



## Caring for Those With Depression

By Todd A. Peperkorn, STM

### OPENING PRAYER

*Lord Jesus Christ, Your precious blood washes away our sins and revives our spirits. Look with compassion on all those who suffer during this pandemic, and restore hope and well-being to them. Banish the spirit of depression, strengthen their faith, disperse the cloud of despair that covers them, and grant them the comfort of Your Holy Spirit and the joy of Your salvation. Give us as Your people wisdom to learn how to care best for them, and courage to reach out to all those in need; for You live and reign with the Father and the same Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.<sup>1</sup>*

### INTRODUCTION

“Why is it that every little thing takes five times more energy than it should, pastor?” The congregation member lamented further, “I’ve had problems with depression before, but this is worse than I’ve ever experienced it. It’s all I can do to even get out of bed in the morning.”

Is this scene familiar to you? All of us have been feeling it to some degree or another, but during this time of pandemic, every bit of work, every emotion, sometimes even every interaction with other human beings takes so much more work. Why is it that simple things have become so hard? Why is it that we see our loved ones struggling *so much* with what really should be easy things?

In this study we are going to try to answer some questions which I hope will be helpful. Here are some of them: How do we as a congregation try to first of all *understand* what is going on and why it is so hard? Why does this pandemic make these things so much harder? What can we do as a congregation, and what can we not do? And finally, what do we do when it seems like nothing is working?

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Collect #800, *Pastoral Care Companion*, p. 325.

## What are the key elements of depression?

Clinical depression is an all-encompassing low or severe mood that is often accompanied by a loss of self-esteem, interest in the outside world, and interest in pleasure or any regular activities. We often lump numerous things under the larger category of “depression,” but this definition helps us to gain some key insights. Depression has to do with our emotions or moods. These moods can express themselves as extreme emotionalism, as anger or resentment, or even as a complete numbness to the outside world. In many ways, the overarching theme of clinical depression is shutting off the outside world, because the synapses in our brains aren’t connecting as they normally do. Outside stimulus becomes difficult to handle, and so we become curved inward, lost or trapped in our own thoughts and feelings.

Clinical depression can have many causes — physiological, situational, psychological, spiritual. Usually it is some combination of all four. It is that combination which makes depression so difficult and even weird for us as Christians. My own body might be working against me, alongside my sinful nature. **Read Romans 7:14–20.** Even if I know what is right, my own sinful flesh fights against me. **Read Romans 7:21–25.** Martin Luther would sometimes say that our sin makes us turned inward upon ourselves, or “*incurvatus in se*” in Latin. That is why, of all diseases, depression has this spiritual element that can be hard to unpack.

## Why has the pandemic exacerbated depression and other mental illnesses?

If we understand depression as cutting off the outside world, a numbness to outside stimulus and a curving in upon oneself, then this pandemic is even worse than we thought! Because we have been forced to cut off our direct interaction with the Body of Christ in so many ways, we are even more vulnerable to attack from the Evil One. The lack of physical contact with others, and lack of spiritual contact or connection with the Word of God and the Sacraments in church — well, that is dangerous business for us sinners who need the Gospel all the time. **Read the Seventh Petition of the Lord’s Prayer and Luther’s Explanation in the Small Catechism.** Deliverance from evil always means that we are delivered *from* the clutches of sin, death and hell, and we are delivered *to* Christ and His Word of comfort for troubled sinners. **Read Isaiah 40:28–31.** Our strength never lies in ourselves, but in the Creator who loves us, who gives Himself to us, and who will never grow weary of giving us His mercy and care.

## What can we do as the church to care for members in this time?

**PRAY.** **Read 1 Peter 2:9.** By praying for all those in need, we fulfill our vocation as the church of being a royal priesthood. A priest intercedes before God on behalf of others. This connects us to the people we pray for, and connects us to God, who exhorts us to pray with “boldness and confidence, as dear children ask their dear father” (Small Catechism, Explanation of the Introduction to the Lord’s Prayer). Because someone with depression may not be able to pray for themselves, we pray for them.

**COMMUNICATE.** **Read 1 Peter 3:13–17.** Be ready to give a defense for the hope that is within you. We will talk about hope more in a minute, but the key part for us here is to communicate God’s love and mercy at all times to those who are in need. Sometimes people with depression have a difficult time hearing good news. They are not wired for it at the time. But be patient and gentle, and give hope where it is possible. God’s mercy does not disappear because things are hard.

**SUPPORT.** **Read 1 Peter 4:7–11.** Notice here that Peter does not call us to do high and lofty things for one another. He calls us to show hospitality without complaint, and to use the gifts God has given us for the sake of one another. What does that support look like? It will depend on the person and the situation. Maybe it means a note of encouragement, maybe it means a meal, maybe it means caring for another’s children for a little while. Be creative! Support doesn’t mean solving everything. It means giving relief where you can.

## What are the limitations of what we can do as the church?

As with all things, we must remember our vocations. The church's vocation is to proclaim the Gospel, to comfort those in sorrow and need, to lift up the weary, and to hold up the gifts of God to a dying world. It is not the church's vocation to diagnose diseases. We would never expect a pastor visiting someone in the hospital to do open heart surgery, unless the pastor also happened to be a heart surgeon. One of the greatest gifts that we can bring to our people is the acknowledgement that we don't do everything. God uses many different people with lots of different skills to care for and love the world. The more we are able to recognize that, the more clear our own place in a person's healing and care will become.

## What is the most important thing that we can do?

**Read Psalm 130.** Perhaps more than anything else, people who suffer from depression need hope. Hope means looking to the future, because God has taken care of your sins at the cross, and takes care of you now in the forgiveness of sins. We have a future because God is always present for us, no matter what may come. We have a future because with the Lord is steadfast love. As the psalmist says, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:26). God's mercy does not depend on my attitude, or how well I am doing "during these difficult times." God's mercy is His very nature, and He never abandons His people. Period. This is not always easy to communicate, but never give up on those whom God loves!

## IN GOD, MY FAITHFUL GOD (LSB 745)

In God, my faithful God,  
I trust when dark my road;  
Great woes may overtake me,  
Yet He will not forsake me.  
My troubles He can alter;  
His hand lets nothing falter.

My sins fill me with care,  
Yet I will not despair.  
I build on Christ, who loves me;  
From this rock nothing moves me.  
To Him I will surrender,  
To Him, my soul's defender.

If death my portion be,  
It brings great gain to me;  
It speeds my life's endeavor

To live with Christ forever.  
He gives me joy in sorrow,  
Come death now or tomorrow.

O Jesus Christ, my Lord,  
So meek in deed and word,  
You suffered death to save us  
Because Your love would have us  
Be heirs of heav'nly gladness  
When ends this life of sadness.

"So be it," then, I say  
With all my heart each day.  
Dear Lord, we all adore You,  
We sing for joy before You.  
Guide us while here we wander  
Until we praise You yonder.

## About the Author

The Rev. Todd A. Peperkorn is pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Rocklin, California. He is the author of the book, *I Trust When Dark My Road: A Lutheran View of Depression*.