Depression, from Despair to Hope

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One morning several years ago, I went to my office and turned on my computer. My plan was to check my email quickly. As I went through the messages, one took me by surprise. It read, “You do not know me, but by the time you read this I will have committed suicide.” The rest of the email rambled quite a bit, but the woman who wrote it signed her name and mentioned the town she lived in.

I have no idea how she obtained my name, much less my email address. I did not know her at all. I called the police in her town and gave them the information that I had. They asked me to fax the email to them, which I did. I prayed for the woman and that the authorities would discover where she lived and find her. Two hours later, my phone rang. It was the police in that town calling to tell me that they had found her. She was comatose from overdosing on prescription medicines. Paramedics rushed her to the hospital and she lived.

I did not hear anything else until three weeks later when another email from her appeared. She said, “You will never guess what happened. The police found me, took me to the hospital, and I ended up in a psychiatric hospital, but now I am home. I wrote her back and offered to send her some Bible studies and refer her to a biblical counselor. She declined saying that she had a psychologist who was her therapist and a psychiatrist who prescribed her medicines. I would have despised her answer except that I knew that somehow God was (as Dr. Jay Adams says) “in the problem.” I wished her well and have not heard from her again.

Depression is a very serious problem. It is, at times, an emergency. More often, though, it is a prevailing sadness that the counselee cannot seem to overcome. Many secular theories suggest the cause and cure of depression, but they are only theories. Instead, we have to turn to God and to His Word to find real hope and real answers. The Scriptures “restore the soul…rejoice the heart… and enlighten the eyes…” (Psalm 19:7-8, adaptation added).

The purpose of this article is to walk you through how I counsel someone with depression. I will present a case study entitled “Depressed Debbie” and explain how I gather data, give her hope, and teach Debbie basic biblical principles from the Scriptures that are sufficient to deal with depression. Even when the depression is due to a legitimate medical issue, the Scriptures are sufficient to help the counselee cope with them in a God-honoring way.

Depressed Debbie

Debbie comes to see you because she needs help. She has no makeup. Her hair has not been washed. She has dark circles under her eyes. She is frequently sighing and there are tears in her eyes. When you ask “What’s wrong?” she says, “I often feel sad and unhappy, but lately it has been far worse than usual. I can’t eat. I can’t sleep very well. I don’t want to be around anyone. When my husband goes to work and the kids are in school, I go back to bed and just lay there. I don’t answer the phone. I have no energy. I feel as if I am going to die. I feel guilty because my husband has to go to the store for me, and he does the cooking and takes care of the
kids. My mother comes over and helps clean and wash clothes and iron. There are days that I
simply wish I were dead. I have prayed and asked God to help me, but I am only getting worse. I
don’t know what to do. Can you help me?”

Debbie has many of the symptoms listed for depression according to psychiatric criteria.

**DSM-IV Criteria for Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)**

- Depressed mood or a loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities for more than two
weeks.
- Impaired function: social, occupational, educational.
- Specific symptoms, at least 5 of these 9, present nearly every day: Depressed mood or
irritable most of the day, nearly every day, as indicated by either subjective report
(e.g., feels sad or empty) or observation made by others (e.g., appears tearful).

1. Decreased interest or pleasure in most activities, most of each day
2. Significant weight change (5%) or change in appetite
3. Change in sleep: Insomnia or hypersomnia
4. Change in activity: Psychomotor agitation or retardation
5. Fatigue or loss of energy
6. Guilt/worthlessness: Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt
7. Concentration: diminished ability to think or concentrate, or more indecisiveness
8. Suicidality: Thoughts of death or suicide, or has suicide plan

A biblical counselor will not need the DSM-IV criteria to know Debbie is definitely
depressed and needs help. I would begin by gathering data and, after that, giving her hope.
Depression is, most often, not one single cause but several contributing factors. To make it easy
for Debbie to see the big picture of what is causing her depression, I write four contributing
factors on the board: circumstances, physical, bitterness, and sin. (Of course, bitterness is a sin,
but I separated it out because it is such a huge contributing factor.) The following list includes
issues for which I need information from her:

1. **Circumstances:** trauma, death of a loved one, financial difficulties, trials, and
tribulations.
2. **Physical:** exhaustion, illness such as anemia, hypoglycemia, hypothyroidism, sleep
loss, reaction to medications such as birth control pills, steroids, blood-pressure
medicines, anti-seizure medicines. (Note: It has been theorized for years that a
chemical imbalance in the brain was causing depression. For years, prominent
psychiatrists like Dr. Joseph Glenmullen have been saying that theory is not true. Now, most psychiatrists have realized and admitted that is not true.3)
3. **Bitterness:** I explain to Debbie that the emotion you feel when you are bitter is
hurt. Bitterness may be directed towards another person or towards God. I asked
Debbie, “Who has hurt you the most?” Debbie answered almost immediately, “My
Dad.” If she had said, “No one,” then she is not likely bitter.
4. **Sin:** Guilt over sin can cause depression (Psalm 32:1-5). For example, gluttony
irresponsibility, anger, lying, immorality, envy, self-pity, stealing, deceitfulness,
rebellion, complaining, worry, selfishness, inferiority judgments, vanity,
discontent, or vain regrets.
After gathering the data, Debbie’s list looked like the following:

1. **Circumstances**: nothing significant in her circumstances
2. **Physical**: cannot sleep well, feels like she will die, reports that according to her doctor she has no health issues, but it has been over a year since her last physical.
3. **Bitterness**: Debbie is hurt from her past when her Dad, in anger, would scream and yell at her. This occurred when he was drunk which was a regular occurrence on the weekends and holidays. Her Dad is still living, and they have a superficially peaceful relationship now that he has stopped drinking.
4. **Sin**: guilt over not taking care of her family, has been a worrier since she was a child, very melancholy/despairing thoughts, guilt over an abortion when she was in college and before she was a Christian.

Hope, Hope, and More Hope

Next, I would walk Debbie through three Scriptural examples: the Psalmist in Psalm 42, the Prophet Jeremiah in Lamentations 3, and the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:8-18.

In Psalm 42, the Psalmist felt overwhelmed, cried, longed for God, believed God had forgotten him, suffered persecution by being mocked for his faith, and then looked back on his life and remembered when he joyfully worshipped God, but those days were over. Several times, he asked the question, “Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me?” Even though the Psalmist vacillated between despairing/wrong thinking about God and hopeful/right thinking about God, he concluded with great hope:

> Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him,
> The help of my countenance and my God. Psalm 42:11

Jeremiah is someone else who also greatly struggled with what God was doing in his circumstances. Jeremiah was a Prophet, but his warnings to the people of Judah about their idol worship fell on spiritually deaf ears. They reacted in anger, mocking and threatening Jeremiah. At one point, at least, Jeremiah became depressed. His thoughts were dark, morbid, and anxiety laden. He felt like God was punishing him and something horrible was just about to happen. He was experiencing physical symptoms and believed that not only the people had turned against him, but also that God had. (It is interesting to me that Jeremiah’s circumstances never got any better, but what he was telling himself changed dramatically.)

I read Lamentations 3:1-20 to Debbie and asked her to tell me if she felt like Jeremiah did. She personally related to several of the verses. So, I reminded her that even though Jeremiah’s circumstances never improved, he remembered something that actually led him to turn his focus from himself to worship of God.

> This I recall to my mind,
> Therefore I have hope.
> The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,
> For His compassions never fail.
> They are new every morning;
> Great is Your faithfulness,
> “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
> “Therefore I have hope in Him.”
> The LORD is good to those who wait for Him,
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The third Scriptural example is the Apostle Paul. When Paul thought about the hardships, persecutions, and burdens he had, he had a Godward perspective. Otherwise, he would have plunged into despair and depression like the Psalmist and Jeremiah did.

… we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you. But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, “I BELIEVED, THEREFORE I SPOKE,” we also believe, therefore we also speak, knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you. For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:8-18

Additional hope verses that I read and explained to Debbie were Romans 8:28-30 and 1 Corinthians 10:13. Of course, the greatest hope that you could ever give anyone is the Gospel. If Debbie were not a Christian, the Gospel is her only hope and truly is, as Paul said, “The power of God for salvation.” (Romans 1:16)

Counseling Tips for Someone who is Depressed

Two diagrams are especially helpful for Debbie. One is the “Depression Spiral” by Dr. Jay Adams. The other is the “Sorrow Fills Your Heart” illustration by Lou Priolo.

The depression spiral looks like this:

At point # 1, I explain that the top line represents your emotions when they are good. At point # 2, something happens to cause her to feel a little down. For example, her child wakes up with a fever. Point #3 is a critical point. The reason point #3 is critical is that, even though she has not
yet sinned, she is at a crossroads. If she honors and obeys God, her mood will lift easily. Instead, if she sins by feeling sorry for herself or becoming angry at God, her mood will get worse. Her mood will keep spiraling down. Ultimately, she would stop taking care of her family and either forget about God or paint Him in a bad light. She would, then, be at point #4 and despairing of life itself. I call that the “pit-pit” of despair. Point #4 is where Debbie is. As she turns to the Lord, it will take her longer to get back up a good place emotionally. The whole point of this illustration is to show Debbie that as she obeys the Lord and draws close to Him, she will not only get better, but also her dark mood will lift. Additionally, she will learn how to think and respond rightly for her good and God’s glory when faced with a future point # 3.”

The “Sorrow Fills Your Heart” illustration looks like this:

At the bottom of your heart is a place for godly grief or sorrow. The Lord Jesus had this when He wept over Jerusalem’s rejection of Him and when He wept when Lazarus died. His grief was heart-felt but always righteous. He never stopped perfectly loving the Father and loving others. Like our Lord, when our sorrow is righteous, our heart is full of supernatural peace and joy from God as well as a love for God and for others.

The problem occurs when our sorrow is not completely righteous. When we sin, such as feeling sorry for ourselves or becoming angry with God, the sorrow begins to grow and crowd out any love, peace, or joy that we have. In other words, it fills our heart. The same thing happened to the Apostles when Jesus told them He was going to be killed. They were frightened, He comforted them because “sorrow had filled their hearts” (John 16:6). I would explain to Debbie that as she renews her mind in thinking rightly about God and doing the right thing, whether she feels like it or not, her heart will again be filled with love for God and others. Her sorrow will be pushed back down to a manageable level and not be sinfully controlling her.

Giving hope, gathering data, and using these illustrations would all be goals for the very first session. I would, also, want to know if Debbie is a Christian. One very helpful question is from Evangelism Explosion: “If you died today and God said, ‘Why should I let you into heaven?’ What would you say?” Over the years that I have been a biblical counselor, I have received many very interesting and telling answers to that question. Even if the person gives a biblical answer, I often assign them my “Salvation Worksheets” for homework just to make sure we understand one another. In addition, many depressed people have significant anxiety. As a result, they often have problems trusting God. Thus, they suffer from a lack of assurance of salvation.

I also would question Debbie for any suicidal thoughts, desires, or plans. If she does have a specific plan, her situation is much more dangerous. Her family will need to be notified and, in extreme cases, she will need to be hospitalized temporarily to keep her from hurting
herself or others. Pray for wisdom about what to do. If she came for counseling by herself, it may be necessary for her family to come and get her so she will not be alone. Question her about guns and medications. Guns will need to be taken out of the home or locked up where she cannot get to them. Also, some medications may need to be locked up and dispensed to her by her husband or mother. Also, be aware that one of the very dangerous side-effects of anti-depressants (especially the first month on them) is anxiety and increased risk of suicide.\(^8\) In addition, I would also want to know if she had ever attempted suicide before.

Debbie already has the help of her mother, who will need to continue watching over her for a while. Debbie will need daily accountability. The following are the biblical instructions that I would give Debbie and whoever is holding her accountable:

- **Fulfill your responsibility regardless of how you feel.** I explain that this instruction is easy for me to say, but will be difficult for her to do. Still, she cannot go back to bed; instead, she must take a shower, get dressed, fix her hair, and put on make-up. She should help her Mom around the house, gradually taking on more and more responsibility.
- **Complete these specific responsibilities today** – make a simple menu for supper tonight and three meals tomorrow. Compile a grocery list, go to the grocery store, and prepare the meals for your family. Make them easy and very simple. Hot dog and chips are fine!
- **Debbie needed to have someone to help her,** but in the case of people who are not as severely depressed as Debbie and with no one to help them, I would have had them telephone me at 7 AM each morning to make sure they were up and dressed.
- **Have her write out a thankfulness list.** You may have to help her do this task at first by coaching her through the process.
- **Teach her to think biblical thoughts based on Paul’s criteria for thinking true, God-honoring, excellent and praiseworthy thoughts which point to God** (Philippians 4:8). You can either teach your counselee this new way of thinking or assign her to read and answer the questions in chapter nine of the book, *Attitudes of a Transformed Heart.*\(^9\)
- **Teach her the “Put-Off and Put-On” concept in Scripture.** She will not *stop* being and feeling depressed until she *starts* being grateful and by God’s grace fulfilling her duties whether she feels like it or not (Ephesians 4:22-24).\(^10\)
- **Assign her to do a self-talk log.** A self-talk log is writing down what you are thinking when feeling sad or anxious or any other painful emotion. When she comes back with her list, go over the thoughts one by one and help her to rethink them based on Scripture. For example, “I cannot take this anymore!” Change that response to, “This is a difficult time for me [true thought] but God will give me the grace to go through it [excellent and praiseworthy thought]” (1 Corinthians 10:13).
- **Assign her to find someone to start helping,** thus taking the focus off herself and putting it on showing love to others. For Debbie, this focus needs to begin with her family.
- **Assign her to go to her doctor and have a complete physical to make sure no physical problems are contributing to depression.** Instruct her to tell the doctor she is receiving faith-based counseling so he will know she is getting help.
- **Other homework over the next few weeks:**
  - *Christ and Your Problems* by Dr. Jay Adams.\(^11\)
  - *Out of the Blues* by Dr. Wayne Mack\(^12\)
  - Schedule daily activities. Do them regardless of how you feel.
  - Daily Bible Reading especially in the book of Psalms. If you have trouble concentrating, read out loud.
Pray and ask God to help you see your sin and responsibility and to repent. Ask Him for comfort and grace to glorify Him no matter the circumstances or the emotional struggle. Remind her that she can “… draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that [she] may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4: 16, adaptation added).

Self-Talk log. Remind her this is not a journal of how she feels. How she feels is terrible. The log is a list of what she is thinking when she feels that way. When she finds herself writing down the same thoughts again, she does not have to keep writing them down.

Scripture memory. Assign selected Scriptures that are not too long. Tell her to practice aloud and you will ask her to say them the next time you meet with her.

Assign Jerry Bridges’ book, Trusting God, if appropriate for her situation. As I mentioned earlier, I often assign chapter nine to begin with as it explains how to think biblically and the book has review questions at the end of each chapter.

Eventually, I would assign Elyse Fitzpatrick’s book, Overcoming Fear, Worry, and Anxiety.

So, What Happened to Depressed Debbie?

Soon after counseling began, Debbie became a Christian. The Scriptures began to give her hope. At first, it was very difficult for her to fulfill her responsibilities, but her Mother continued to come over for a few days to be with her and lovingly encourage her to do her work. Within a fairly short period of time, Debbie began to have a glimmer of hope. Within about six weeks, she was well on her way to becoming emotionally stable. Debbie began going to church soon after the counseling began and now is an active member of her church. After eight weeks of meeting with me, we both agreed she need only come every other week. After six weeks of meeting every other week, we went to once a month for three sessions and then she was dismissed.

Does Debbie ever feel depressed now? Of course she does. Her natural sinful bent is to feel sorry for herself and to worry. However, when she does so, she now has the biblical understanding and the supernatural grace of God to help her recover before she spirals down into the pit of despair.

Debbie would tell you now that instead of her “tears being her food day and night,” she is now “… hoping in God and praising Him, her salvation and her God” (adapted from Psalm 42).

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4 Martha Peace’s “Salvation Worksheets” are available for a free download on www.marthapeace.com. Also Stuart Scott’s Gospel presentation is a free download at www.oneeightycounseling.com.


6 Adapted with permission from Lou Priolo, Picking up the Pieces: Recovering from Broken Relationships (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012).


10 Martha Peace’s Bible study on the “Put-Off and Put-on Concept” is available for a free download on www.marthapeace.com. This study is also helpful for the counselor to gather data.


13 Jerry Bridges, Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts (Carol Stream, IL: Navpress, 2014).

14 Martha Peace, Attitudes of a Transformed Heart.