

ANSWERS for Women

A SERIES

LECTURE 1: DEPRESSION – Finding Hope in Dark Times

Introduction – Sometimes LIFE fails to meet our expectations

I. What is depression?

There is a whole spectrum of feelings called depression. We'll say we're depressed when we're feeling a little down in the dumps for a morning. But depression also describes a woman who feels so worthless and empty that she would rather die than go on.

A. DSM-IV

When it comes to diagnosing and defining depression, psychologists, psychiatrists and physicians use a list of symptoms found in the DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-IV) - This is a manual which lists the symptoms of mental health problems, including depression. If you have several of the symptoms nearly every day, for 2 weeks or longer you may be given the diagnosis of depression:

But you don't need a doctor to tell you you're depressed – you know that!

B. Dysthymia

Sometimes the doctor may tell you that you have *dysthymia* which means you are living a joyless life and feel tired all the time. You just don't like life anymore. This is considered a long-term but milder depression that can last 2-3 years.

II. Is depression really a problem?

A. Women are twice as likely as men to experience depression.

In the United States it is estimated that over 19 million people experience depression each year. That is one in ten adults, and most of those are women.

B. The symptoms of depression cross gender, age, racial, socioeconomic, and religious lines.

C. Antidepressants are the most prescribed drugs in our country

According to CNN.com/Health, antidepressants are the most prescribed drugs in our country. RealMentalHealth.com reports that in 2007 over 80 million prescriptions were written for antidepressants.

D. Advertising for anti-depressants in almost every woman's magazine

For example: *Country Home Magazine*, May 2008, p 25.

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| So, if you are here tonight and you are struggling with depression you are not alone. |
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III. What causes depression?

A. Life change

1. Birth of a baby

2. Move

3. Loss of a friend, loss of a job, loss of good health

4. Divorce

5. Debt

6. Death of a loved one

Any one of these events can trigger depression that moves beyond normal sadness. If we don't take steps, normal sadness can move to serious depression.

It is a good and helpful thing to do some reflection to find out what lies behind depression. Sometimes depression may not hit right away and when it hits later it may feel like it dropped out of nowhere. For the most part the symptoms of depression are an indication that something is not right on the inside.

Questions to ask yourself:

- When did my depression start?
- Has there been a major life change?
- Did anything significant happen?

B. Stress and fatigue

Stress and fatigue can come from over-commitment, expectations, frantic pace and unrealistic deadlines.

Stress and fatigue drain our internal reserves so that something small can push us over the edge.

C. Physical causes

1. Illness – There are certain physical illnesses that may have a connection with depression – diabetes, MS, epilepsy, cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, brain tumor, etc. Chronic pain and terminal illness can also contribute to depression.
2. Hormones – Thyroid problems can produce the symptoms of depression, and we know how our feminine hormones during PMS, post-partum, and menopause can contribute to depression symptoms.
3. Chemical imbalance -

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), “Evidence indicates that brain biochemistry is a significant factor in depressive disorders.”

“It's not known specifically what causes depression. As with many mental illnesses, it's thought that a variety of biochemical, genetic and environmental factors may cause depression. Some evidence from high-tech imaging studies indicates that people with depression have physical changes in their brains. The significance of these changes is still uncertain but may eventually help pinpoint causes. The naturally occurring brain chemicals called neurotransmitters, which are linked to mood, also may play a role in depression. Hormonal imbalances also could be a culprit.

Depression, Mayo Clinic Health Letter, April 2008

There is a growing assumption among many studying depression that we are purely physiological creatures. In other words, every feeling, reaction, habit, thought can be explained by our chemistry, hormones, synapses, and genetics. Increasingly, all behavior is being explained from a purely physical basis.

I would like you to consider the possibility that there are some things going on in your life that are more than just physical. Might depression be a problem of the soul?

D. Heart causes

There is no doubt that what goes on in our hearts and minds affects us physically. If you are tense or stressed about something you are likely to get headaches or stomach pain. If you are afraid, your adrenaline kicks in to make you more alert and ready to deal with the situation.

We even see this connection of heart and body in the Bible. Listen to what is said:

“When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. Psalm 32:3-4

1. Ongoing sin – Just as the Psalm above says, holding on to sin can cause depression.
 - a) Lack of forgiveness leading to bitterness
 - b) Unconfessed, hidden sin – adultery, lying, cheating
 - c) Constant defeat from an addiction
2. Disappointment in unmet expectations

3. Overwhelmed with the needs and expectations of others
Women are especially vulnerable to this. You try to do it all, but get weary and overwhelmed, or just plain unable to make everyone happy. We will talk more about this in the lecture in June on “The Superwoman Syndrome.”
4. Anger – Anger can turn to bitterness and that can turn into depression.

Hebrews 12:15 is a verse that challenges us to not allow bitterness to take root in our hearts. If we allow it to do this it will spring up and cause us to wound people around us.

Often it isn't one thing that causes us women to experience depression. Many times it is a combination of factors that form “the perfect storm.” You may be able to handle a difficult marriage, but when your mother requires extra care, and you get tired from the extra time and energy, you become overwhelmed with it all and succumb to depression.

IV. Is medication the answer for my depression?

I'm not a physician, but I do want to make some observations of some factors you may want to keep in mind when you are considering medication.

Important: You should never make changes in your medication without your doctor's supervision.

- A. Get a physical exam with blood tests to rule out some possible reasons for your depression.
- B. Antidepressants may help improve mood and mental alertness, increase physical activity and improve sleep patterns.
Sometimes you are so depressed that medication may be helpful to enable you to think more clearly. But don't let it keep you from addressing the cause.
- C. Often the effectiveness of antidepressants diminishes with time and medication needs to be changed.
- D. Antidepressants are powerful medications and often have serious side-effects.
 - 1. It is important to determine possible side effects before you begin taking antidepressants. Realize that the side effects can be counter-productive.
One serious side effect that they can't really explain is an increase in suicidal thoughts. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a warning that antidepressants may increase the risk of suicide in certain people. Children are especially susceptible to suicidal thoughts and behavior when taking antidepressants.
 - 2. Antidepressants may require additional medication to counter the side effects.
Sometimes you will be prescribed multiple medications in order to counteract the side effects – one pill for anxiety, and another to help you sleep. Understand that you are putting some very powerful medications into your body.
- E. Antidepressants may be successful in mitigating the symptoms, but they don't address the life causes.
- F. Antidepressants are being prescribed for more than just depression.

V. Is there hope for my depression?

YES – but its not instant.

I believe we were created by God in His image to be in relationship with Him. This God who created us knows us inside out. He knows how we are wired. If you would permit me I would love to read from Psalm 139. It let's us know just how intimate God's knowledge of us is.

O LORD, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. ²You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away.
³You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do.
⁴You know what I am going to say even before I say it, LORD. Psalm 139:1-4

What I would like to do in this last portion of our time is share some insights to help you make progress in your struggle with depression. Some of these suggestions are going to come from God's Word and some of them are wisdom gleaned from life.

A. Principle 1 – You **have the power to** do something about your depression.

Your actions can make a difference. It's important to know that no one can do it for you. We are going to talk about the power of friends to help later, but they can only help. They can't do the things for you to get you out of depression. I know this may be really hard for you to hear, because when you are in depression it is hard to take any action. But my prayer is that gaining hope will give you courage to take the first step, and once you've taken the first step to take the second step.

B. Principle 2 – The principle of sowing and reaping: progress takes time and patience
Normally we don't get into depression overnight, so we won't get out of it overnight either.

One of the great roadblocks to getting out of depression is impatience. We want to feel better, and we want to feel better now. But life doesn't work that way in the physical realm, nor does it work that way in the emotional or spiritual realm.

This is what can be so discouraging about change – we want it to be fast, but it's slow. At first it is imperceptible, but if we continue with patient and consistent action, over time we will begin to see the harvest of the sowing we are doing in our lives.

Galatians 6:9 says, "So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up.

I know when you are depressed taking any action is hard. It is doubly hard when you don't see any results right away. The principle of sowing and reaping helps me understand that it is normal for it to take time.

C. Principle #3 – Change the things you can change.

1. Take care of your physical needs – It is very difficult because when you are depressed you don't feel like doing anything. But it is important to get your body back to its natural rhythms. Eat well, get out of bed in the morning, exercise – get some fresh air and sunshine. Get that oxygen flowing through your body. Watch your caffeine intake so that your sleep is not affected. About an hour before you go to bed, turn off the TV, and consciously put your depression thoughts out of your mind. Read over Psalm 23 – The Lord is my Shepherd. Meditate on it and let those thoughts be the last thing you think about as you go to bed. I know insomnia can be a problem and I will talk about how to deal with it in the next lecture in May on Fear, Worry and Anxiety.
2. Take a break from your routine – People who are depressed become passive. You might find yourself sitting in front of the TV all day. Get out of the house. Take a walk. Get a break from your baby, or take your baby to visit a friend. Listen to joyful music. Watch a funny movie. Laughter is good medicine. Sign up for a class – learn to cook, quilt, dance or paint.
3. Change your thinking. Some of you might think it's impossible to change your thinking – that what you think is what you think. But, as people created in the image of God we have the power to make choices, even in our thinking. Instead of grumbling and complaining, be thankful. Instead of being angry and holding bitterness in your heart, forgive. Instead of feeling sorry for yourself because of your situation, do something for others: send a card or note, bake some cookies and give them away, think of one thing you could do to lighten another's load. Get your mind off yourself and your own problems.
4. Find a friend – People who are depressed isolate themselves, but this is when we need a friend. We grow impatient that change isn't happening right away, but a friend can be a partner in helping you make changes in your life. Share your commitment with your friend of the changes you are going to make, and give her permission to hold you accountable to the commitments.

A friend is always loyal, and a brother is born to help in time of need.
Proverbs 17:17

5. Start a journal of your journey through depression. Each day write down what you did to bring change to your life. List the things you are doing, and the results as you begin to see them. Write a list of the things you are thankful for and add to it each day. As you uncover the heart issues that contribute to your depression write them down. Not only will this help you, but you may be able to help someone else in the future with the wisdom you gained in the battle.

Conclusion

As you know, I am a Christian and because of this there are three things that help me when I encounter difficult times:

1. I know God loves me – when I am struggling with life, the promises of God help. He doesn't condemn me for having problems. He loves me and opens His arms to me to come to Him for help.
2. I know God has the resources to give me strength to endure
3. All I know is because of God I have hope, I have peace and I have joy.

I don't want to force anything on you, but consider that maybe the sadness in your heart is the emptiness of living without the love and forgiveness of God.