

ON DEPRESSION

BY BOB FOX, Red Mountain Community Church Associate Pastor and Elder Emeritus

Everyone gets the blues. They're a normal part of being alive emotionally, maybe even a part of being healthy. Depression is different. It drags on. You feel stuck. You become unmotivated. Things that once lifted your spirits do nothing for you. You feel isolated from God. You withdraw, where you once engaged. In some this withdrawal is quite pronounced, and they would sleep all day if they could.

What causes depression? It is certain that we feel depressed because of body chemistry. However that does not necessarily tell us that the cause of our depression is chemical. Three factors about how God has made you help formulate an approach to depression in yourself or in those you love.

First, we are made for God. Depression was not his design for us, but became our experience as a result of separation from him. That doesn't mean we can pray our way out of depression, but it does tell us that being right with God is part of the equation. Spiritual health may be the most important thing you strive for. It's what we're designed for.

Second, our moods are impacted by a series of chemical/electrical signals controlled by our brain. In response to what the senses of sight, hearing and touch take in, the brain generates signals that create appropriate emotional and physical reactions. This enables us to react in a way that is appropriate to our reality. That seems very straightforward and foolproof. However, at least two things can go wrong. Our brain sometimes interprets sensory data wrong. We have all experienced times when our brain sorted wrongly what the eye saw, or the ear heard, or the sense of touch felt. So, for example, we were frightened by thunder at night and crawled into bed with our parents. There are also situations in which the body just randomly overproduces or under produces a certain chemical and the result is an emotional and physical reaction that is chemically correct, but does not align with real life events. For our responses to be healthy, we must correctly perceive our surroundings, and our body chemistry must be correctly balanced.

The **third factor** in our understanding of depression is what we might call the great human mystery. We are referring to the fact that we are physical, emotional and spiritual beings rolled into one. We can have a very emotional experience that can lead to physiological symptoms. We can have a physical issue that leads to emotional symptoms. The physiological and emotional intertwine with the spiritual as well. Something can start out spiritual and progress to a string of emotional and physical maladies. We should never forget that though we might understand ourselves in terms of certain compartments neatly labeled and organized, the reality is that these are all inter-related. So, even though God's Spirit is working in us, our experience of that is perceived and experienced by imperfect senses, processed by a fallen brain, colored by emotional scars, all in an imperfect body.

The following summarizes what can be said about depression.

- Depression can be caused by body chemistry. It can be that simple.
- Depression can be caused by our spiritual condition; us being incomplete spiritually or us being disobedient to God.
- Depression can be caused by emotional damage of some sort that needs to be sorted out.
- Depression can be caused by a combination of the previous three, and this is most often the case.

Remember, the **key symptom of depression is that you get stuck emotionally** so that you never move “up.” If you experience it, here is some practical advice for you.

1. You should approach it holistically. Explore possible physiological, emotional and spiritual causes.
2. Against all instincts, open yourself up to others. You must force yourself to do this even though it is the last thing you feel like doing.
3. Start with a visit to your doctor. Tell them plainly about the problem.
4. Talk with trusted friends. Ask them to pray with you and for you. Open up your life to them.
5. Visit a pastor. Be transparent about your spiritual life and the health of your walk with God.
6. On the advice of a pastor, visit a trained Christian counselor or Psychiatrist.
7. Do your assignments. Follow orders from doctors, suggestions from friends, and advice from counselors. Don't just expect them to “fix” you.
8. Don't give up. That will be your instinct!

Now, what about the use of medication? Christians often ask, “Is it right for me to take antidepressants?” Anti-depressants can be a valuable asset in dealing with your condition. If your issue happens to be a physiological one, medications are the only means by which you will gain help. Remember, if any other organ in your body was malfunctioning, you would pray for God's healing, but you would not think of ignoring medical advice. Christians should feel free to take anti-depressants at a doctor's direction and under their supervision. Self-medication is always a bad idea. At the same time, just taking medication may give you relief, but not really solve the problem. Remember how you are made. A physiological imbalance can be triggered by an emotional or spiritual issue. Because you are a fallen human being there are constant spiritual issues that need to be explored. Get help from others to explore them. Get help discerning possible emotional issues as well. There are quite likely emotional wounds festering within you as a result of living with fallen people in a fallen world. The truth carefully and gently applied will set you free from these things. Reach out for help in doing this.

In short, medication can be of significant value even if the root of your depression is not physiological. The relief of the symptoms can give you the mental outlook you need to face emotional and spiritual issues that have you stuck. God may bring you healing in time in these areas that allow you to set aside your medication. But this needs to be done with great care and the advice of your doctor. Always remember the old adage, “He who doctors himself has a fool for a patient.” Don’t medicate yourself and don’t un-medicate yourself.

There is another aspect of our humanity that relates to this area of depression. It is one that needs to be faced squarely. None of what we have said above negates the fact that we do have the ability and responsibility to manage, order and control our own lives. It seems that in our society we want to simply be happy, or be content, without cultivating the things that lead to happiness and contentment. The reality is that **happiness and contentment are not “found”** in the sense of suddenly being laid hold of through some experience. Both should be considered fruits of what is planted, cultivated and nurtured. So what is true is that we eat the fruit of what we sow and hoe. If we do not sow and hoe, no amount of prayer, or medication, or thrilling experience will bring us the fruit of contentment or happiness. Counseling, medication, prayer, and the support of others are useful to help us plant and cultivate the things which yield happiness and contentment. But we must structure into our lives foundational things. We must **plant and cultivate** that which in the end will fill our empty lives.

Our understanding of depression is growing, but there are still missing pieces of the puzzle. The medical community isolates and treats physiological causes of depression. Churches acknowledge this and seek in addition to treat spiritual and emotional causes of depression. Counselors seek to get at the roots of emotional causes of depression. The reality is that there are likely multiple factors at work in any depressed individual, all of which must be addressed. Do not lose hope if depression afflicts you. You must reach out.