, the negative thoughts or feeling are dismissed and they temporarily feel better. Yet, the next step leading to depression will be inevitable if their circumstances do not change. Even though we can quickly dismiss a negative thought or feeling, we cannot avoid what will happen if we push those negative thoughts and feelings away. There is always a consequence to the choices we make. If we do not pay attention to stress, discouragement, etc., then we will have problems falling asleep, staying asleep throughout the night, loss of energy, loss of appetite, poor memory, and a growing sense that our work has no meaning or purpose.

The person who keeps pushing away the thoughts and feelings they do not like is actually “planting” seeds into their life. These seeds will take root and start to produce fruit. From person

to person the fruit looks different, but in general, the harvest will be some kind of depression and/or addiction.

As a leader, knowing how to talk about depression is important. Often a teammate or friend will recognize that someone is struggling with depression before the depressed person is actually ready to see it himself. Keep in mind that men seem slower to recognize being depressed than women. Coming alongside others in an affirming but honest manner is key to helping a person talk through his struggles with you.

How would you respond to this situation as a leader? Roger, one of your team leaders, has started to make open, critical comments about his wife, physically looks tired, seems easily distracted, is resentful toward the country and culture that he lives in. He makes statements about not seeing any point to what he does, appears to have gained or lost a significant amount of weight, and has withdrawn from many of his normal activities and responsibilities and in turn has begun to spend more time (and perhaps money) in an unproductive, unwise manner. Obviously something is wrong, but how will you find out what it is?

If you simply ask, “Are you depressed?” you might hear in response, “Well isn’t everyone!” or, “Of course not!” Neither answer suggests that he is really ready to look at his problem with you. Often a person struggling with depression feels that given his circumstances, feeling burned out and hopeless is normal. In addition, he may believe that if his circumstances would change then he would feel better. He does not understand that it is how he is responding to his circumstances that is leading to the depression. His view of the problem, his view of the Father and his view of himself hinders him from responding in an adaptive way to his difficult situation. When a person becomes depressed all solutions look equally bad and unacceptable. A depressed person does not see that there may be solutions to his problems, nor does he view his circumstances as an opportunity to grow, trust and change.

Starting out a conversation with your team leader can begin with what you have noticed about him. You could say, “Roger, I have noticed that you seem a little different lately. It is hard for me to put my finger on it exactly, but you seem more impatient, you are not laughing as much as you used to, and you look tired. Have you noticed this as well?” At this point, if Roger is ready to talk with you, he will openly share with you. It is important to listen, ask questions, avoid telling stories about your struggles, and limit any advice giving. Rather, help your team leader by going through a simple checklist of depression symptoms so he becomes more aware of what really is going on. Here are few questions to ask: Do you have a hard time remembering things that you usually are able to remember? Is it hard for you to feel emotions like grief, joy or pleasure? Are you more irritable? Do the activities that usually seem enjoyable, no longer seem enjoyable? Do you spend less time with friends or interacting with family members? Is the future something you dread? Are mornings the most difficult part of your day? Are you having a hard time staying asleep or walking up and not falling back to sleep? Do you have feelings of guilt, but are unsure of why you have them? Has your appetite changed? If the person answers “yes” to most of these questions, help him find the care that he needs to talk through and overcome his depression.

*Next issue*

- Personality types and depression
- What to do when problems are denied