

Sermon Series: Mental Health

Sermon 3: Depression and the Brain **Psalm 22:2 and 42:11; Jeremiah 20:1-11;** **2 Corinthians 4:7; Psalm 51**

[Prepare Scripture references or print text on individual papers to distribute.]



Today we finish up our series on the brain. I'd like to ask for four volunteers who are willing to read some Scripture passages. [hand out papers]

Today I want to talk to you about depression. A lot of people don't realize this, but 80% of the American population will, at one point or another, experience clinical depression in their lives. It's probably the one illness of the brain that a lot of people understand, because so many of us have experienced it.

If you're comfortable responding, I want to ask, "Okay, let's just out ourselves today: how many people here have ever taken an antidepressant?" If you're not willing to say it, that's okay. But take a look around and understand that most of us have.

Depression is one of those things that I think the human brain is most prone to, because so much of it is rooted in our fears, and our anxieties, and all those kinds of things. And when people have trauma or drama in their lives, what happens is your brain chemistry has to shoot out so much serotonin and norepinephrine and all those kinds of things, but it can't make enough. It's not like we have reservoirs of happy juice in our heads. And suddenly the brain can't keep up. As we've talked about in past weeks, it's just a clinical

thing that happens to our brains. As fearfully and wonderfully as we're made, the brokenness of mankind into sin has, in fact, affected our brain chemistry.

Hope is ultimately what the church has to offer to everybody, but especially to those who are hurting and hopeless who might be depressed or have clinical issues with their mental health. But the problem in the Christian Church is twofold. First, in our culture we have an idea that we are not supposed to be unhappy. We're never supposed to suffer. We're never supposed to go through terrible times or troubles. And we've gotten this idea that those times are the rare exceptions to our lives. I don't know about you, but the older I get, the more I realize that joy and happiness and things 'being just right' are the rare exceptions in life (especially when it comes to family gatherings, right?).

But the Bible doesn't say that we are supposed to have happy lives. In fact, Jesus tells us there will be a lot of suffering and difficulties in this world. But He also promises that God will be with us. That He won't leave us. That He won't forsake us. And that in spite of whatever we're going through, we can have faith. We can have love. We can have hope. And we can know that our God is with us. Suffering is very real, and it is part of life here on this earth.

The second thing we have to understand is that when it comes to depression, a lot of people who have never had it are inclined to encourage people - wrongly. They kind of spiritualize it, and it ends up that the person who is depressed hears that if they would 'just read the Bible more', 'trust God

more', and 'walk closer with Him, you know, just immerse yourself in Him', and that somehow fixes it.

Granted, with every single illness you and I will ever have, all of those things are true, but not in and of themselves, because it also takes medicine. Now, it's not that God can't heal supernaturally. But if you use medicine for other things in your life, then you've got to be consistent. There is no shame in using it for your brain.

A family psychologist friend, Dr. Brian Luberstedt, said this: "Part of Christianity's problem is they think everything from the neck on up is spiritual." Now, you tell me, when is this part of you spiritual? (point to brain) *My* brain doesn't think very spiritual. I have to discipline my brain to think spiritually. And I have had a lot of unpleasant things come out of this pie hole. So don't tell me from 'here on up' is spiritual and the rest of us is flesh – but there *are* spiritual things involved.

The other thing that happens many times in Christianity is that we make people feel as though if they are going through depression, it may be because of undealt-with sin. What sin have you not dealt with? Who in the Old Testament can you think of had this problem? Who really was going through terrible times had friends constantly telling him that these bad things are happening because there must be something?

Job.

Job, Job, Job, Job, Job. There are times when the choices we make in life can lead to the consequences of having a physiological problem. Okay? There are diseases people can catch by making wrong choices. There are broken relationships, all kinds of things, because of wrong choices. But there

are also times where if we don't deal with our sin, our sin deals with us. Can you think of an Old Testament Bible person who had that problem and ended up getting depressed, and out of it came a number of Scripture passages? Who?

David.

David. So let's listen to Psalm 51. [Volunteer reads]

Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in Your sight; so You are right in Your verdict and justified when You judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts to teach me wisdom in that secret place.

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones You have crushed rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so sinners will turn back to You. Save me from blood guilt, O God, and God will save me, and my tongue will sing of Your righteousness.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. May Your good pleasure make Zion prosper, to build up the walls of Jerusalem.

The Lord will never despise a broken heart, a contrite heart. In this case, David had not confessed his sin. He had not really dealt with it. He had

covered it up. He had raped, if you will, Bathsheba. Then he had Bathsheba's husband killed. And that pain and the consequences of it went deep for him. There are a number of Psalms that we could read that were written right around that time where it's pretty clear that David was in a state of clinical depression. And it had to do with guilt. So I don't want to dismiss that for us today. I don't want to make light of the fact that there are times where you and I are in despair and it has to do with choices we've made. I know this full well. There are times where you can end up being at the bottom of a pit, and it is because you jumped into that pit.

So with that said though, there are other times where the brain misfires, just like your arm might break, or you might have high blood pressure. It's all physical, and it's because of a physiological issue with the brain.

Let's view a short video with an interesting perspective of: what if we treated physical illnesses like people treat mental illness?

Video: If Physical Health Problems Were Treated Like Mental Health Problems <https://youtu.be/0B5nfkaeplc>

Makes a simple little point, doesn't it? Now, today I want to approach this. We've discussed the spiritual issue, when somebody does have things that cause the brain issue, but I want to talk to you about how to help a friend who has depression, and what it means to bear one another's burdens. We'll start by looking again at David. Listen to what David says in Psalm 22:2:

O, My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and I do not find rest.

And now Psalm 42:11:

Why are you downcast, O, my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.

David does this back and forth, and back and forth in the Psalms over and over. Approximately 60% of the Psalms are laments. And when people get depressed, it changes how they see things. Their behaviors change. Their sleep patterns change. Their eating patterns change. And generally speaking, they feel bad about 100% of the time. And it's not just a feeling of sad and gloom, but it can be one of just 'blah' – of having no motivation. No nothing. No feelings.

It is clear when you read the Psalms that David knew he was depressed. He entreated, "Where are You, God? Where *are* You? Why is my soul so downcast? And then he tells himself: "Put your hope in God, David." When I was at the deepest, darkest pits of depression, I remember people would say all kinds of things to me. And I remember that it didn't matter what they said. It was like it went in, and it came out, and it didn't make any difference. Many times I wasn't even able to grasp what they thought, or what they were saying.

Being around a person who is depressed often makes it difficult to be their friend. But I want you to hear this: the Bible says we are to "bear one another's burdens". To be their friend means to be their friend even if they're at their worst. Even if they're pushing you away. Even if you feel that they're sucking the life right out of you. You need to set clear boundaries for yourself and for your friend. But for someone with depression, having a friend, having somebody to be there with you is key to getting better. If you have a support system and you're going through clinical depression, you will

get better sooner and you will stay well longer due in large part because of that good support system.

So your friendship with someone who is in depression or having any other kind of mental health issue is absolutely imperative for them. But you've got to do it the right way. You've got to love them the right way. Let's listen to Jeremiah 20:1-11.

When the priest Pashhur, son of Immer, the chief officer in the temple of the LORD, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things, he had Jeremiah the prophet beaten and put in the stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin at the LORD's temple.

The next day, when Pashhur released him from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, "The LORD's name for you is not Pashhur, but Terror on Every Side. For this is what the LORD says: 'I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends; with your own eyes you will see them fall by the sword of their enemies. I will give all Judah into the hands of the king of Babylon, who will carry them away to Babylon or put them to the sword. I will deliver all the wealth of this city into the hands of their enemies — all its products, all its valuables and all the treasures of the kings of Judah. They will take it away as plunder and carry it off to Babylon. And you, Pashhur, and all who live in your house will go into exile to Babylon. There you will die and be buried, you and all your friends to whom you have prophesied lies.'"

O, LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long.

But if I say, "I will not mention His word or speak anymore in His name," His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot. I hear many whispering, "Terror on every side! Deport him! Let's deport him!" All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying, "Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him."

But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten.

There are even times when God gives you and me work to do, and the work to do is so painful that we become depressed. And yet Jeremiah was not able to stay silent. He had a fire within him when he tried. Yet, when he opened his mouth, he felt like everybody was against him and everything was a problem. And I'm certain that he was feeling depressed.

Let's hear what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:7:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

Isn't that beautiful? We have this earthly vessel that cracks and doesn't work right. And it's all to show that in our weakness He is strong. We are weak. And He's strong. That gives Him glory, and that gives Him praise.

So let's get into some practical things that you can do for a friend who is depressed. Above all, understand that they need you as their friend. Even if they push you away, they need you to be there. What they need more than anything is what I would call a ministry of presence. They don't need you to tell them what to do, how to think, how to look at things. They just need you to be there. And sometimes being there just means sitting with them. Sometimes it means cooking them food.

Whatever you do, if you ever hear about somebody facing clinical depression or going through a mental-health issue, treat them just like you would if they were in the hospital for open-heart surgery, or if they had a broken leg. What would you do? You'd call or text them. You'd assure them, "I'm praying for you." You'd send a get-well card. You would also most likely take a casserole to their house. In contrast, many people will tell you that mental illness is the one illness where no one brings you a casserole.

In fact, one of the ladies that leads a Fresh Hope for Mental Health support group in Lincoln, NE, had a brain tumor. It seemed like everyone they knew brought casseroles, so much that their freezer was full. Everybody from their church prayed and formed a prayer chain. People visited her. They asked about her. A year later, she experienced clinical depression. She couldn't go to church and couldn't even leave her house. The response? Nobody did a thing. They didn't know what to do. She already felt badly enough from the depression, but then felt abandoned by her friends on top of it all.

So if you have someone in your life who you're noticing is changing, or there may even be a hospitalization, please don't back away from them. Don't be afraid of being their friend. Don't be afraid of getting up close to them. Encourage them if they have not been to see a doctor, and to specifically see a psychiatrist. Because sometimes people who are depressed go to their GP, who prescribes an antidepressant, something they need at the time. But sometimes they need other medicines, because it's a little more complicated than just straight-up depression. If your friend was having heart problems, would you encourage them to just go see their general practitioner? You'd probably say, "Go see a specialist. Now!"

Something very helpful you can do as a friend is to allow them to talk to you without passing any judgment as to how they're feeling. You want to avoid that kind of condemnation response that goes like, "You just need to understand other people have it worse than you." Just stay away from those kinds of comments.

Realize two major points: Know that you're not going to be able to fix it. And accept that it's not your job to convince them of anything. I think a lot

of us Christians have a lot of things mixed up when it comes to witnessing. We somehow think that we've got to use human rationale. We've got to talk them into it or get them to a point of agreeing when it comes to matters of faith. But Whose job is it to change people's hearts? The Holy Spirit. And what's our job? To listen, encourage, and pray.

Listen, Encourage and Pray. Sounds like a good threesome. Yes, we can speak God's hope into their lives, but it's not our job to convince them. It's just our job to love them – and to love them right where they are.

[Insert a personal experience of being a supportive listener, or use Pastor Brad's]: I once met with a former pastor. I hadn't seen anybody that broken and messed up for a long time. It was hard to listen to him and not counterbalance what he was saying. But I kept reminding myself I just needed to shut up and listen. I didn't need to debate him, and I didn't need to straighten out his thinking. But I better be really praying for this guy.

You see, there are so many times when you and I just need to be 'Jesus with skin on'. We just need to 'be there' with a big pair of ears and a large loving heart that's going to love them through this.

Another thing you and I can do is to engage them. Depressed people will tell you all the time: "No, I can't go." "No, I don't want to go." Or they'll agree to go and then cancel at the last minute. They don't want to go anywhere. Don't give up on them. Keep inviting them. Keep encouraging them. Keep engaging them.

I'll mention this one again: you have to set personal boundaries. Not matter how you wish to help, there is only so much you can do. You can have the life sucked out of you trying to do too much. You've got to set some

personal boundaries and stick to them; but constantly assure them that no matter what, your love and your support will not change.

And then finally, continually and always offer them hope. Hope is a very interesting thing. It's a lot like love. You can love someone who cannot even feel and receive your love. And what will happen? If you continue to love them unconditionally, what will happen? Love will break through, right? The same is true of hope.

But let me close with this point. Romans 8:28 says that God takes all things and works them out together for our good. He can and does do that for you and me. And it has nothing to do with how you and I feel, you know. It has nothing to do with whether you and I feel hopeful. It has everything to do with the fact that He is our sure and certain hope. And it's the kind of hope that's not merely wishful thinking, but certain. It certainly is true. And when people have that, then they have something to live for.

A side note: One really good thing to do, by the way, is if you know someone who's depressed, asking them if they're suicidal or if they can be safe will not cause them to become suicidal. See, people don't die because they commit suicide. Suicide is the end result of an illness that has become terminal. Do you understand what I'm saying? And for heaven's sakes, if you have someone like that in your life, you need to ask them: "Will you promise that before you do anything or you plan anything, that you're going to let me know? Will you call me the first time that you want to develop a plan to take yourself out?" And then if they do, you need to be ready and take the necessary action, because if they can't be safe by themselves, they

certainly need to be in a place where they can be kept safe until they are no longer at that spot.

Here's the bottom line: Jesus came that all of our brokenness might be healed through Him. That healing comes either on this side of Heaven, or it certainly is fulfilled in Heaven. But the reality is: we're all broken. We're all a mess, like we say many times. And the good news is, that *in* my brokenness, *in* my cracked parts, the innermost bright light shines out to show that He's strong, that He's real.

In Japan, there's something they do to their favorite piece of pottery if it drops and it breaks. Instead of gluing it together, trying to keep the crack from showing, you know what they do? They solder it together with gold, 14-karat gold. And because of the cracks and the brokenness of the pottery, it becomes even more valuable.

I suspect most of us here have a few bodily scars. [Insert personal experiences, or share Pastor Brad's:] You know, I've got a spot right here where I caught Kim Schultz's pencil in elementary school. I got a little lead in my hand. I have little scars right here from my gallbladder surgery. My point is, we all have some battle scars, right? But they've healed and are proof of the power of God in our lives. That's the kind of hope that we have. It's sure. It's certain. It's real. And it's what we have to offer to other people.

And if you're depressed today, if you are clinically at that spot, or falling in that direction, my friend, get help. Don't wait. Get help. And there's no shame. I've never felt ashamed of a hangnail. I didn't feel ashamed of my broken foot when I did that. I didn't feel ashamed when I had my

gallbladder surgery. And I don't feel ashamed of having bipolar disorder. I can no more change having bipolar disorder than I could change having an inflamed gallbladder or a broken foot. (The broken foot I probably could've avoided by not being a klutz, but you see what I'm saying.)

Hope is the one thing the church has got to get right, because we have the only true hope that no one else can offer. Nobody else has this hope. There's a lot of wishful thinking out there, but we got the real deal – the sure and certain hope through Christ.

Closing Prayer: Jesus, I just ask that in spite of the inadequacies of how this may have been put together today or the words that were spoken that you'd go deep in our hearts, and that through your Holy Spirit You would help us to see those who are hurting, those who need healing, those who need hope. Help us to be the kind of friends that are able to hold strong to You, the sure and certain foundation. And when times of trouble and pressures come in this life, help us hold onto You, on the Rock on which we can be certain for all things. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Handout

As you leave today, we'll have copies available of this article of ways to help friends through the darkness of depression. I was speaking some from it this morning, but here is the much more extensive list. God's blessings.

Copy/paste and print this article or create a list to hand out:
<https://bible.org/article/helping-friend-through-darkness-depression>.