

HELP!

MY TEEN IS
DEPRESSED

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INTRODUCTION

My husband and I were thrust into our teen's battle with depression not long ago, and we've never felt more ill-equipped to respond. Though I myself have sailed the seas of sorrow many times in my teen and adult years, I never imagined my child would take such a journey. It broke my heart to discover she was walking down a road that I had traveled. I felt guilty, as if I could've done something to protect her from the melancholy. I felt regret, as if my history with depression had infected her emotional and physical composition.

Most of all, *I felt helpless.*

I wanted to fix her. I wanted our daughter to be the happy girl she used to be. But as time passed, we discovered the most important thing we could offer her was our faithful, compassionate presence—not our “fix-it-quick” promises.

You see, there are no quick and easy solutions

for healing your teen's depression. Chances are you're already beginning to sense this. You've tried strategies and remedies, but discouragement remains. Your child's moods shift from one day to the next. Conversations and arguments over medical care and counseling methods are taxing and tiresome. Perhaps you're slowly coming to the realization that you have no idea how to rescue your child from the darkness he or she is in.

You are not alone in your sense of helplessness and desperation. Many parents have found themselves frantically crying out to God, echoing the urgency of King Jehoshaphat's distress:

*For we are powerless against this great
horde that is coming against us. We do not
know what to do, but our eyes are on you.*

(2 Chronicles 20:12)

Yet, even as you diligently search for resources and support, there's something you need to remember: You are not the savior of your child's soul or the ultimate healer of his or her sorrow. Only God has the power to turn your child's darkness into light. He promises to lead you step by step as you continue to look to him for wisdom.

*And I will lead the blind
in a way that they do not know,
in paths that they have not known
I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them
into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I do,
and I do not forsake them.*

(Isaiah 42:16)

This verse isn't some hyperspiritual, feel-good pep talk, but a divine guarantee which finds its "Yes!" in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20). If you've trusted in Jesus for the salvation of your soul, and have been born again by the Holy Spirit, you have the precise resources necessary to walk your child through depression in a way that honors God and blesses your child.

It's my hope that by reading this mini-book, you'll gain practical biblical wisdom to help you care for your depressed teen. We'll explore the various ways God interacts with his despondent children, and learn how to apply these observations to your child's particular situation. In addition, you'll find comforts and cautions for your own heart. Caring for a depressed child will

test you and tempt you to respond in sinful or harmful ways. Therefore, these pages are intended to offer hope for the hopeless teen and help for the helpless caregiver.

Understand the Experience of Depression

Author and biblical counselor Ed Welch writes,

There are times when depression is saying something and we must listen.¹

While it can be tempting to view your teen's depression as pouting, or simply the result of hormone fluctuations, the truth is that your child's despondency is an outward expression of internal unrest. Unbiblical assumptions about the nature of your child's depression can lead to unhelpful responses such as:

“What have you got to be sad about? You don't know how lucky you really are.”

“Toughen up and get over it already.”

“If you think positive thoughts, you'll start to feel better.”

“This is no way for a Christian to act.”

“Put on a happy face—fake it till you make it!”

Perhaps you can identify with some of these statements. I know I can! I understand how tempting it can be to grow impatient with your teen's emotional instability. Oftentimes, in frustration, parents may resort to trite slogans and superficial encouragements. Even so, a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality is desperately insufficient to help our teens. In fact, any strategy that invites us to rely upon our own willpower for change is a limited resource at best, and painfully destructive at worst—

for not by might shall a man prevail.

(1 Samuel 2:9)

Before we get too far along, it's important to view depression through a biblical lens. When the Scriptures inform how you think about depression, your posture toward your teen can become more humble, gracious, and compassionate. Let's take a look at some core statements that offer a biblical framework for moving forward in your care.

Depression Is *Not* Abnormal

Understand that your teen's depression, though possibly severe, is not an abnormal human

experience. It's ultimately the result of living in a fallen world that is broken by sin, death, mourning, crying, and pain (Revelation 21:4). Dr. Daniel Berger puts it succinctly:

If life in general is happy, then sadness should be viewed as an abnormality. But if life is generally sorrowful and fallen, then sorrow should be expected and understood—no matter how deep, enduring, or impairing—as a normal honest assessment of and reaction to life.²

Think about it. Babies are born *crying*, not laughing. They need the warm, soothing embrace of someone else in order to find their calm. The same is true for us. To experience happiness, we need satisfaction, comfort, and pleasure that we cannot manufacture within ourselves. We constantly pursue happiness because it seems to elude us—no matter what we have, how much we have of it, or how long we have it for. This is why King Solomon, after reflecting on how much of his life was spent on empty pursuits and worldly priorities, concluded that

All is vanity.

(Ecclesiastes 1:14)

Pastor and author Timothy Keller explains,

*Everybody knows that all parties are eventually going to be over—that all joy really does end in grief. . . . Death ends everything. Everything your heart wants out of life will eventually be taken away from you.*³

This is what is meant when Proverbs 14:13 observes,

*Even in laughter the heart may ache,
and the end of joy may be grief.*

Depression Is a Form of Suffering

It can be challenging to view your teen's depression as a form of suffering, but that is what it is. A biblical example is found in Psalm 88, which is often referred to as "the unresolved psalm." It is called this since, unlike the other songs in the book, this particular psalm does not end with any hope of resolution or rescue. Instead the writer honestly communicates his feelings of living in deep darkness, and reveals that we don't always get answers from God in the midst of our despair. Look at what the suffering writer says in this brief summary:

*I am a man who has no strength . . .
like the slain that lie in the grave . . .
in the regions dark and deep . . .
my eye grows dim through sorrow . . .
Afflicted and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. . . .
my companions have become darkness.*

(Psalm 88:4, 5, 6, 9, 15, 18)

Psalm 88 is a peek into the heart of a believer in God who, despite his commendable faith, is suffering a season of unresolved, inexplicable sorrow. He finds himself physically isolated, spiritually wounded, and utterly unable to do anything about it except to lament over his pitiful condition. If this is the experience of a faithful man of God, how much more painful and confusing must depression be for a teenager with far less emotional and spiritual maturity?

If you personally have experienced depression in the past, remind yourself of its torture. If you have not experienced depression, try to put yourself in the shoes of the sufferer who penned Psalm 88. Your teen is feeling this unrest now, daily, hour by hour, minute by minute. Take the words of Charles Spurgeon to heart:

Yes, we would feel more for the prisoner if we knew more about the prison.⁴

Depression Involves *Both* Body and Soul

There are those who hold the view that depression is strictly a physical issue, and others who regard depression as solely spiritual. Many caregivers will come to the table with an opinion that depression is *either* physical *or* spiritual. However, if we believe our teen is depressed solely because of a spiritual issue, we may treat him or her with less compassion, or place blame upon him or her for this particular struggle. In similar fashion, if we believe depression is purely a physical issue, then we may ignore the necessity for evangelism and/or discipleship during the healing process.

The problem with these either/or approaches is that they're too simplistic, or reductionist. Humans are not merely biological organisms to manage through medication, nor are they merely spiritual beings impervious to the physical complications that arise from living in finite, fallen bodies. To better understand the dynamics at play we must first ground ourselves in a biblical understanding of the composition of man. Genesis 2:7 offers us a solid foundation:

then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

In the very beginning, God created man as body and soul—both of equal value and necessity. God used dust from the ground (the physical component) as well as his own divine breath (the spiritual component) to bring Adam to life. Embracing this unity is imperative in our approach to helping our depressed teen. We need to consider possible physical components, and we need to recognize that our teen's spiritual care is important.

Does this mean depression always has a physical cause? No, not all depression finds its roots in an organic, physiological issue. Rather, because every human being is made in the image of God, and designed to live in relationship with him, there is always a spiritual component in the mix. So, while the treatment of depression may sometimes require more than soul care, it never requires less. Consider Proverbs 18:14:

*A man's spirit will endure sickness,
but a crushed spirit who can bear?*

A spirit that is well can persevere through bodily afflictions, but a crushed spirit cannot sustain a healthy body. That's why hopelessness is so dangerous. "The erosion of hope," Keller writes, "is what makes suffering unbearable."⁵ While it may be true that your teen's body would benefit from medical care, a crushed spirit requires the kind of balm that only the living Word of God can supply:

*For whatever was written in former days
was written for our instruction, that
through endurance and through the
encouragement of the Scriptures we might
have hope.*

(Romans 15:4)

Depression Can Serve Redemptive Purposes

The truth that God can work good out of this season of depression (Romans 8:28) is a consolation to use sensitively. However, it's not without biblical merit to suggest that God intends to use this season of suffering to spiritually refine both you and your teen. Let's briefly consider three purposes.

First, you may find that your teen's depression serves as an opportunity for you to share the