

Depression from a Pastors Perspective

The suicide of famed actor and comedian Robin Williams was my motivation to address the greatly misunderstood and under recognized issue of depression. This blog is way overdue, as this same tragedy hits the church community. Many have heard the story of the most famous and popular clown in harlequinade and pantomime. His name was Joseph Grimaldi. He was known for making audiences laugh as he entertained them in ways people had never seen. At an early age he was forced into retirement due to medical and mental ailments. The doctors not knowing what to do for him thought that what he needed most was a good healthy dose of laughter, so they recommend he go see the performance of the clown named, "Grimaldi." He then looked at the doctor and responded, "*I am he.*" Grimaldi died penniless at the age of forty-five.

It is wrongly assumed that fame, money, success, and influence disqualify a person from exhaustion and depression. It does not. Too many of us have what the 16th-century Spanish poet and Roman Catholic mystic Saint John of the Cross calls, the "*Dark Night of the Soul.*"

Some of the most gifted, anointed, and intelligent people can suffer from depression. Musical genius Ludwig van Beethoven, The Presbyterian minister and President of Princeton, Ashbel Green, Super Bowl Quarterback Terry Bradshaw, thirtieth United States President Calvin Coolidge, Princess Diana, writer Charles Dickens, novelist Ernest Hemingway, singers Billy Joel and Janet Jackson and even in the Bible we find King David, Elijah, Nehemiah and I would even argue Jesus Christ himself for a brief moment while in the Garden of Gethsemane all battle bouts or moments of depression.

Depression is a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of inadequacy, dejection, and despondency. Depression is that "thing" that eats away at your insides causing you to feel less than. Depression is that feeling of aloneness in a room full of people. Depression is that feeling of maybe everyone would be better if I weren't here. Depression is the feeling of it's never enough, I just can't do this, no one understands me, and no one is for me. Depression can be painful and disabling. Just as we must fight to keep the weight off in a physical sense, we must fight to keep the weight off in an emotional sense. Maintaining emotional health must become a priority for people that are in the public eye and have high demands and expectations placed on them. I can write first-hand about this because very few occupations and callings carry the high percentage of alcoholism, drug use, suicide and depression as Pastoral ministry. According to the New York Times, "*Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension, and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade their life expectancy has fallen.*" Whatever your occupation allow me to share some of my thoughts on how to battle this demon of depression.

- **Have a healthy outlet.** Too often our outlets become activities that are equally damaging to us as the depression. Eating and drinking are NOT good outlets. I recommend some type of physical, recreational and preferably outside activity. One of my favorite outlets is my motorcycle.
- **Get missing.** Only God is omnipresent. Too often we function as if we need to be at everything. We do not. Choose wisely and as far in advance as possible what you will attend and don't let people guilt trip you for not being available all the time. The Bible says of God that He doesn't slumber or sleep. We need to do both.
- **Get off the roller coaster.** If you like rides then go to an amusement park but don't allow people or positions to take you for a ride. Being up one hour and down the next can slam wear you out. Learn to manage your expectations, not stretch the reality of things, be honest with yourself and know your triggers and buttons.

- **Live between the “C’s.”** We all have two sets of extremes in our lives. We have the critics on one end who regardless of what we do find fault and something negative to offer as if we have been placed on this earth to please them and them alone. Or we have the compliments on the other extreme where no matter what they keep stroking your ego and patting you on the back even when it isn’t warranted. Ignore both and live between the two. The reality is we allow people to pull us in their direction and this pull can be taxing and overwhelming. None of us are as good as everyone says nor as bad so maintain a healthy and balanced self-perception that isn’t dictated by others.
- **Seek professional help.** Especially us “Christians.” If someone gives their life to Christ and hobbles down the aisles of some church with a cane because they have a broken leg you are going to encourage them to go to the doctor and get a splint or cast placed on it. In the same regard mental illness requires medical attention and not just spiritual anecdotes. There is nothing wrong with going to a counselor, support group or seeking medical attention.
- **Get a life.** Despite what we have been told we are not what we do. We are human beings and not human doings. We function best when we learn to “be” before we learn to “do.” Too many of us have an identity crisis and we see ourselves in light of our occupations or relationships. This is an unhealthy view of your true self.
- **Turn off.** Too often we are expected to be “on” all the time. We all need people and environments that love us and accept us when we aren’t on our best behavior and having our best thoughts. We all need a safe place to be vulnerable and unprotected. A place where our hair isn’t in place, clothes aren’t ironed, face isn’t shaved, words aren’t being measured and struggles aren’t being judged.

My heart goes out to the people who have lost family members and friends due to depression. May we all learn to manage our mental health and be mindful of the pressure we place on others and ourselves.

What do you recommend as a possible solution to help battle depression? I welcome your feedback.