

1. Pressed Down

A friend sends you a text message with just three words: 'I'm so depressed!' How do you respond? Maybe you simply text back, 'What's wrong?' Then, the words begin to flow. You may read a story of lost love, a hopeless view of the future, or a state of seemingly endless physical or emotional suffering. Unfortunately, your friend's declaration can be misused, such as in statements like: 'I'm so depressed that my team lost the championship.' But in many other cases, real pain shines through—possibly even in a text that says: 'I want to kill myself.'

So, let's ponder a problem that appears to be so prevalent in our world today: What exactly is depression? Before getting more technical, consider the literal use of the term: To be depressed is to be 'pressed down.' If you think about it, that's really a good word picture. When a person is depressed, he or

she is collapsing under a weight—a heavy burden that is unbearable. To use another common phrase, depression feels like a person is ‘carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders.’ Being in this state brings untold pain, suffering, and misery.

Or, maybe you have heard the phrase: ‘being down in the dumps.’ This is another vivid picture of depression. If you are in the ‘dumps,’ you are surrounded by all sorts of garbage; you are part of a huge trash heap. You may have never had the privilege of touring your local city dump, but it certainly isn’t a place in which you want to hang out for very long. Being in that sort of pit would only drive you to despair, as you gaze around at what your life has become. Just think of the prodigal son and his life of feeding pigs in the pigpen to get one more image of depression in your mind (Luke 15:11-32).

The problem of depression, then, has many universal features to it. Here are the main symptoms that are shared by all who suffer with it:

- Fatigue
- Pessimism and hopelessness
- Pain

- Trouble concentrating, making decisions
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- Persistent sadness
- Overeating or appetite loss
- Loss of interest in pleasure
- Suicidal thoughts.

Depression is described as sucking the joy out of life, as being a stubborn darkness that will not go away. It has a way of sticking around as an unwelcome visitor in our lives. In the *Harry Potter* series, the author imagines fearful creatures called dementors, invisible beings who feed on happy emotions. J.K. Rowling drew on her experience of depression to describe them: 'They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them.'¹ Depression is scary!

Medical and psychological professionals have given diagnostic labels to various types of depression; yet, they all share many of the same symptoms. A helpful way to think about it, as with many other problems, is that depression has a spectrum or a range to it. Some people experience a mild depression

1 J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), chapter 10.

that comes and goes, while others have more intense depressed feelings that never seem to go away. There is seasonal depression, as well as depression related to a particular event or situation. Some depression is chronic (lasting a long time), while other depressions are acute (brief in nature). Whatever the particular type, depression is a difficult problem that requires a proper understanding and solution.

At this point, you may be wondering: Can a Christian be depressed? That's a really good question. Some Christians believe that once someone is saved, and enjoys all the blessings of a relationship with Jesus Christ, all major struggles (like depression) should end. After all, followers of Jesus should always be joyful, right? Christians also have access to the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, and so on. Since the person who is depressed is hopeless, pessimistic, persistently sad, and even has suicidal thoughts, it just seems so opposite of the life of the believer in Jesus!

While Christians certainly do enjoy life in Christ, and the power of the Spirit and the Word, we still have ongoing difficulties in this world. Think about it this way: Do Christians have things in their lives that are 'pressing down'

upon them? Definitely! Difficult relationships, complicated life events, and hard decisions can be weights on our shoulders. Physical and mental diseases, disabilities, and disorders can press us down as well. Then, there's the work of Satan, the attacks of this evil world, and our own sinful hearts that produce heavy burdens. So, yes, Christians get depressed too, requiring help and care that will provide the possibility of change.

As will be discussed further, the Christian who is suffering with depression has resources that the non-Christian does not have. Truthfully, those who are outside of Christ have reasons to be depressed all the time! Life in this fallen world is always pressing down on us, and none of us are strong enough in and of ourselves to withstand it. Between our own sinful hearts, the lies of the devil, and the temptations found throughout our present culture, it is no wonder depression is regularly at the top of the charts of human problems.

Thanks be to God, He has given us new life in Jesus Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Some of the most familiar words of invitation from Jesus to the lost soul are found

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in Matthew 11:28-30. They are a great comfort for those suffering from depression as well:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Main Point

Depression is a universal problem that unbearably presses many of us down.

Questions for Reflection

- What things are bearing down on you right now?
- What do all the symptoms of depression have in common?
- Why is it misguided to think that Christians should never get depressed?
- What resources does the Christian have to deal with the problem of depression?