

Facing Depression with Body, Mind, and Soul



Christopher News Notes

depressive episode—with symptoms that affect daily living, lasting more than two weeks—in the past year.

Clinical depression is not just a bout of the blues or a passing bad mood. It's a mental illness—but one not limited to the mind. Depression affects every area of life. Living with depression means seeking help and support for body, mind, and soul. So where do you begin?

Take Depression Seriously

"Depression"...is a true wimp of a word for such a major illness."
—William Styron

Winston Churchill called depression "the black dog" that rarely left his side. But the condition wears a different face for everyone who lives with it. Kelly Dudzik writes about her experience at *Medium*: "Clinical depression is more like the Great Depression. There is a lack, a deficit, a shortage. You don't feel sad, you feel nothing. There is no reason to do anything when you are in the throes of a depressive episode. Every single thing is hard."

No one knows what—or what combination of things—causes depression. Brain structure and chemistry, genetic predisposition, childhood trauma, hormonal changes, and physical illnesses such as autoimmune disorders are all being explored, as well as the high incidence of alcohol and drug addiction among people with depression.

There's no one treatment, either. What works for one person may not for another—or may stop working as effectively over time. And going without treatment takes a toll on families, relationships, jobs, and even lives. Untreated depression is a major contributing factor in suicide. But people can and do live with depression every day—sometimes the people we least expect.

Pro Football Hall of Fame quarterback Terry Bradshaw won four Super Bowls with the Pittsburgh Steelers in the 1970s. But during all the fame, Bradshaw recalls, he was never happy. He smiled, he laughed, he joked around, but inside he felt no joy.

Bradshaw was depressed, but he didn't suspect it. After all, sports stars were supposed to be stronger than that. It wasn't until the late 1990s that Bradshaw sought help, he told the *Chicago Tribune*, after "experiencing a panic attack so intense" that he wanted to die.

Medication was a lifesaver for Bradshaw, but he did not go public about his depression for several years. When he did, it was so others like him wouldn't struggle alone. "I thought maybe I could help people with awareness, help men get the strength and courage," Bradshaw says. "I'm a big macho guy. Depression is not something you make light of. It's serious."

Depression and Faith

*"Comforter, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?"*
—Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ

One of the most difficult parts of living with depression for people of faith is sorting out what role God plays in this journey. Studies show regular churchgoers are less likely to report feeling depressed, but that may also mean they're less likely to talk about it. Depression can make it harder to pray or to find meaning and comfort in life.

Often, people of faith don't recognize depression in themselves, or they feel misplaced shame about it. Writing at *CatholicMom.com*, Marissa Nichols shared her struggle with post-partum depression in the face of expectations that "good Catholics" couldn't be afflicted with that kind of thing. Many moms, she noted, "suffer silently, alone and in the fear that others will judge them or their faith."

Nichols did suffer, silently, for nearly a year. Finally, "through grace," she wrote, "I realized that to ignore one's genuine suffering, or to try to pretend that grief and chemical imbalances can't occur even in these circumstances, is harmful. It took getting real help—marriage help, personal counseling and a brief stint with medication—to finally get better."

Certainly, faith is an anchor for many people living with depression. At the same time, prayer is not

Getting Help

- A one-stop shop for information and resources, both for those with depression and their families and friends, is **NAMI—the National Alliance on Mental Illness**. Start your journey at www.nami.org.
- At the **National Suicide Prevention Hotline, 1-800-273-8255**, counselors are available to listen and help those in emotional distress 24/7 at no cost. In the United States, you may also **text HOME to 741741** to text free with a trained crisis counselor 24/7.

treatment—or the only treatment—for mental illness. "Prayer is an important, and even indispensable, part of our lives—but it isn't everything," writes Polish Instagrammer Jola Szymanska at *Aleteia*. "God can perform miracles, but usually He works through natural means. He expects us to trust in Him and ask for His help, but also to use the resources He makes available to us, and that includes the science of medicine, which can help us be healthy in body and mind."

Keeping faith when living with depression is no easy matter, but it is possible. As Michael J. Lichens shared at *Catholic Gentleman*, "Prayer is very hard when you are depressed. I, for one, have nagging doubts when I go through my black dog days. God seems silent and I wonder where He is and what He's doing. All the same, I do pray, and peace eventually comes. In one case, it took me two years of praying, but peace did come."

"If you are praying and meditating and the words do not come," Lichens continues, "then sit in silence. Find an icon or an adoration chapel and utter the words, 'You are God, I am not. Please help.' If nothing else, your mind will slow down and will shift its focus to God, who sustains all life and is the source of our strength." Other Catholics living with depression also stress the importance of the sacraments, including receiving the Anointing of the Sick.

Depression affects the mind, body, and spirit. Living with depression means seeking the right balance of treatment to address all these integral parts of who we are.

Depression and Hope

Many people recover completely from episodes of clinical depression, although there has been surprisingly little research into how they are able to do so. Many, many more, with the help of a whole range of treatments, achieve a kind of remission: living with depression. One common denominator seems to be the ability to find and cultivate hope.

In their *Catholic Guide to Depression*, Dr. Aaron Kheriaty and Msgr. John Cihak stress the importance of what they call “practical hope”:

“Finding hope need not be complicated; it can be remarkably simple. Consider the case of a young father who was struggling with depression...He related later that just seeing [his young daughter’s] face and the constant smile of his joyful girl was enough to instill in him sufficient hope for the day. Our reasons for hope may be right there in front of us, if we only have eyes to see.”

Living with depression can give us valuable tools and insights for living in general—courage, persistence, the authentic self-knowledge that promotes true humility, appreciation for the simplest joys, and compassion. To be open to hope, and to the unexpected “gifts” of depression, takes mindfulness—being present to the journey. Board-certified

psychiatrist Dr. Lindsay Israel offers these “resolutions” for those living with depression:

- **“Focus on what you can control.”** So much of living with depression is beyond our control or, on bad days, beyond our capabilities. But doing what we can and celebrating each small victory is important.
- **“Choose your environment wisely.”** Negative thinking is a symptom of depression, so try not to be too much alone with your self-critical brain. Spend time with caring family, friends, and peer supports.
- **“Get help when you need it.”** Whether it’s cooperating with your therapy plan or asking a friend for help with child care, don’t be afraid to reach out. Ask yourself for help, too!
- **“Fight depression with treatment.”** That means seeking the help we need for physical illnesses (including addictions) and spiritual healing as well as mental health. It means eating, sleeping, and exercising to promote overall wellness.

While we tend to see depression solely as a deficit, especially when we are deep in its fog, it can be paradoxically productive. Out of her own 18-year journey with depression, Daughter of St. Paul Sr. Kathryn Hermes came to see that living with depression could be a way of the cross that bears the fruit of inner peace.

She wrote that for those who walk this journey, “the place where you are can open up and become new life. It is a creative time, even if you do not perceive it as such... Through weakness, something new breaks through into our world. Through you, something new is born.”


“It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.”

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“Christ took all human suffering on Himself, even mental illness. Yes, even this affliction, which perhaps seems the most absurd and incomprehensible, configures the sick person to Christ and gives him a share in His redeeming passion.”

—POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II