
3 Biblical Ways to Fight Depression

Walking Through the Shadow



WHY AM I SO SAD? *Has God forgotten me like everyone else has? How long will my soul feel troubled?* Real believers, like the writer of Psalm 42, have hard questions like these. Many of us know what it is to have downcast souls. In fact, one respected psychology professor believes that we stand “on the brink of the worst mental-health crises in decades.”¹

The Bible addresses depression. It gives us examples of others who have suffered like us, the language to talk about our troubles, and true and comforting answers to our hard questions. But to beat depression we must

realize that we’re in a battle. We must fight to make hard changes in our lives. Spiritual growth—in any circumstance—is a commitment to change, “and yet, the human heart resists nothing as strongly as it resists change. We will do anything to avoid it.”²

Jesus asked people what they wanted him to do for them (John 5:6) in part to hear whether they were willing “to use all the means available to get better.”³ Staying stuck in the rut of our problems is easy. Overcoming our problems is hard. But with God’s help, we can do it. How?

¹ Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2019), 106.

² Howard G. Hendricks, William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 292.

³ David Murray, *Christians Get Depressed Too* (Grand Rapids: RHB, 2010), 69.

Question Your Feelings



TO FIGHT DEPRESSION we have to know how it affects our feelings. Psalm 42 describes depression's feelings of severe despondency and dejection. The writer's soul is cast down, in turmoil (Ps. 42:5, 11). He feels unquenchably thirsty (Ps. 42:1). He's sad (Ps. 42:3). He worries that his best days are behind him (Ps. 42:4). He wonders if God has forgotten him (Ps. 42:9). His feelings are dark and strong.

In one sense, our feelings reveal us. If we're depressed, they might truly indicate that we have something like "a deadly wound" in our bones (Ps. 42:10). But like a literal wound, the symptoms need to be evaluated. That's what the writer does. "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?"

In a fallen world our feelings are imperfect guides. We shouldn't automatically or fully trust them. Consider these realities:

- **OUR FEELINGS CAN EXAGGERATE.** At my grandmother's funeral 25 years ago, I felt certain that I would never get over her death. My feelings got something right—I was very sad. But they exaggerated the extent of the loss.
- **OUR FEELINGS CAN SEEM UNIQUE.** We can become depressed about our depression if we imagine that something weird has happened to us. But depression and other hard feelings aren't "strange" (1 Pet. 4:12);

they are "normal abnormalities in an abnormal world . . . Even strong and mature Bible characters such as King David and the Apostle Paul battled worry, anxiety, and fear (Ps. 56:3, 2 Cor. 7:5; 1:8)."¹

- **FEELINGS CAN PRETEND TO BE PREDICTIVE.** Despondency tends to feel permanent. But the writer of Psalm 42 refused to give in to this false fear: He tells his soul, "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (Ps. 42:5, 11).
- **FEELINGS CAN LIE.** The writer of Psalm 42 felt that God had forgotten him (Ps. 42:9). But he knew better; "By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me" (Ps. 42:8). God will not forget his people. He has "engraved you on the palms" of his hands (Isa. 49:15–16).

Still, our feelings can indicate changes that we must make. Feelings of depression don't always indicate our failures or sin. But they can alert us to the spiritual work that God is calling us to do. Remember: "Trust, confession of sin, and following Christ in obedience . . . are the staples of the spiritual life."² Both happy and sad people always have changes to make. The important thing to remember is that feelings—whether in depression or any other state—are indicators that should be honored and evaluated.

¹ David Murray, *Why Is My Teenager Feeling Like This?: A Guide for Helping Teens through Anxiety and Depression* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 17, 15.

² Ed Welch, *Depression: The Way Up When You Are Down, Resources for Changing Lives* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 19.

TOO OFTEN WE UNREALISTICALLY DIVIDE ourselves between the physical and non-physical as if they are like oil and water. But God knows better. When addressing our sanctification, he brings together the “whole spirit and soul and body” (1 Thess. 5:23). What does the unity of our being mean for battling depression physically?

- **ROUTINE.** Often the feelings of depression overpower our sense of responsibility and throw off our habits. But “the place of habit in Christian thought and life is significant.”¹ The God of order (1 Cor. 14:33) has put hourly and seasonal markers in the sky to shape our routines (Ps. 104:19–23). One clinical psychiatrist reports that having had “many clients whose anxiety was reduced to subclinical levels merely because they started to sleep on a predictable schedule and eat breakfast.”²
- **DIET.** There is no single biblical diet. But the apostle Paul willingly gave dietary advice to the young minister Timothy (1 Tim. 5:23). And we’re stuck in a personal dark age if we think that what we eat has no effect on how we feel. We should thank God for enjoyable food (Ps. 104:15). But food is fuel; it always affects our performance. Those who believe their bodies host the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19) will eat wisely.
- **EXERCISE.** Bible authors commend physical exercise (1 Tim. 4:8) and use athletic metaphors positively (2 Tim. 2:5). Researchers tell us that “exercising three

to five times a week is about as effective as antidepressants for mild to moderate depression.”³ When we’re depressed, we might not feel like exercising. But we should question that feeling too.

- **CONNECTION.** Depressed people need positive human interaction. God urges human fellowship (Acts 2:42) and the avoidance of toxic people (Rom. 16:17, 2 Tim. 3:5). Sadly, depression can drive us away from people and toward digital devices which offer little consolation. But researchers have linked depression and anxiety to constant internet access.⁴ By immersing ourselves in a digital world, millions of people “have lost the ability to process and make sense of their emotions, or to reflect on who they are and what really matters, or to build strong relationships.”⁵ One of the best things depressed people can do is commune with other saints in godly, face-to-face friendship (Ps. 42:4).
- **MEDICAL HELP.** Depression is a physical illness—a medical issue tied to the brain—affected by biochemical, genetic, personality, and environmental factors. While each of the preceding points can go a long way in helping a depressed person, in some cases, medication is necessary. Seeking help from a medical professional to determine what other physical factors might be contributing to depression is consistent with our biblical understanding of humans as both body and soul.

1 Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More than Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 163.

2 Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018), 18.

3 David Murray, *Reset: Living a Grace-Paced Life in a Burnout Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 79.

4 Jean M. Twenge, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>

5 Newport, *Digital Minimalism*, 108.

Bring Your Depression to God



MUCH OF WHAT DEPRESSED PEOPLE should do reflects wisdom common to believers and unbelievers. And that should sound right to us. We're living in God's world, and his rules for well-being are for everyone. But we will never be made whole unless we seek our healing in God. "Emotional maturity means leading our feelings to God, not letting our feelings lead us *away* from him."¹ Sufferers must "entrust their souls to a faithful Creator" (1 Pet. 4:19). Thankfully, "depressed people are like everyone else: their inner person can be renewed by faith even in the midst of the pain," provided they bring their pain to God.²

This is what the writer of Psalm 42 did. He wasn't talking *about* God but *with* God. Here is the language of healing: "You are the God in whom I take refuge" (Ps. 43:2). With God as his witness, the writer counseled his soul to hope (Ps. 42:5, 11). Hope isn't the same as eliminating your problems (Rom. 8:24); but it's the gift of confidence in God's promise that a better day is coming. God's light and truth can, in his good timing, lead us to happy fellowship with him (Ps. 43:3). And that hope in a better future is informed by the past. The writer recalled leading worshippers to God's house with glad shouts and songs of praise (Ps. 42:4). He had to conclude that the future will not necessarily be like the present—it could be better, like the past was.

Jesus too brought his pain to his heavenly father. The only reason we know of Jesus's deepest agony of soul is because the Gospel writers invite us to witness Jesus wrestling with his Father in prayer (Luke 22:44).

We can bring our depression to God with convictions that are more durable than our feelings. God is good. God

is in control. We may feel worthless, but the Bible says that Jesus loves us. So God will see us through. Hebrews 11 powerfully reminds us that many sufferers finished the race well and found their rest in God. The storms of life are real, and they can be severe. But the human writer of Psalm 42 exaggerated when he said to God, "All your breakers and your waves have gone over me" (Ps. 42:7). That only happened to one of God's children. When we're depressed, let's look to Jesus who endured not just physical torment and spiritual grief, but also psychological darkness for us. Like the dawning of a new day, he also came to life for us. And in his light we too can see light (Ps. 36:9).

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¹ Akshay Rajkumar, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/despair-well/>

² Ed Welch, *Blame it on the Brain: Distinguishing Chemical Imbalances, Brain Disorders, and Disobedience* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998), 116.

