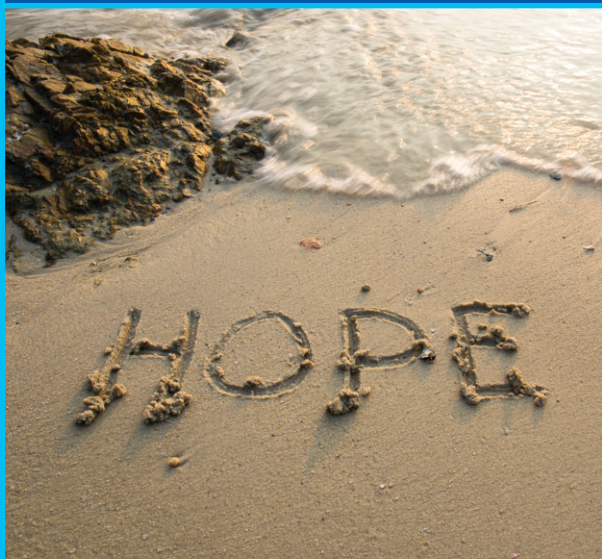


Fighting Depression, Finding Hope



Christopher News Notes

HAVE YOU EVER FELT SO BURDENED THAT IT'S LIKE YOU'RE IN A HAZE? Delicious food has lost its taste; others' kindnesses don't touch you; your blessings seem far outweighed by your burdens. Have you then felt deep guilt, wondering, "How dare I feel so miserable when millions of people are far worse off than me?" It is normal to feel sad sometimes. But depression is not normal.

Depression is a real, physical illness whose symptoms can be difficult to untangle from regular sadness. So what is the difference between the two? And what is the role of mental health in the life of a Christian?

Depression vs. sadness

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) says that with grief, “painful feelings come in waves, often intermixed with positive memories.” In major depression, on the other hand, your mood and interests can be diminished for most of two weeks. Also, with grief, self-esteem is usually maintained. In major depression, feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing are common.

The APA states that other long-term depression symptoms include: changes in appetite, trouble sleeping or sleeping too much, loss of energy, feeling guilty, trouble concentrating or making decisions, or thoughts of suicide and death.

Even those who appear to be “poster-children” of happiness, or seem to have it all, can suffer from the illness. Depression does not discriminate. The APA cites the most common underlying factors are biochemistry, genetics, personality, and environment. Depression can be common for women postpartum when their hormones and brain chemicals are off-balance. It can also be common in those who have suffered some sort of abuse or trauma. Even gloomy weather can lead to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). There are multiple factors that are woven into this complex disease.

Can I pray away depression?

Just like other illnesses (such as cancer, or diabetes, or MS), depression cannot be prayed away or made better by staying cheerful. Of course, praying and turning to God are necessary and life-giving during any stage of life. But thinking that you can pray away depression is like saying your prayer alone is enough to treat cancer.

God allows us to use science to our benefit, and there have been marvelous strides in our understanding of the human brain and its chemicals in

If you suspect that you are suffering from depression, you must first take solace in three things:

- You are deeply loved by God and worthy of His love. No matter how you feel, or what you’ve done, or what has been done to you, He loves you infinitely more than you could imagine.
- You must not feel weird, abnormal, or alone. Depression and its related illnesses (such as anxiety or obsessive-compulsive disorder) are common, and more people suffer from them than you realize. In fact, the American Psychiatric Association says that “depression affects an estimated one in 15 adults (6.7%) in any given year. And one in six people (16.6%) will experience depression at some time in their life.”
- There is hope and real treatment available to you. It does get better, and God will open the doors for you if you seek with a sincere heart. Reach out to your doctor. Find a therapist. It can take a lot of mental and physical energy to take that first step toward treatment. But it gets easier as you get help. Do not give up!

recent years. Most mental health professionals recommend treatment of both therapy and medication (if indeed medication is needed). And of course, since humans are mind, body, and spirit, adding a spiritual component to the healing will prove beneficial.

Dr. Aaron Kheriaty is an associate Professor of Psychiatry, Director of the Bioethics Program at the University of California Irvine School of Medicine, and the author of *A Catholic Guide for Depression*. He warns that if we “prematurely spiritualize every emotional or mental health problem, we risk ignoring important means of healing. We also risk unjustly stigmatizing the person who is suffering from depression, and blaming the victim for something that may not be his or her fault.”

In other words, depression does not mean that your spiritual life is lacking. In fact, some great saints have suffered from depression. St. Thérèse of Lisieux is thought to have struggled with it as a teenager, and Mother Teresa’s diaries after her death revealed she felt worthless and unloved. Being depressed is not a lack of trust in God.

We need to look no further than the Gospels to see that Christ understands the human condition. Christ was so in love with the human race that He allowed any human emotion we might feel to also touch Him. In the Garden of Gethsemane, before His death on the cross, Christ’s distress was so

intense that He began to sweat blood. He asked His Father to take the suffering away. Jesus understands the cross that mental illness can be. He walks with the abused, the lonely, the searching.

On the flip side, some people who have a diagnosed mental illness may feel disgusted with themselves, because in their minds they have never experienced any commonly-recognized trauma. They may think, “If my life has so many blessings, why am I not grateful?”

Lisa Klewicki, a licensed clinical psychologist, wrote in *Catholic Digest* that it is “important to know that such serious symptoms of depression are not signs of laziness or a lack of willpower—they are signs of serious illness. Those who are severely depressed don’t choose to withdraw from life; they actually *can’t* be involved in life. They have no ability to motivate themselves or follow through with ideas that would help them. In fact, they often think of themselves as worthless and expendable.”

In a blog post on *The Catholic Woman*, Hillary Mast explains that for her there seemed to be no real “reason” for being depressed. “I never experienced any abuse or trauma...I was raised in a loving...Catholic family. I was just extremely sad a lot of the time...Some of my earliest memories involved thinking that I’d never be as ‘happy’ or ‘normal’ as other children and then bursting into tears because, ‘I just didn’t feel good.’”

Hillary's parents got her into therapy when she was nine years old, and it gave her the help she needed. As an adult she finds peace in her faith: "Whatever [your cross], Jesus wants to help you carry it. He doesn't want you to shove it in a dark closet and hide it away, trying to ignore it. He doesn't want you to compare the size or weight or shape of your cross to another's. He wants you...to take it up and use it as a stepping stool to heaven. And in carrying your own cross, you'll help others carry theirs."

Helping Someone with Depression

It can be difficult for those who have never suffered from depression to understand how crippling it can be. Some may even well-intentionally tell a depressed person that they "need to get over it" or "look at the bright side" or "focus on your blessings." Lisa Klewicki offers tips in her *Catholic Digest* article for those who may not have depression, but want to be sensitive to those who do.

- Offer to help with normal, everyday activities. This will not only give the depressed person a sense of hope that someone else cares, but also give them more time to focus on healing.
- If you notice that someone in your life is not as chipper or energetic as usual—or maybe even a bit distant—don't just ask, "Would you like help?" Those who suffer with depression can't make decisions easily, and they often want to cover up their struggles. Just provide the help. For instance, you might say: 1) "I'm making chili

tomorrow for my family; I'll bring you some for your family." 2) "My kids and I would love to have your children come play at our house this Friday." 3) "My adolescent son or daughter is looking for service hours, so they'll come clean your house this weekend or do your yard work."

- Don't forget to pray for those with depression.

It is important to note that true depression needs to be treated by a professional. Loved ones do not have the medical tools that are necessary to overcome the illness. Walking alongside a friend or family member with depression does not mean fixing or healing them. It means encouraging them to seek treatment and help them find that treatment.

Claudette has struggled with a bipolar disorder since early childhood. By the time she received her diagnosis in her mid-20s, she had already experienced a chain of traumatic experiences, including the tragic early death of her brother. She recounts the guilt that overwhelmed her because she hadn't seen or talked to him before his untimely death. She cried herself to sleep in the nights that followed. But she distinctly remembers one night when she felt a soft pressure on her shoulder. She turned and clearly saw a golden image of her brother that then gently faded through the window.

"It was then that I felt truly at peace," she said. Whenever she faced some difficulty in her illness, she would recall that moment of peace, and take comfort that her older brother was lovingly watching over her during her struggles. When she took a leap of faith and opened up about her health issues to her other siblings, they circled around her and supported her while she received the therapy and medication she needed to become better.

Ultimately, although a great cross, we can use depression to draw closer to Christ. For those with depression, seeking out professional help and support can be a humble act of trust and lead to great healing.


**"It's better to light one candle
than to curse the darkness."**

A non-profit, founded in 1945 by Father James Keller, M.M., The Christophers encourages people to change the world for the better. Donations are tax-deductible. News Notes are published 10 times a year. Single copies are free.

Editor-in-Chief: Tony Rossi

The Christophers

5 Hanover Square, New York, NY 10004

212-759-4050, ext. 241

mail@christophers.org • www.christophers.org

Christopher News Note 637

ISBN: 8755-69601

"Give yourself another day, another chance.

*You will find your courage eventually. Don't
give up on yourself just yet."*

—Unknown