

What Do You Do When You Become Depressed?

by Jay E Adams

You may not even care to read this pamphlet. If you are depressed at the moment, you certainly won't feel like it. "What's the use of trying anything else?" you may ask. "After all, nothing else has worked."

Well, before you put it down, let me make one clear statement that I hope will stick with you even if you temporarily lay this down, because I think it will make you want to pick it up again later on to finish reading what I have to say. That statement is this: There is real hope for you; your depression can be overcome, not only now, but for good. In this brochure, I want to tell you how to get out and to stay out of depression. If you will read on to the end of this paragraph, you will learn that hundreds of others just as depressed as you have found that this is possible. And if you continue to the end of the pamphlet you will discover that what you will read is not complex, does not require a long time to achieve, and it never fails. The reason why I can make these strong assertions is that the way to overcome depression that I shall be describing to you is neither my way nor the way of any other human being—it is God's way.

That is why there is hope. There is hope because at last you have come to the conclusion that all other ways do not work. I agree. Up until now you have not taken God's way; don't you think it is about time to consider what He has to say?

"What's the catch?" you ask.

If by catch you mean what are the conditions for finding the way out of depression, let me say that there are three:

1. You must know God personally before you can expect Him to give you the help that you need.
2. You must not put the alleviation of depression first as your goal, but rather the desire to please God by doing what He says.
3. You must do exactly as He says regardless of how you feel.

Those are the conditions. If by catch you meant that there were other factors that would not be revealed until later that would soften my earlier claims, then let me assure you that there are not. Depression can be defeated by God's directions and by the power that God gives through His Spirit to enable those who know Him to follow His Word.

"O.K.," you reply with some reserve and caution. "Tell me about it. I am interested, but I am not going to get my hopes up too soon. I'll hear you out, but I don't want my hopes to begin to soar only to come crashing down around me in a week or two. That hurts too much. I've had my hopes up before only to have them dashed again and again. And let me begin with one of those catches, or as you prefer to call them, conditions: what do you mean when you keep on saying that I must know God? I don't quite understand that."

I am glad that you have raised this question at the outset because it is basic. Everything else depends upon it. You can never use God as a machine to produce something that you want, nor can you do what the Bible says as a technique or gimmick to serve your ends. While God spells out principles and methods in the Scriptures which do change lives, these principles do not work mechanically without His blessing. That means that you must have that blessing as you begin. And in order to do so, you must be on speaking terms with Him.

"I'm afraid that I still don't understand."

All right, then let me explain. You and I, as well as every other human being who was ever born into this world, with the one exception of Jesus Christ, were born sinners. Our parents were sinners and they could beget only sinners. Your children, like you, are born sinners too. The Bible teaches that "all have sinned and have come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). When God says "all" that is exactly what He means. You see this demonstrated all round you; you have never met a perfect person. But that is exactly where the problem lies. God is a holy God. He dwells in perfect righteousness. Yet, because we are sinners, we have become unfit to dwell with Him and have alienated ourselves from Him and have become His enemies by refusing to obey His commandments. He has said "You must not lie," but we all have; "You must not steal," but there is none of us who has not stolen, beginning with cookies from the cookie jar when we were only children. To disobey means also that we have put ourselves in jeopardy, since God is not only holy, but also the just Judge of His creatures. He has judged that we must suffer punishment for our sins. But He is also merciful and has provided forgiveness from sins in Christ. Those who have never had their sins forgiven by God come short of the eternal glory that God will share with those who come to know Him. That is what I am talking about.

"But how does one come to know Him?"

Through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. What I mean is this. Because we could not free ourselves from our sins, God in His mercy provided forgiveness by sending His own Son to die in the place of guilty sinners, taking the punishment that they deserved for their sins. When they come to recognize their perilous situation before God, and are truly sorry for the rebellious lives that they have lived and depend upon Jesus' death on the cross, God saves (rescues) them from eternal punishment. God no longer holds them guilty for their sin and accepts them as friends. He is not merely their judge from then on, but also their loving heavenly Father. To those who come to know Him that way, He makes and keeps the promises that He has revealed in the Bible. But they do not pertain to any others.

You can find out more about this by reading the following passages in the Bible: Ephesians 2:8, 9; John 3:16; Romans 4:4, 5. If you still do not understand, consult the person who handed you this pamphlet or contact the distributor whose imprint appears at the end.

But let us assume that you have put your faith in Christ and that you know God as your Savior and Lord. Yet, you are still plagued with depression. Remember, I said that knowing Him was a condition to victory over depression; I did not say that knowing Him itself would solve the problem. Let us go on then, to consider that question.

Although depression is a terribly debilitating problem that is far too widespread among Christians as well as among those who do not know God, it is not so difficult a problem to solve as at first it might seem to be. What you need to recognize is that depression comes as the result of a failure in self-control and self-discipline. One work of the Holy Spirit of God is to produce such discipline in those who, by faithful obedience to His Word, seek to please God by doing what He says rather than doing what they feel like doing (cf. Galatians 5:23). That is at the heart of the matter.

"Well, I don't quite see it. If you expect me to buy that you will have to spell it out a lot more clearly."

Of course, I was just generalizing about it before I got down to the specifics, because I wanted you to be aware of these basic facts as we move ahead. Let's get down to the place where the rubber meets the road, then, by pointing out that homemakers, preachers, and all

those who must set and keep their own schedules are particularly vulnerable to depression. Someone whose daily work is routine and whose output is structured for him so that by 12 noon he must produce X amount of work and by 5 P.M. another X amount, rarely suffers from depression. That is because his work does not depend upon self control and self discipline. Others discipline and control him and his output. Consequently, he rarely gets behind in his work.

On the other hand, for the person who must learn to control and to discipline himself, in a day in which there is little emphasis upon discipline, often all that it takes for him to begin the descent into despair and depression is to experience a setback that tempts him to focus upon it and to forget his obligations. His schedule is broken, he gets behind in his chores, which then begin to mount up, and. . . he is by then already heading straight down the road that leads to depression. Stir together into one pot a setback (sickness, disappointment, guilt over an unconfessed sin, etc.), failure to handle the setback God's way, a tendency to follow feelings rather than to pursue obligations, and the willingness to participate in pity parties (or to soliloquize in blue funks) and you have all of the essential ingredients for that foul tasting thick stew of depression.

God has so constructed us that when we fail to handle responsibilities properly, our consciences trigger bad feelings. These, if not heeded early, ultimately will lead to depression. David looked at depression as a merciful warning sign from God intended to goad him to repentance and a change of attitude or behavior (When he had sinned he said, "Day and night your hand was heavy upon me," Psalm 32:4). The guilt that underlies depression comes from the failure to handle the problem or setback God's way. Therefore, any failure to heed this warning, or any attempt to silence it by shock treatments, the use of antidepressants, by home brew, etc., constitutes an additional failure that only compounds the guilt and increases the intensity of the bad feelings that stem from it. As a result depression grows and grows in a cyclical manner.

One good place to begin when considering God's solution to the fundamental failure that underlies depression is to take seriously the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:8: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair." There were many times when Paul found opposition and difficulties hard to take; there were also circumstances in which for a time he did not know what to do next. He was afflicted and he became perplexed. But he did not become depressed. In these trying times, God at length enabled him to handle every difficulty without despair. He had setbacks, but he did not allow these to keep him from continuing in the clear course of action that was at hand. He did not in despair, give up the tasks that he knew that God wanted him to continue. He was down, but not out. The depressed person is one who when he gets down also gives out.

Now, it is vital to understand the important difference between being perplexed, disappointed, blue, physically weak, or even feeling low because of guilt, and being depressed. All of us, with Paul, get down, we are all blue from time to time; we all become discouraged. But that is not depression. Depression comes when we fail to handle the blues, the disappointment, the perplexity, the guilt, or the physical affliction God's way. It comes whenever we allow the bad feelings that are associated with these problems to hinder us from carrying out our duties. When we do follow our feelings instead of following our obligations to God and to our neighbors we are guilty and this makes us feel even worse. When the feelings of guilt are added to the bad feelings that already plague us, that makes

us feel far worse and therefore less like doing our work. If then we follow those increased feelings of self-dissatisfaction—and it is easier all of the time to do so—we trigger more, ad infinitum. Now you see what I meant when I said that depression is cyclical.

"Yes, that is really how it is—it just keeps on getting worse and worse."

Right. So long as you continue to follow your feelings when they tell you that you "can't" do what you know that you ought to do, you don't, and as a consequence, you drop deeper and deeper into the pit of depression, doing less and less until at last you are doing nothing but lying around on the couch, popping chocolates and watching TV. Am I beginning to ring any bells?

"Too many. But what can be done about it? It's one thing to describe a problem, but it's another to solve it."

I agree, but it is important to see clearly the dynamics that are at work so that the solution can be geared in accurately. I have noted that depression comes from handling a situation, in which you feel bad, wrongly. The bad feeling originally may come from your own sin or from the fact that after having had flu for four days you must go back to work that has piled up in your absence and that you do not feel like doing both because it is greater than usual and you are weaker than usual. You may have let the ironing go ("Oh, look at those clothes") or the test papers have been stacking up on the desk ("I'll never be able to get those papers graded until I feel more like doing so."). Whatever the specifics of the problem may be, one thing is paramount: instead of doing what you know that you ought to do, when you give in to your feelings, hoping that later on you will feel more like doing the dreaded duty, you have already taken several strides down the dismal path of depression. The key to warding off depression, then, is this: do not follow your feelings when you know that you have a responsibility to discharge. Instead, against your feelings, you must do as you should. And when you do, even if at first you do so mechanically, simply because you want to please God and you know that He wants you to do this, in time your feelings will change. God will give you a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment and at length enthusiasm for what you dreaded previously. You must not wait until you feel like it, or you may never feel like doing that task. Nor must you try to change your feelings directly; you cannot do that. Do what you know God wants you to do, **WHETHER YOU FEEL LIKE IT OR NOT**, and a change in feelings will take place, as a by-product, in time. That is the secret of turning back the tide of depression once it begins to overwhelm you. There is no other way.

"You say that if I do what I know that God wants me to do, simply in order to please Him, whether I feel like it or not, that He will bless this and strengthen me and eventually even change my feelings too?"

You've got it! To put it simply, do this: 1. Make a full list of all of the things that you know that you have neglected doing because you don't feel like doing them. 2. Get to work doing them in order to please God and the others who are depending upon you (your spouse, your family, your boss, your roommate, etc.). 3. Keep at it no matter how you feel, and as you begin to see the task accomplished, you will begin to sense a change in feeling. The tide will have been turned. Homemaker: go ahead; clean that house, start making those meals again, get up and see your husband off to work. Salesman: quit your stalling; get out that list of prospects, pick up the phone and begin to make those appointments for an interview. Then get out on the road and follow them up till all have been held. Whatever it is that you ought to do, you know;

get to it—don't wait until you feel more like it. Don't put it off till a 'more convenient time; whatever you can do right now, do. Don't wait another hour.

Then, once you have pulled out of the doldrums, think about the future. You can keep out of depression in the future in exactly the same way that you pulled out of it after you slid into the pit: by doing whatever God requires in any low period of your life, **WHETHER YOU FEEL LIKE IT OR NOT**. And be sure to schedule your life in the future, and then stick to the schedule, no matter how you feel. Get help from a Christian pastor or worker if you do not know how to make out a schedule. This counselor may also be able to monitor the way in which you keep your schedule, for a period of time, until you become accustomed to living according to it. That is one way for him to encourage you to "love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24). God Himself plans and schedules; you, who are created in His image, cannot do without the order that scheduling brings. If you schedule well, you will have no time for pity parties, no time for hanging on the phone with a neighborhood crony or spending all morning complaining over coffee about how bad things are when you ought to be at home working. The coffee should come at the completion of the chore; it may never replace it.

So, there it is. You now know what to do to get out of depression and what to do to stay out of it. Let me sum it up once more in slightly different words:

1. Confess your sin of failing to assume your responsibilities along with any other sin that you may have failed to confess.
2. Begin to do whatever it is that God wants you to do in order to please Him, regardless of whether you feel like it or not.
3. Deal biblically with any particular sin that may have triggered the bad feeling originally (the feeling may not have originated in sin however).
4. Avoid pity parties, blue funks and gripe groups. Schedule your work, then follow your schedule, not your feelings.

Copyright 1975 by Jay E. Adams