

How Should We Handle Overwhelming Feelings?

What is the biblical perspective on how to handle overwhelming feelings?

There are healthy and unhealthy ways to do that.

The healthy way to deal with strong feelings starts with thinking wisely about feelings in general. [Our pastor](#) often says that feelings are real (we do feel them, often intensely), but they're not reliable (they make terrible indicators of what is true). So we should acknowledge them, but not be led by them.

Especially powerful, overwhelming feelings.

Allowing yourself to be controlled by your feelings is unwise and immature. The flip side of that is our example of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. No one ever experienced the strength of horrific feelings like He did, to the point of sweating blood. He allowed Himself to feel His feelings, but then He turned in trust to His Father, submitting to His will. He set the bar for how to handle overwhelming feelings: *feel the feelings, and trust the Lord.*

Often, though, especially in the young, people deal with their strong feelings in unhealthy ways.

Stuff them. One of my friends refers to her “vault,” the supposedly safe, impenetrable locker where all the painful feelings of her horrific childhood were supposed to stay stashed. Out of sight, out of mind, out of touch. Until the vault developed cracks, and those strong feelings of pain and shame and horror and fear started slipping out sideways into her relationships and her dreams.

This is not God's plan for emotional health. David wrote in Psalm 51:6, "You (God) desire truth in my innermost being." In Romans 1, Paul referred to those who "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (1:18). Stuffing and denying feelings is not truthful. And it doesn't make them go away. Someone even wrote a book titled, "Feelings Buried Alive Never Die."

Let them explode. Without self-control, the angry person can vent his or her anger with verbal shrapnel and even physical abuse. Road rage, anyone? (I blogged about this in [The Problem with Heart Bombs.](#))

Self-injure. The "solution" of cutting, burning, skin-picking, hair-pulling, and other forms of self-injury has been growing in popularity over the past decade or so. These destructive behaviors can provide momentary relief by distracting attention to soul pain by causing body pain. When it becomes an addiction, the release of endorphins, feel-good brain chemicals, provides an additional reason to keep repeating it.

Those choosing to self-injure need an extra measure of grace and understanding, because their level of soul pain is especially high to go to that extreme. In addition to the emotional pain, I believe they are experiencing a nasty spiritual warfare attack. Jesus said that our enemy, Satan, "comes only to steal, kill and destroy" (John 10:10). The "slow suicide" of self-injury is a pernicious way to do that. I do think that cutting is a demonic suggestion, based on the story in 1 Kings 18 where the prophets of the false god Baal cut themselves trying to get the attention of their idol. Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 10 that sacrifices made to the false gods of idols are actually sacrifices to demons, so there is a biblical connection between cutting and demonic influence. (I'm not saying anything about demon possession, which is not even a good biblical interpretation of the New Testament word *demonize*; rather, I think those who cut hear the whisper from the enemy, whose native tongue is lying [John 8:44]: "Cutting will help. Cutting will make me feel better. Cutting is the

answer.”)

God’s word offers us some healthy ways to express strong, overwhelming feelings.

Talk about them. The highly sensitive and emotional King David invited the Lord into his strong feelings, and he used words to express the agony of his heart. Many of the psalms are powerful expressions of the psalmists’ emotions. Consider Psalm 55:1-5 for example:

“Listen to my prayer, O God. Do not ignore my cry for help! Please listen and answer me, for I am overwhelmed by my troubles. My enemies shout at me, making loud and wicked threats. They bring trouble on me and angrily hunt me down. My heart pounds in my chest. The terror of death assaults me. Fear and trembling overwhelm me, and I can’t stop shaking.”

When overwhelmed by strong emotions, telling someone else who can be trusted to listen respectfully and with understanding is a healthy, constructive way to express feelings.

Writing one’s thoughts and feelings in a journal is a powerful process to move the feelings from the inside to the outside. (I recently wrote about that here: [Pen > Puter](#))

Let yourself cry. Then there is God’s good gift of tears. God created us with tear ducts as a way for strong feelings to leave the body, moving from our hearts on the inside to our cheeks on the outside, and that is much better, much healthier, than cutting so that the “red tears” flow.

Psalm 56:8 shows us that David was not afraid to let his tears fall:

“You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.”

God considers our tears precious enough to collect!

Sometimes, though, people have trouble accessing their unshed tears. They are locked up inside. Often this is because of having made a self-protective inner vow, usually many years ago: "I will not cry." It was considered unsafe because crying resulted in shaming or being punished. When children make a personal inner vow like that, it functions like the cruise control on a car, controlling the speed. The little person who made the vow many years before created a hard and fast life-rule, and until it is addressed and renounced, it stays in place. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:11, "When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things." One of those childish things can be making an inner vow—which ends up, from the perspective of adulthood, being what the Bible calls a "foolish vow" (Lev. 5:4-6). And the wise thing to do with a foolish vow is break it, or renounce it or cast it off in Jesus' name. Romans 13:12 instructs us to cast off deeds of darkness, which this kind of vow would be because it is the opposite of trusting in God.

What should we do with hard, overwhelming feelings?

- Don't try to hide from them or stuff them.
- Acknowledge them and let yourself feel them. Invite Jesus into your feelings.
- Talk about how you feel, and what you're thinking, with a safe person.
- Let yourself cry them out of your body one tear at a time.

And follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man: *Feel the feelings, and trust the Lord.*

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On Suicide

Apr. 9, 2013

Over the weekend, Rick Warren (pastor of Saddleback Church in California, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*) and his wife Kay revealed that their son Matthew had taken his life after a lifelong struggle with mental illness. In an email to his church, Pastor Warren wrote, “[O]nly those closest knew that he struggled from birth with mental illness, dark holes of depression, and even suicidal thoughts. In spite of America’s best doctors, meds, counselors, and prayers for healing, the torture of mental illness never subsided.”

Many years ago, I was privileged to take a three-year lay counseling class from a wise and experienced man who taught us that those who commit suicide don’t really want to die; they just want the pain to end. Deep depression feels like being locked in a dark dungeon with no way out. The pain can become intolerably intense; one friend likened it to being forced to hold a large cauldron of boiling liquid with no hot pads. Those of us who have been spared from deep depression cannot really imagine how dark and how painful it is.

Psalm 139:16 says, “All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be.” That means that before God even creates us, He knows the day of our death. That also means that those who commit suicide are dying on their ordained last day. Most of the time, though, God intervenes in people’s plans to end their lives, each story different and drenched in grace.

When one teenage girl learned she was pregnant, she planned to drive one of her family’s cars into an embankment at the end

of the week-but her parents sold that car before she could carry out her plan, and she decided she couldn't wreck the one remaining vehicle. Today, she is so glad she gave birth to her baby girl, who brought immeasurable joy to her adoptive parents, and enjoys her life of service to God which includes her own family.

Another friend lay in bed one night planning to end her life by walking out in front of an 18-wheeler on the nearby interstate. As she thought about making her way in her nightgown across the empty field that lay between her house and the highway, she suddenly thought, "I can't walk across that field in my bare feet!" . . . and turned over and went back to sleep.

When our son was suicidally depressed in high school, his friend came to us and told us of his plan to hurt himself a few days later. He was not pleased that his friend had "betrayed" him, but we were so grateful-and it enabled us to get him some badly-needed help.

There are so many stories of God's intervention that when we do hear of someone taking their own life, I do believe it means God allowed it because it was their ordained day. This doesn't diminish the pain for the survivors, though.

My dear friend Caren Austen, responding to the news of Matthew Warren's suicide, wrote an essay revealing her own struggles with mental illness and suicidal depression so that people would know what it's like. With her permission, I gratefully share these excerpts:

"I am not weak, lacking in faith, demon-possessed or oppressed or anything else but suffering from faulty brain chemistry.

"The disorder affects my daily life: my ability to work, interact with other people, activities of daily living to the point of sometimes being unable to get out of bed or leave my house. I hate it. I hate that God has chosen this path for my

growth and sanctification. Depression is my nearly constant companion. I rarely get a break. I wake up with it. I work with it. I go to sleep with it, knowing that tomorrow I'll wake up and live it all over again.

"There are so many of us who suffer silently, because it is not acceptable to discuss mental illness. Cancer is OK. People have sympathy and understanding for that. Cystic Fibrosis, diabetes, MS and the multitude of other terrible diseases and disorders are acceptable. Mental illness is considered taboo. The stigma attached to it prevents people from getting the help they need, from picking up the phone, from asking for prayer.

"Many, many people, especially Christians, negatively judge people with mental illness and especially those who have made the awful decision to take their own lives. A common statement is: 'It's the ultimate selfish act.' I'd ask you to consider what agony any individual must be enduring to fight every natural instinct for survival to choose instead to die. To be feeling psychic pain so incredible that the very thought of even one more moment is unendurable. I have, in the past, been completely and thoroughly convinced that if I loved my family, especially my children, as I said I did, I would remove the evil (me) from their lives, so I would no longer influence them for evil.

"These are the kinds of thoughts that people who choose suicide experience. They are not to be judged harshly. They are to be seen with compassion. Yes, it is an unspeakable tragedy that leaves those left behind with the worst kind of pain. A pain that I can't even imagine as they believe that the one who died didn't love them enough to fight. I know those are the thoughts, the feelings of those left behind, but they are not the actual reasons suicide was chosen. In fact, just the opposite is likely true. The one who chooses suicide often does it out of love for those they care most about, as strange as that may seem."

Please, please pray for the Warren family and for all those teetering on the edge of suicide. God knows who they are. It may even be someone you know and love.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/on_suicide

Giving Can Improve Your Health; Science Says So

Want happiness and fulfillment in life? Then practice giving, advises an influential medical professor.

It really is good to be good, claims Stephen Post, Ph.D., professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. Science says it is so.

Post and coauthor Jill Neimark present evidence in their recent book, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*.^{1} As head of an institute supported by philanthropist Sir John Templeton^{2}, Post has funded over fifty studies [related to giving] at forty-four major universities. He's convinced that giving is essential for optimum physical and mental health in a fragmented society.

Post says research has produced remarkable findings: Giving protects overall health twice as much as aspirin protects against heart disease. If pharmaceutical companies could charge for giving, we might see ads for Give Back instead of Prozac, he speculates. One program, Rx: Volunteer, has some California HMO physicians giving volunteerism prescriptions to their Medicare patients.

All You Need is Love?

Post and Neimark say around 500 scientific studies demonstrate that unselfish love can enhance health. For instance, Paul Wink, a Wellesley College psychologist, studied University of California Berkeley data that followed about two hundred people every decade since the 1920s. Giving during high school correlated with good mental and physical health across life spans. Givers experienced these benefits regardless of the warmth of their families, he found.

Other research says that giving correlates with lower teen depression and suicide risk and with lower depression among the elderly. Studies at Stanford and elsewhere found links between frequent volunteering and delaying death. Post says giving even trumps receiving when it comes to reducing mortality.

Give more; enjoy life and live longer? Maybe, as Jesus famously said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." [\[3\]](#)

Illustrations abound of givings personal benefits. Millard Fuller, a millionaire, gave away much of his wealth at age thirty. He and his wife, Linda, sold their business and affiliated with Koinonia Farm, a Georgia Christian community. They built houses in Zaire and then founded Habitat for Humanity in 1976 to help needy people build affordable homes. Fuller's goal was to eliminate poverty housing from the face of the earth. Get rid of shacks!

Today Habitat volunteers have constructed over 225,000 houses, helping over a million people in over 3,000 communities worldwide. Countless volunteers attest to the personal satisfaction their involvement brings.

From Playmate to Orphan Care

Post and Neimark relate an intriguing tale of a former *Playboy* model who has devoted her life to helping poor kids in Haiti. Susan Scott Krabacher's childhood helped her connect with the hurting children she now serves. Sexual abuse, her mother's psychiatric breakdown, multiple foster homes, and her brother's suicide took their emotional toll. In her late teens, she became a *Playboy* centerfold and moved into the *Playboy* mansion.

Ten years of playing mixed with depression. Eventually she reconnected with the faith of her youth. Observing Haiti's poverty prompted her to learn more of the biblical take on life. The foundation she and her husband started runs three orphanages for 2,300 children. "I work long hours," Krabacher notes, "put up with unbelievable sacrifice, bury too many children, and get no compensation but love, which is the greatest freedom you can know and the most important thing in the world."

Post would agree. Do you desire happiness, love, safety, security, loyal friends, true connection, or a benevolent and hopeful world? He has one answer: Give. You'll be happier, healthier, and live longer. Love cures, wrote the esteemed psychiatrist Karl Menninger. It cures both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.

Notes

1. Stephen Post, Ph.D., and Jill Neimark, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), www.whygoodthingshappen.com.
2. Institute for Research on Unlimited Love: www.unlimitedloveinstitute.org.
3. [Acts 20:35](#) NASB.

Giving Can Be Good for You: Science Says So

“All You Need is Love”

Do you want happiness and fulfillment in life? Then practice giving, advises an influential medical professor.

“It really is good to be good,” claims Stephen Post, PhD., professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. “Science says it is so.”[{1}](#)

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Give more; enjoy life and live longer? Maybe, as Jesus famously said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35 NASB). Both Jewish and Christian biblical texts admonish us to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Mt. 22:39 NIV). I don’t know about you, but I find it fascinating to explore these ways that contemporary science and social science often highlight the value of ancient biblical principles.

Post presents research to support the value of ten ways of expressing giving love. Here we will examine four of them: compassion, humor, loyalty, and listening.

“Love cures,” wrote the esteemed psychiatrist Karl Menninger. It cures “both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.”[{6}](#)

Compassion’s Benefits

Illustrations abound of giving’s personal benefits.

Millard Fuller, a millionaire, gave away much of his wealth at age thirty. He and his wife, Linda, sold their business and affiliated with Koinonia Farm, a Georgia Christian community. They built houses in Zaire and then founded [Habitat for Humanity](#) in 1976 to help needy people build affordable homes. Fuller’s goal was “to eliminate poverty housing from the face

of the earth. Get rid of shacks!"[{7}](#)

Today, Habitat volunteers have constructed over two hundred twenty-five thousand houses, helping over a million people in over three thousand communities worldwide.[{8}](#) Countless volunteers attest to the personal satisfaction their involvement brings. And they're in over ninety countries. In Amman, Jordan, for example, I had lunch with the Habitat director there who involves compassionate volunteers in the Middle East.

As I reflect on his work, I'm reminded of another Middle Eastern leader who showed great compassion. One of His followers wrote, "When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36 NIV).

Stephen Post says "we're hardwired to open our hearts and to care—and in fact, compassion is important for the survival of the species."[{9}](#) He cites preliminary psychological research in which "compassion significantly reduced depression and stress."[{10}](#)

In that light, consider the intriguing tale of a former *Playboy* model who has devoted her life to helping poor kids in Haiti. Susan Scott Krabacher's childhood helped her connect with the hurting children she now serves. Sexual abuse, her mother's psychiatric breakdown, multiple foster homes, and her brother's suicide took their emotional toll. In her late teens, she became a *Playboy* centerfold and moved into the *Playboy* mansion.

Ten years of playing mixed with depression. Eventually she reconnected with the Christian faith of her youth. Observing Haiti's poverty prompted her to learn more of the biblical take on life. The foundation she and her husband started runs three orphanages for twenty-three hundred children. "I work long hours," Krabacher notes, "put up with unbelievable

sacrifice, bury too many children, and get no compensation but love, which is the greatest freedom you can know and the most important thing in the world.”[\[11\]](#)

Humor – Good Medicine

There are intriguing parallels between some modern social scientific findings and time-tested biblical life-lessons. One of these involves humor. An ancient proverb says, “A joyful heart is good medicine” (Prov. 17:22 NASB).

Humor heals. Think about how you felt the last time you roared with laughter. Maybe a funny movie, a family situation, or an uproarious joke session had you even crying and gasping for air. Your abdominal muscles and heartbeat went wild. One Stanford psychiatrist “found that a hundred laughs is the aerobic equivalent of ten minutes of rowing.”[\[12\]](#)

Stephen Post sees humor as a way to help others, “a very effective way of connecting, of lightening another’s life as well as our own.” Interviews with Holocaust survivors conducted by a Tel Aviv University researcher found that many cited humor “as a way of surviving trauma.” Post notes that Ronald Reagan was a master of using humor to put other people [and perhaps himself] at ease. When President Reagan was shot and at risk of dying, he quipped to the emergency room doctors, “I hope you’re all Republicans.”[\[13\]](#)

Of course, bitter humor can hurt rather than heal. But positive humor can help people relate and communicate openness. Post cites psychologist Robert Provine who monitored and analyzed over twelve hundred “bouts” of laughter in public places. Provine says shared, contagious laughter can be “an important signal you send to someone that says, ‘This is play. I’m not going to attack or hurt you.’”[\[14\]](#)

Humor is also important for a successful marriage, according to University of Washington psychologist John Gottman. He

found that coping with issues “through dialogue, laughter, and affection” was a good predictor of whether marriages would last. [\[15\]](#)

On a Detroit TV talk show, the host and I were discussing my book, *Secrets of Successful Humor*. He asked about humor and marriage. I told him, “The secret of our marriage is that we take time two evenings each week to go out to a lovely restaurant. A nice dinner, some candlelight, soft music, a slow walk home. She goes Tuesdays; I go Fridays.”

It hit a nerve. The host roared, long and loud. Contagious laughter spread throughout the studio audience. We all enjoyed some communal fun that helped open us up to each other.

Loyalty Bonds

A famous biblical proverb notes, “A friend is always loyal, and a brother is born to help in time of need” (Prov. 17:17 NLT). Post believes that “Loyalty is love that lasts. . . . The commitment inherent in loyalty defuses our deepest existential anxiety.” He continues: “Broken covenants are hard to restore and never quite attain their state of original trust. It’s not easy to find loyalty in our society.” [\[16\]](#)

Marriage and friendship, of course, can be significant expressions of loyalty. University of Chicago demographer Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher co-authored the book *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*. Analyzing data from over six thousand families, Waite discovered strong correlations between marriage and longevity. Gallagher says their research demonstrated that, compared to similar singles, married folks “are physically healthier, live longer . . . experience less anxiety, depression, hostility, and loneliness, and are more likely to tell you that they’re happy with life in general. They have more sex than single people of the same age.” Of

course there's a caveat, Post notes. High-conflict marriages bring stress and can lower immune function.[{17}](#)

Friendships count, too. University of North Carolina sociologist Rebecca Adams' frequent childhood moves had her attending thirteen schools by the time she entered college. She feels she learned how to *make* new friends but wasn't as good at *maintaining* them. These experiences helped motivate her to study friendship. She's discovered strong links between quality of relationships and mental well-being. Adams notes, "It's been shown over and over again that friendship is more important to psychological well-being than family relations are. . . . Friendships are voluntary. So we'll choose friendships that support our psychological well-being."[{18}](#)

Men can learn a lot from women about friendship. Male and female friendship styles often differ, Adams says: "Men define their friendships in terms of shared activities, and women define them in terms of conversation. For men, a friend is their fishing, golfing, or bowling buddy. For women, a friend is someone they can confide in." Of course there are exceptions, but Post notes that emotional intimacy is what nourishes friendships most.[{19}](#)

Giving love through compassion, humor, and loyalty all contribute to our well-being. But, is anybody listening?

"I'm Listening"

The television comedy *Frasier* was one of the most popular TV series in U.S. history. It's been called "a thinking person's comedy." Reruns are ubiquitous, about six episodes daily in our area. Frasier Crane, the protagonist, is a caring, sensitive, cultured—but insecure and sometimes pompous—Seattle radio psychiatrist who always greets his callers with, "I'm listening." Yet sometimes he becomes so wrapped up in himself that he tunes others out. He's not alone. In one amusing

scene, Frasier's ex wife, Lilith (also a psychiatrist), tries to converse with Frasier's brother, Niles (yet another psychiatrist), about an especially weighty matter. Niles, focused on a video game, doesn't pay her sufficient attention, prompting Lilith to exclaim, "Is there a *chair* here I could talk to?"

I confess that in our home, my wife Meg sometimes has to use Lilith's line to get my attention. (Mind you, I don't confess that it's as often as *she* might *claim*!) But listening is a powerful form of affirmation and an important tool in understanding and communication. Solomon, a wise Jewish king, wrote, "What a shame, what folly, to give advice before listening to the facts!" (Proverbs 18:13 NLT)

Stephen Post writes, "When we truly absorb another's story, we are saying, 'You count. Your life and feelings and thoughts matter to me. And I want to know who you really are.'" He claims that listening can help both the listener and the one listened to. New studies indicate: "Listening activates the part of our brains hardwired for empathy. . . . When we listen to others in pain, their stress response quiets down and their body has a better chance to heal."[\[20\]](#)

Post says that without a good listener, we can feel terribly alone, "like the psalmist in the Bible who cries out, 'No man cared for my soul.'" He continues, "This has led some scholars to call the God of the Psalms a God of listening. Our need for a listener is an inherent aspect of all prayer."[\[21\]](#)

So, giving love is good for you. Science says so. Compassion, humor, loyalty, and listening are important ways you can express giving love. Is it as intriguing to you as it is to me that contemporary science and social science are often in harmony with age-old biblical counsel? Makes me think I should read the Bible more often.

Notes

1. Stephen Post, PhD, and Jill Neimark, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), 15.
2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., 7.
4. Ibid, 7-8, 48-51.
5. Ibid., 8-10, 68-69.
6. Ibid., 2.
7. Ibid., 25, 275.
8. www.habitat.org
9. Post and Neimark, *Why Good Things Happen*, 179-180.
10. Ibid., 184.
11. Ibid., 177-8; see also Susan Krabacher (as told to Kristi Watts), "Diary of a Playboy Centerfold," *The 700 Club*, www.cbn.com/700club/features/amazing/Susan_Krabacher061506.aspx; accessed January 24, 2008.
12. Post and Neimark, *Why Good Things Happen*, 132.
13. Ibid., 133-135.
14. Ibid., 139-140.
15. Ibid., 141-142.
16. Ibid., 199-200.
17. Ibid., 203-205.
18. Ibid., 216-217.
19. Ibid., 221.
20. Ibid., 231-232.
21. Ibid., 234.

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Reflection on the Virginia

Tech Shootings

We moved our household this weekend, so I had not heard anything about the shootings at Virginia Tech until that same night. Next morning, I began reading articles to bring myself up to speed. The situation hurts. It was a student at the university, not some outsider. The gunman was 23, only three years younger than me.

Another person from my generation lashing out in violence; this is not the first time it's happened. This situation brings to mind several other recent occurrences, both locally and nationally. On a personal level, I recently found out that a guy from my high school who also graduated from my alma mater, University of Texas at Dallas (UTD), committed suicide recently. He was 26, an accomplished musician, national merit scholar, and earned a computer science degree.

During my junior year at UTD, a friend of mine at a Christian university came home for Christmas. While she was in Dallas, she received word that her dormitory roommate had committed suicide. She was a bright girl with a promising future and was apparently from a Christian family.

A month after I had graduated UTD, a news report came out that a student drugged, raped, and assaulted another student—during an exam study session.

Lastly, while reading about the Virginia Tech gunman's angst that finally snapped into a violent rage, I could not help but remember the Columbine shootings. That report came out my senior year in high school. The two teenage perpetrators were my age.

With all of these cases of violent crimes on campuses among young, educated people, I have to wonder, *What is wrong with my generation?* Why are these twenty-somethings breaking like this? Crime and violence are a part of the fallen world that

we live in, but the inordinate amount of violent and sexual crimes on campuses is staggering.

My generation has received the most “information” from media than any other. We have seen the rise of technological advances that only Gene Rodenberry (*Star Trek*) could dream of. We have grown up thinking that every opportunity and possibility is at our fingertips (or at the click of a mouse). We have some of the fastest, most efficient cars, the biggest malls, and some of the best plastic surgery that money can buy. The nation is rich, and although material resources may not satisfy us in the long run, they sure feel good right now. We have medications for nearly everything, and beauty products for everything else. But apparently all of the riches, technology, beauty, and opportunities still leave us in despair—for some, despair to the point of death. Why? Is this an artifact for only this generation, or does the Bible speak to the despair plaguing us?

Consider the words of Solomon:

“I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself... I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces... Also whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure... Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 2:4,7-8,10-11).

Just as Solomon was blessed and lived in a time of education, materialism, and plenty, I think his hopelessness rings true of my generation as well. Compared to prior generations, we have it all, and yet it only fills us with despair that is

really no different. There is a void that only God can fill. At the end of Ecclesiastes, Solomon concludes that the end of the matter is to fear the Lord and keep his commandments (12:13). In other words, when all is said and done, no amount of education, riches, or technology can compare to knowing the Lord through His Son Jesus Christ.

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Deadly College Shootings in U.S.

Some deadly shootings at U.S. colleges or universities, listed by number of fatalities:

April 16, 2007

A gunman kills 32 people in a dorm and a classroom building at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va. The suspect then dies by gunshot himself.

Aug. 1, 1966

Charles Whitman points a rifle from the observation deck of the University of Texas at Austin's Tower and begins shooting in a homicidal rampage that goes on for 96 minutes. Sixteen people are killed, 31 wounded.

July 12, 1976

Edward Charles Allaway, a custodian in the library of California State University, Fullerton, fatally shoots seven fellow employees and wounds two others. Mentally ill, Allaway believed his colleagues were pornographers and were forcing his estranged wife to appear in their movies. A judge found him innocent by reason of insanity in 1977 after a jury was

unable to reach a verdict and he was committed to the state mental health system.

Nov. 1, 1991

Gang Lu, 28, a graduate student in physics from China, reportedly upset because he was passed over for an academic honor, opens fire in two buildings on the University of Iowa campus. Five University of Iowa employees killed, including four members of the physics department, one other person is wounded. The student fatally shoots himself.

May 4, 1970

Four students were killed and nine wounded by National Guard troops called in to quell anti-war protests on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio.

Oct. 28, 2002

Failing University of Arizona Nursing College student and Gulf War veteran Robert Flores, 40, walks into an instructor's office and fatally shoots her. A few minutes later, armed with five guns, he enters one of his nursing classrooms and kills two more of his instructors before fatally shooting himself.

Sept. 2, 2006

Douglas W. Pennington, 49, kills himself and his two sons, Logan P. Pennington, 26, and Benjamin M. Pennington, 24, during a visit to the campus of Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, W.Va.

Jan. 16, 2002

Graduate student Peter Odighizuwa, 42, recently dismissed from Virginia's Appalachian School of Law, returns to campus and kills the dean, a professor and a student before being tackled by students. The attack also wounds three female students.

Aug. 15, 1996

Frederick Martin Davidson, 36, a graduate engineering student at San Diego State, is defending his thesis before a faculty committee when he pulls out a handgun and kills three professors.

Jan. 26, 1995

Former law student Wendell Williamson shoots two men to death and injures a police officer in Chapel Hill, N.C.

April 2, 2007

University of Washington researcher Rebecca Griego, 26, is shot to death in her office by former boyfriend Jonathan Rowan who then turned the gun on himself.

Aug. 28, 2000

James Easton Kelly, 36, a University of Arkansas graduate student recently dropped from a doctoral program after a decade of study and John Locke, 67, the English professor overseeing his coursework, are shot to death in an apparent murder-suicide.

Source: Associated Press

Accessed Apr. 17, 2007 © 2007 MSNBC.com
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18137414/>

A Christian Response to the

Horror at Virginia Tech

Many of us found ourselves glued to the television, watching videos of the events surrounding the mass murder in Blacksburg, Virginia. A day like all other days for thousands of college students, faculty, administrators, and all the rest that make up the mini-city of Virginia Tech University suddenly turned into a waking nightmare, the kind of experience that happens on TV but never really happens to us. Or so we think. I've been to the campus in Blacksburg; it isn't the kind of place one would imagine mass murder. But where *would* one expect such a thing, except in far away places like Iraq?

In such situations, our emotions typically take the lead since it takes awhile to get all the information that informs our thinking. What emotions do we experience? Shock? Fear, as we think about students of our own there or at similar campuses? Sadness for the loss of life, especially for such senseless loss? Another sense we have, sometimes not till after the initial shock has worn off, is moral outrage, a deep-seated sense that what happened was wrong: not in terms of economics or simply the proper functioning of an organization, but in terms of moral wrong. Deep down we know there is good and there is evil, and this event was evil.

But upon what do we base this sense? Before you just brush the question aside with the ubiquitous "Duh!" or ask incredulously, "What kind of question is *that?!*" pause a moment and give it some thought. Why is such a thing wrong? After all, if we push a Darwinian, naturalistic worldview to the limit, we might think ourselves justified in seeing this kind of horror as really no different from animals attacking and killing each other. Keep in mind that the Nazis were able to carry out their slaughter because they had relegated Jews to a lower level in the evolutionary chain.

The first point I want to make is that *Christianity explains our moral outrage*. It's explained by the fact that we are created in God's image and have in us a sense of moral right and wrong. The apostle Paul wrote that "the requirements of the law are written on [our] hearts," that our "consciences [are] also bearing witness, and [our] thoughts now accusing, now even defending [us]" (Romans 2:15). God is the standard of moral right and wrong, and we reflect that knowledge in ourselves. Of course, we can deaden that knowledge; a conscience can be trained to ignore promptings to do good.

Have you seen someone get angry (or maybe you got angry yourself) when a person who commits such an evil act commits suicide immediately afterwards? Oh, I know: some people ultimately want the person to die himself. But there's something about being denied to express our moral outrage at the person. We want justice for the crime committed, and we don't always want it to be a quick and dirty justice. Frankly, we'd like the person to suffer and know what he's suffering for.

How do we explain our desire for justice? What I described above is more a desire for vengeance. However, we do want justice. We want the person to face up to the charges, to hear the condemnation (consider the trials where families of victims get to speak their minds to the accused). We want him to know he did wrong and to know he's going to suffer the consequences, and then we want justice meted out.

Along the same lines that Christianity explains moral outrage, it also *explains our desire for justice*. We know some things are morally wrong and are deserving of punishment. And we want to make a strong enough impression on the guilty that he (or observers of the case) doesn't do it again. God is *very* interested in justice. A quick search in the New International Version lists almost one hundred twenty instances of the word "justice" in the Old Testament. The psalmist writes, "The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his

unfailing love" (33:5). "Truth is nowhere to be found," God said through Isaiah, "and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice" (Isa. 59:15). And, "Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (1:15-17).

This isn't just an Old Testament concern. In the New Testament we have this promise: "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

A question comes naturally to mind. If God is so interested in justice, why doesn't He fulfill it now? This is an extremely important question. However, it's one I'm going to forego for now (search Probe's Web site for articles on the problem of evil; Sue Bohlin's article "[The Value of Suffering](#)" is a good start). The long and short of it is that we don't know just what God is up to. We can hazard some guesses. C. S. Lewis said that suffering is God's "megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Let's say we *can't* give an answer to the question, Why is evil allowed? What then? If that's the primary criterion for accepting a particular religion or philosophy as true, we will be able to accept none, not even secularism!

What, then? Where does that leave us? Christianity does have an answer to that: *Christianity offers hope*. Even in the worst of situations, the person who has received the grace of God in salvation has the hope of a future in which death has no place. This isn't "hope" as in cross-your-fingers hope, like, "I sure hope the game doesn't get rained out this weekend." In the New Testament, hope is presented as the assurance of the future. We have the hope of eternal life—of that life which

has no room for death—by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The apostle Peter wrote, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). Jesus proved that He had broken the hold of death through His own death on the cross by breaking free from the tomb and appearing live to hundreds of people. Because He rose and conquered death, we who trust in Him will, too.

Hope is a fundamental ingredient of Christianity. Faith enables us to say “yes” today to what we know we should do; hope enables us to say “yes” to the future, because it rests in the hands of the God Who loves us. One of my favorite verses in Scripture is in Romans. Paul wrote: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (15:13). This is God’s desire for us, to live in the (sure) hope that our future is secure in Him.

One more thing. Christianity isn’t just some set of religious dogmas and practices that keeps some of us off the streets on Sunday mornings! *Christianity provides a way of life that minimizes such tragedies.* It provides both the framework within which we order our lives *and* the ability to do it by the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. Blaise Pascal held out the value of Christian morality as an enticement to see if Christianity is true. Even if it isn’t true, he said, look at the kind of life it calls us to lead! Thomas Jefferson, who so rejected the miraculous in the Bible that he edited out of the New Testament all such things, recognized a high level of morality in its pages. And when you ask people who the best exemplars of goodness have been in history, Jesus is typically on the list, even the lists of those who don’t believe He is the divine Son of God.

The point is that built into Christianity is a structure of life that prohibits people hurting each other. Of course, this

isn't to suggest that Christians never do wrong! But it *is* to say that we have more than just pragmatic reasons for doing right. We do right to honor God, to honor people, because we believe in moral right and wrong. Sometimes we do the right thing—only because it's the right thing to do, regardless of the rewards! However, I would be dishonest if I didn't note that there *does* lie in our future many blessings for obedient lives.

But Christianity goes beyond simply providing a moral code. It also provides the power to follow it! The Holy Spirit somehow resides in us (one of the mysteries of the faith!), and He transforms us, changes us through a number of ways into the image of Christ (cf. Rom. 8:5-17; 12:1,2; Gal. 5:16-26).

To sum up: Christianity explains our moral outrage at the mass murders at Virginia Tech this week. It explains our desire for justice, and guarantees that it will be carried out eventually. It offers real hope, hope that is sure, for those who suffer. And it provides a way for people to live with one another without having a reason to give in to such evil impulses.

It's likely that some people will read this who aren't Christians. If you're one of them, I'd like to ask you to consider thoughtfully what I've said about Christianity, but also consider what *you* believe. You may be an adherent of another religion or philosophy, or you may simply be a secularist who believes in God but believes He doesn't really have much to do with our lives. My question is this: If you agree that the issues I've raised are important, how does your belief system answer them? If it *does* answer them, do the answers seem plausible? Is there good reason to believe them? If not, maybe the whole belief system needs to be evaluated.

If you'd like to know more about a Christian understanding of these issues, hunt around on our Web site for other articles. Or [send us an e-mail](#). You can even use the old-fashioned

method of calling on the phone!

We'd love to hear from you.

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“Help—My Daughter Just Attempted Suicide”

My 19-year-old daughter has been hospitalized because she has tried to commit suicide. This has not only created a moment of crisis with in our immediate family but a very big puzzling question. Why would a person who professes to believe in Christ attempt to commit suicide? What should I say to her? How can I tell her that Christ is bigger than any of her problems may be?

Please know that I will be praying for your daughter and your family in this difficult time.

Teenagers are universally having a difficult time sorting out their lives in this new millennium. There are so many competing pressures and influences that they easily get overwhelmed. While suicide is indeed a drastic measure, it is more common today among our youth than ever before.

If your daughter is a believer, as you suggest, she might be wondering where is God in her life and circumstances. She may have a false expectation that knowing God should make everything better. While Proverbs makes clear that we are better off living with wisdom and insight, there are no guarantees against trouble. In fact Jesus warned that we would have tribulation in our lives. We can often see the ungodly

and wicked succeeding in life and wonder why we should bother doing things right. Asaph wondered the same thing in Psalm 73. Check out my article on [Where Was God on 9/11?](#) for an exposition of this important Psalm.

She may also rationalize that heaven will be a far better place than earth and why not get there sooner if her life seems impossible for whatever reason. This logic is hard to refute especially since we believe in the eternal security of the believer. Suicide does not forfeit your place in heaven if you are a true child of the King.

If she is not truly a believer then she needs the hope only He can bring. Images of the Good Shepherd from Psalm 23 and John 10 (especially verses 9, 11, 14, 15, 27, 28, and 29) can be very helpful to someone struggling to make their way in this messy world. The entire Gospel of John may be a good project for the two of you to read together.

So what do you say? First, you assure her of your love and commitment to her no matter what she has done. As her father, you carry the major load in communicating your love and acceptance of her no matter her failures or perceived inadequacies. You must depend on the Lord to allow you to see her through Jesus' eyes.

Second, she needs to understand that God is sovereign and has planned out her life. In our relationship with Him we need to seek His wisdom and guidance not our own. Things may look bad now but she can't see her life ahead as the Lord does. There is a reason for everything even when it doesn't make sense to us. She may not be ready to trust God with her life yet but she needs to know you trust God with her life.

Third, there is undoubtedly some deep seated need or hurt in her life that causes her to disrespect herself so much. She will likely need counseling to uncover this. But she will need your support through the entire process. You may need to face

a failure on your own part in her life that you are unaware of. You have to be willing to face whatever it takes to bring her back to wholeness. For awhile you will need to supply the courage she needs to face every day. You can't do this in your own strength. Remember Isaiah 40:31:

*But those who hope in (or wait upon) the LORD
will renew their strength.*

*They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary
they will walk and not be faint.*

Take courage, for your Savior has overcome the world and there is nothing impossible to Him.

Respectfully,

Ray Bohlin

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“Do People Who Commit Suicide Go to Hell?”

A young man I know committed suicide. Someone remarked that if he was troubled that day, he is *really* troubled now because the Bible says he is in hell forever. Is this true? If so, can you give me Bible references to support it, likewise if it is false?

That is NOT what the Bible says. That's what a lot of people think, but God isn't one of them.

Trusting Christ is the only criterion for determining whether one goes to heaven or hell. If the young man had trusted Christ and committed suicide as the only way he could think of to make the pain stop, then he is with the Lord because of the security of the believer. For instance, Rom. 8:38-39 says,

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Nothing—including our own acts such as suicide—can separate believers (the context of Paul’s letter) from God’s love.

Consider also John 10: 28-19, which shows we are DOUBLY safe:

“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”

Not even ourselves.

If the young man had not trusted Christ, then unfortunately he is in hell, but not because of suicide: it would be because of his refusal to believe in and entrust himself to Jesus.

I hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

“Why Wouldn’t God Let Me Commit Suicide?”

Hi Sue,

I just read your article [Do People Who Commit Suicide Go to Hell?](#). I believe everything you say to be true and biblical...and then I get stuck.

I have bi-polar depression, I thank God that I am now stable, but last year there were many times when I seriously considered suicide. I believe in God, His grace, and Christ’s death for all sinners, and I believe, like Romans 8 says that we can never be separated from Him – but my one question is, “Why am I still here? Wouldn’t it have been/be much easier to die and be with Him in His glory for eternity?” I mean I’m not sure that the suffering is worth it...

I believe God kept me from suicide...but I still wonder if it’s so easy to be with Him (in death) then where’s the catch?

Dear _____,

Bless your heart. I have friends who are bipolar and we have gone through some DEEP depression with our son over this.

What’s the catch, you ask?

Well, to make what’s probably a weak analogy, are you familiar with the NBA draft that has signed young basketball players just out of high school? Oh wait, I see you are in another country. Oh well—I bet you can appreciate it anyway. . . There is a promise of money and fame and glory for these young athletes, so why “waste” their time in college when they could be making big bucks playing basketball? Sounds good—only, they are too young to appreciate the maturing process that happens in college. So often, they crash and burn once they turn

professional because they're not ready. The trials of being a college student, it turns out, are deeply beneficial for maturity and character development; they prepare students for life as professional athletes.

Our life on earth isn't a holding tank or a detention center where we impatiently wait out our time until we're given a "green light" to die and go to heaven. (I know, it's easy to think of it this way, particularly for sensitive people who really hate living in a fallen world.) God's purpose in leaving us on earth once we are saved is to grow holiness and maturity and strength in us, a process that would be short-circuited by an early death. It would mean we enter heaven in a state of "arrested development," so to speak. Since the scriptures speak of being given power, authority and responsibilities in heaven, the only place and time we have to develop our stewardship is here on earth.

I understand your feelings of not being sure if the suffering is worth it, but that's because of not having an adequate view of God and of heaven and of your future, not to mention not understanding the value of suffering. (If I may be so bold as to recommend my own article on that subject. . . it's the best thing I've ever written: ["The Value of Suffering."](#))

Yes, it would be a lot easier to be in heaven than to continue to live in a fallen world and a fallen body on earth, but God isn't into "easy," God is passionately committed to fashioning us into the image of His Son. I'm afraid there are no shortcuts, but you can be assured that every difficult day you endure, every trial and every heartache, is being used to achieve that "weight of glory" in you (2 Cor. 4:17). God never wastes suffering, not a scrap of it. He redeems all of it for His glory and our blessing. Every single tear you have shed is so precious to your heavenly Father that He has them stored in a heavenly bottle. He hasn't turned away or forgotten you.

_____, I pray you will know His comfort and peace like a warm

blanket enveloping your soul.

Sue Bohlin

Probe Ministries

(Follow-up e-mail from Sue)

I have continued to think about your question and my answer, and the Lord put it on my heart to send you a P.S.

I have a young friend (early 20's) who attempted suicide several years ago but survived. She couldn't understand why God didn't just take her to heaven, either. Why wouldn't He honor her (seemingly) reasonable request to be with Him in glory?

Well, not too long after her suicide attempt she met a wonderful man, got married, and just had a precious little baby. On both her wedding day and then especially when she first held her newborn infant in her arms, she was overwhelmed with thanksgiving that God DIDN'T take her home to be with Him when she wanted it. She realized that God still had blessings to lavish on her that couldn't come in heaven. As a cystic fibrosis patient, she understands that she also has certain trials and pain ahead of her, but the joy far outshines the darkness.

This brings up one of answers to the question, What is the purpose of life? –For God to bring glory to Himself by lavishing His love and grace on us. All of creation, including the unseen realities in the heavenlies, is given the opportunity to see evidence of God's character and heart as He pours out His blessings on the people He made in His image. And that's one of the reasons why so many people who have been tempted to kill themselves are prevented from doing so—because God still has blessings in store and we need to be HERE on earth to receive them.

Warmly,

Sue

Depression

One Person's Story

Depression—a word that is used frequently in our time. Does it apply to you, someone you love, or someone you know? Since 17 percent of the population suffers from major depression at some point in their lives,^{1} it is probable you have been touched by it in some way. Perhaps the following account will “ring true” in light of your experiences. (This story really happened, but the name of the character has been changed.)

For many years Stan, an evangelical Christian, struggled with varying degrees of depression. These bouts were incapacitating on occasion, irritating or highly frustrating sometimes, but always persistent in their visits. Eventually the struggle came to a crisis point. He was not able to respond to any emotional stimulus that was offered; he had totally isolated himself from family, friends, and work. In retrospect he realized this isolation was done purposefully. The true causes of his struggle had never been addressed, and he was tired of pulling himself out of one depressed state only to find another staring him in the face. So he refused to repeat the pattern that had plagued him for so many years. It was time to find the root causes, instead of repeatedly dodging them.

After talking with a good friend who was a counselor, he decided he should consider admitting himself to a psychiatric hospital. He immediately contacted such a place and entered

the "first phase," or initial analysis prior to admittance. This analysis indicated he should become a patient. The next day he became part of an extraordinary program of discovery that was to last more than three weeks. In fact, those weeks were so extraordinary, he will tell you they provided the impetus for dramatic, positive change in his life and thought.

During those days of concentration, Stan dealt with several important issues that subsequently have led to a more stable life. First, he faced the trauma of abuse he had experienced. Second, through the ministry of a compassionate chaplain and a counselor, he realized he was weary of learning about God, without at the same time knowing God in the personal way the Bible frequently indicates. He was hungry to couple Biblical precepts with personal experience. Third, the sense of community among those in the hospital with him led him to consider the social "games" he had been playing in his evangelical Christian setting outside the hospital. Even though many of the patients were not Christians, that did not deter them from intimacy, trust, and truth. There were no hidden agendas, no political posturing, no hypocritical fronts. They listened to one another, cried together, encouraged one another, challenged one another, laughed together, and even disciplined one another. Fourth, Stan was challenged to consider whether he should take medication in light of his trust in God's healing power. He was put on medication that is still part of his life after eight years. Fifth, he was led to consider his thought life, especially as it applied to expectations he had of himself.

Unfortunately, there are many Christians who continue to wrestle with what Winston Churchill called the "black dog" of depression. They struggle without finding help. This essay is offered with the hope that it will encourage those who need help, and that it will prompt many to respond with patience and love to those who are depressed.

Who Suffers with Depression?

Some have said depression is “the common cold of emotional disorders, and it appears to be on the rise. People of both genders get depressed, although women are twice as likely as men to suffer from major depressive disorders.”^{2} Who are these people? As we will see, they are both famous and infamous people; they are normal people; they are even people we know from the Bible.

Depression can be described as “a condition of general emotional dejection and withdrawal; sadness greater and more prolonged than that warranted by any objective reason.”^{3} Dejection, withdrawal, sadness, and other similar terms are familiar to many. Vincent Van Gogh, Abraham Lincoln, Edgar Allen Poe, Marilyn Monroe, Rod Steiger, Mike Wallace, and many other notable people have struggled with depression. In 1972 Senator Thomas Eagleton acknowledged his depression, and the Democrats dropped him as the Vice Presidential candidate. In 1995 Alma Powell, the wife of General Colin Powell, revealed her history of depression, and her husband urged others to get help.^{4} Martin Luther and Charles Spurgeon, two great men in the history of the church, frequently lived with the dark shadow of despondency.

Even some great biblical characters wrestled with depression. At one point in his life, Moses wanted to die (Exodus 32:32). While struggling with his suffering, Job “cursed the day of his birth” (3:1). He said, “I will speak in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul” (7:11). In addition, he cried, “My spirit is broken, my days are extinguished, the grave is ready for me” (17:1). Elijah was incapacitated with depression soon after he had been an integral player in one of the great demonstrations of God’s power (I Kings 19). After Jonah witnessed the astounding grace of God among the wicked Ninevites, he angrily said, “Death is better to me than life” (Jonah 4:3). The great prophet

Jeremiah declared, “Why did I ever come forth from the womb to look on trouble and sorrow?” (Jeremiah 20:18)

The amazing prophecy of Isaiah 53:3 states that the Suffering Servant, the Lord Jesus, was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” *Sorrows* and *grief* can refer to both physical and mental pain, which could include depression.[{5}](#) Consider the thoughts of Lydia Child, the 19th century abolitionist, in light of Isaiah 53:

Whatever is highest and holiest is tinged with melancholy. The eye of genius has always a plaintive expression, and its natural language is pathos. A prophet is sadder than other men; and He who was greater than all the prophets was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”[{6}](#)

A well-known spiritual says, “No one knows the trouble I’ve seen,” a sentiment that is understood by those who are depressed. J.B. Phillips, author of the classic *Your God is Too Small*, dealt with depression all his life. In one of his many letters, he offered these comments to one who also was struggling: “As far as you can, and God knows how difficult this is, try to relax in and upon Him. As far as my experience goes, to get even a breath of God’s peace in the midst of pain is infinitely worth having.”[{7}](#)

We have seen that depression has been experienced since ancient times. No one is immune, but, praise God, those in His family are not alone. The Lord Himself is with us.

Depression: Symptoms and Explanations

- *I feel so tired!*
- *I feel weak; my arms are heavy.*
- *I feel so agitated!*
- *I feel anxious about everything, it seems.*
- *I feel so fearful—of death, of tomorrow, of people.*
- *I can’t concentrate!*

- *I can't remember things I used to remember.*
- *I can't face people; I want to be alone.*
- *I'm not interested in sex anymore.*
- *I can't sleep!*
- *I sleep to escape!*
- *I only eat because I have to.*[{8}](#) • *I hate myself!*
- *I feel angry all the time!*
- *Everything and everyone is stupid!*

Such comments are familiar to those who are dealing with depression. Usually these phrases are not descriptive of what is objectively true, but they are descriptive of how a depressed person is responding to his predicament. One who hears them can be tempted to dismiss the one who made the statements with well-meaning but trite responses that betray a lack of understanding. It often is difficult for someone who has not wrestled with depression to understand.

So how can we understand? Why does a person get depressed? There is no simple answer to this question, contrary to what some people think. As Dr. John White has written, "Depression has many faces. It cannot be relieved on the basis of one simple formula, arising as it does by numerous and complex mechanisms, and plummeting sometimes to depths where its victims are beyond the reach of verbal communication. There are mysteries about it which remain unsolved. No one theoretical framework is adequate to describe it."[{9}](#) It is meaningful for a Christian to understand this. Sometimes a response to the depressed can focus on a principle without regard for the person. For example, the 17th century English bishop Jeremy Taylor wrote: "It is impossible for that man to despair who remembers that his Helper is omnipotent."[{10}](#) This assumes that remembering something will automatically change one's thoughts and feelings. The person who is depressed doesn't necessarily make that connection. Mentally healthy people have reasonable thought processes, but they are not the norm in a depressed person's clouded life. "Mental health is

like physical health. We are all vulnerable to its loss.”[{11}](#)
A truly depressed person is not mentally healthy.

As we have stated, there is no one all-encompassing answer to the “Why?” of depression. But there are a number of models that suggest answers.

- *Aggression turned inward, or unexpressed anger.*
- *Object loss, as in the loss of a parent.*
- *Loss of self-esteem.*
- *Incorrect thinking.*
- *Learned helplessness, or inability to respond to unpleasant experiences.*
- *Loss of reinforcement, as in lack of sympathy.*
- *Loss of role status, as in loss of power or prestige.*
- *Loss of meaning of existence.*
- *Impairment of brain chemistry, as in neurotransmitters.*
- *Neurophysiological malfunction of brain cells.*[{12}](#)

When we ponder these models in the light of a Christian worldview, we find that none of them can stand alone. Each one taken separately reduces us to only one element, whereas a Christian worldview sees man holistically. Man is not to be seen solely as a product of his past, his thought life, his societal conditioning, or his biology. The one who is depressed should be approached as Christ would: as a whole person made in God’s image.

Depression and the Whole Person

“What is man, that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” These memorable phrases from Psalm 8 pose crucial questions in regard to the subject of depression. The answers we give to such questions will provide a beginning point for responding to those who are depressed. As Leslie Stevenson has written, “The prescription for a problem depends on the diagnosis of the basic cause.”[{13}](#) A Christian is

challenged to consider a prescription for depression that sees both the material and immaterial aspects of a total person. Such considerations lead to concerns as to whether one should take medication, submit to some type of psychological analysis, or simply trust God to provide healing. Or, as a prominent Christian psychiatrist asks, "Is [depression] a disease of the mind or of the body?"[{14}](#) Is it both/and, or either/or? These are issues that tend to stir controversy among Christians. Too frequently the controversy is focused on "clumsy clichés, ...subtly damning exhortations, breezy banalities, and the latest idiocy in pop psychology. Or else...unnecessary pills."[{15}](#)

The history of the church demonstrates that one of the reasons for such a response is found in an ancient struggle between Greek and Hebrew influences. More often than not we tend to side with the Greeks and divide humans "into a less important physical part (body and brain) and a more important immaterial part (mind and soul)."[{16}](#) This unbiblical division creates problems, because "just as music is more than the orchestra that plays it, so I am more than my body."[{17}](#) I am also more than my mind and soul.

When this unity of human nature is ignored two extreme views can be found among Christians. "One is that we submit to all suffering, sickness, pain&mdashwhether mental or physical&mdashas from God."[{18}](#) The other asserts that "through the exercise of faith and by the power of Jesus' name we can banish every sickness, every difficulty. Sickness, tragedy, pain must be resisted, for all come from Satan. Unhappiness is a sign of defeat and unbelief."[{19}](#) This means that seeking help from physicians, psychologists, or psychiatrists "is a tacit admission that the resources in Christ and the Scripture are inadequate."[{20}](#) Both of these views are too simplistic, but there are certainly elements of the truth in them. How can we reconcile them?

Quite simply and obviously, the one who is depressed should be

treated as a whole person. Consider the statements of John White, a practicing Christian psychiatrist, author of a thought-provoking book on depression and suicide entitled *The Masks of Melancholy*, and many other books. He wrote:

I will no more treat mind as distinct from body than body as distinct from mind. By the grace of God I will treat persons, not pathology, sinners rather than syndromes, and individuals rather than illnesses. And however primitive our weapons may be, there are effective weapons and we must use them. [{21}](#)

As one who has fought with depression, I have come to realize the wisdom of Dr. White's comments. The treatment I have received has come from family, friends, physicians, psychologists, and psychiatrists who understand how God has created us. Their compassionate, godly responses to my struggle have been instrumental in my recovery. To paraphrase the apostle Paul, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of [them]" (Philippians 1:3). They were the Lord's servants in my time of need.

Responding to Depression

Sarah's husband has been isolating himself from her for several weeks. He won't communicate with her. He doesn't eat much. He shows no emotion other than a sense of sadness and gloom. He sits in the dark for hours. He has called his office several days to report he is taking a sick day. He does none of the things he once did that gave him a sense of joy and accomplishment. He shows no interest in making love with her. He has disappeared for hours in his car and will not say where he has been. Sarah wonders if she has done something to upset him and is desperate to get him to talk with her so she can discover what is happening.

Perhaps this scenario is familiar to you or someone you know. How can we respond to such a crisis? How can we help the one

who is depressed?

First, understand the difference between someone who is sad or disheartened and someone who is truly depressed. Sadness or a “blue mood” are experienced by most of us. Depression is much more debilitating and long-lasting. There are at least three levels of depression. One can be called *major depression*, which “is manifested by a combination of symptoms that interfere with the ability to work, sleep, eat, and enjoy once pleasurable activities.” Another, called *dysthymia*, is less severe but keeps one “from functioning at ‘full steam’ or from feeling good.” The third level is called *manic-depressive*, or bipolar depression. This “involves cycles of depression and elation or mania.”[{22}](#)

Second, if you believe someone is struggling continually with depression, encourage him or her to seek help. Suggest that your friend see a trusted pastor, counselor, or physician. The earlier you can suggest this, the better.

Third, at the first sign of depression, encourage conversation and then listen carefully. The deeper a person sinks into a depressed state, the more difficult it is to talk with anyone, even those she loves most. Make yourself available and gently pursue communication as often as you can. But leave time for silence when you are with her.

Fourth, give emotional support that indicates you are taking the person seriously. “Do not accuse the depressed person of faking illness or of laziness, or expect him or her ‘to snap out of it’.”[{23}](#)

Fifth, be an encourager. Affirm the one who is depressed with statements of truth about his character and abilities, as well as your love for him.

Sixth, if he will let you, pray for him in his presence.

Seventh, if you hear remarks about suicide, take them

seriously and seek advice from an expert.

Eighth, act as a "mental mirror." She probably isn't thinking reasonably and is in need of gentle reminders of a clearer image of the world and herself.

Ninth, don't chastise him if he expresses anger, even anger at God. Listen carefully to discover why he is angry and help him begin to think how he can best express that anger.

Tenth, on a larger scale, do what you can to develop an atmosphere in your church that allows one who is depressed to find trust, truth, and compassion.

These ten suggestions, as helpful as they can be, do not constitute the ultimate response to the depressed. We need to remember that ultimate healing rests in the hands of our loving God, who makes all things new.

Notes

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6. *The New Dictionary of Thoughts*, 1936 ed., s.v. "Melancholy."
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10. *The New Dictionary of Thoughts*, s.v. "Despair."
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14. White, 53.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 41.
17. Ibid., 45.
18. Ibid., 47.
19. Ibid., 49.
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21. Ibid., 220.
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23. Ibid., 9.

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