



Healing Hearts • Restoring Relationships • Liberating Lives

WINTER BLUES OR DEPRESSION?

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“Blue Monday” has been designated as the most depressing day of the year. It always occurs on the 4th Monday of January and fell on January 26th this year. This day of misery sets in about one month after Christmas.

The formula for Blue Monday includes seven variables: nasty winter weather, post-holiday debt subtracted from January’s paycheck, fading Christmas memories, failed attempts to keep New Year’s resolutions, lack of motivation, and the need to take action. It sounds depressing to think about a “day” calculated to be the most depressing of the year, yet the fact is millions of people suffer with depression for days, months or even years.

Depression has been referred to as the *common cold of mental illness*. The occurrence among Americans is staggering:

- Depression affects approximately 18.8 million American adults or about 9.5% of the US population age 18 and older in any given year.
- Everyone will at some time in their life be affected by depression -- their own or someone else’s.
- 4% of preschoolers are clinically depressed and among the fastest growing market for anti-depressants.
- The rate of increase of depression among children is 23%.
- 54% of people believe depression is a personal weakness.
- 41% of depressed women are too embarrassed to seek help.
- Depression will be the second largest killer after heart disease by 2020 -- and studies show depression is a contributing factor to fatal coronary disease.

One of the most alarming statistics for me is that fewer than 50% of people suffering from depression will seek counseling, let alone the care of a doctor. Instead, they would prefer to say nothing rather than risk the shame of being categorized as “mentally ill.”

As these numbers rise in the culture, they also continually grow within the Church. Pastors and congregations wrestle with how to authentically support those within their own walls who struggle with depression. Individuals may feel stigmatized, dismissed, isolated and/or guilty, adding to their depression.

How can the Church create a place that welcomes people to feel safe, especially when life gets messy?

- **Recognize that depression is real.** When a person says “*I loathe my life*” or “*My heart is in turmoil and cannot rest; days of affliction confront me,*” such as Job said (Job 10.1; 30:27), one of the most powerful sentences you can speak at that moment is “**I believe you.**” By

genuinely saying this, you validate not only the person but their feelings of pain. These three words communicate acceptance.

- **Learn the symptoms.** Depression can be an insidious illness that affects body and soul. This is one reason that causes people to react insensitively. Listening to a person describing their experience of depression can be overwhelming if you don't know what you are listening for. Distinguishing between the "blues," which everyone experiences now and then, and the darkness of clinical depression is important. The major symptoms to listen for include:

- feeling sad, hopeless or worthless
- trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- uncharacteristic low energy
- anxiety
- loss of interest or pleasure
- changes in weight or appetite
- possible suicidal tendencies

The spectrum of depression includes SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder), Postpartum Depression, and Bipolar Disorder.

- **Learn more about less-discussed forms of depression:**

- **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)** is caused by a shortage of daylight during the winter months. About 25 percent of people who suffer drastic seasonal lighting changes experience some kind of winter blues—five percent of those develop serious SADness requiring medication and even hospitalization. Ever wonder about your own bleak midwinter blues? Most of us will be affected by a milder form of SAD. Less daylight sets off the hormone melatonin—mellowing energy level and mood, while making stomachs hungrier than usual. Any more fruitcake left?
- **"Learned helplessness"** can be seen in an individual who explains their depression in phrases that sound self-defeating and half-hearted, (i.e., *"I always forget where my keys are . . . I never remember to call . . . I can't do anything right."*) You may hear this person making repeated apologies, excuses for lack of commitment or the inability to engage in relationships. This type of depression can be particularly crippling for Christians who feel stuck as victims of their own unpleasant circumstances. Guilt and defeat are prominent feelings. Even when this person has the relational support and the tools to change, their mind has been so trained that they feel helpless to change personal events or situations.
- **"Acedia"** is an ancient word that in essence says, *"I don't care."* For this type of depression, a person's world has become too challenging and relationships with others too demanding. Either a person refuses to care or is incapable of doing so. It is the body and mind's response to the day-to-day routine, habits—the ordinary of everyday life. This person in their darkest moment may ask, *"Why care?"*

I have included a list of recommended reading at the end of this article. The internet is a good resource--Google returned 98,300,000 hits on the word "depression" alone! (The staff at Wellspring is available to answer questions, as well.)

- **Listen well.** Knowing the symptoms you are listening for helps when you speak the second most powerful sentence, "**Tell me more about your pain.**" This sentence validates that a person's words and experience mean something to you. Listening is an act of service and love.
- **Extend help with respect, kindness and gentleness.** This is a crucial point in the process. How can the Church confidently extend help? Jesus alone is able to both relate with feelings of abandonment (Ps. 22.1) and provide the resources to overcome them (Phil.4.13). As two of these resources, pastors and congregations can help individuals tremendously by acknowledging that we have all "been there," personally or with friends and family. Express that depression makes sense to you, not only as a fellow sinner, but as a sojourner in this broken and fallen world. We do not have to fear the messiness of life and the people it affects. The Church can really be a bastion of hope.
- **Know when to refer.**
 - There may be times when an individual or others appear to be in **imminent danger** and you must seek help immediately by contacting the proper authorities.
 - At other times, you may realize that helping an individual find **specialized help** may be necessary. You may need to consider referring when the pain and issues feel too overwhelming, or don't fall in the pastor or congregation's area of expertise or training. Sometimes the best counsel you can give is to help people connect with doctors, counselors and support groups. Refer to the symptoms of clinical depression (earlier in this article). Whenever a person's health is at stake, the most important question you can ask yourself is "**Do I have the time and specialized expertise to assist this person?**" Some severe depression requires medical treatment which often includes anti-depressant medication or hospitalization. Sometime these treatments help diminish the individual's symptoms, but long-term counseling for the problem may be called for.
- **Pray.** Prayer can be exceedingly difficult for a person in depression. What a relief for the suffering when they know they are prayed for, especially by the Holy Spirit who intercedes on behalf of the groaning (Roman 8.26-27). *If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you."* (Psalm 139.11-12)

Recommended Reading:

- *Darkness Is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness* by Kathryn Greene-McCreight
- *Being Well When We're Ill: Wholeness and Hope in Spite of Infirmary* by Marva J. Dawn
- *Acedia & Me:* by Kathleen Norris
- *The Roots of Sorrow* by Richard Winter
- *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* by Martin Seligman
- *Crisis and Trauma Counseling: A Practical Guide for Ministers, Counselors, and Lay Counselors* by Dr. H. Norman Wright