

Introduction to Anxiety and Depression – a Spiritual perspective

Presented at the women's workshop (To dream the Dream) 10.4.10

Someone once said that nothing in the Christian life is guaranteed. However, in the same way that a seat belt provides security in a car, God is able to take care of us on life's journey through all its ups and downs, and ultimately to take us home to Glory with him in heaven.

Life gets tough – sometimes we are reaping the consequences of our own misdemeanour or folly, sometimes bad things happen to good people. Many people through the ages have struggled to accept that a good God can allow suffering.

How about you? How is our walk with God in the tough times? How are we doing at supporting our fellow pilgrims who are going through tough times?

We are going to consider very briefly anxiety and depression. I will introduce the subject, and provide some resources for further information if you are interested. I work as a GP in Northwest London and have a special interest in mental health. This is partly because of the overlap with general life and Christian Ministry, (my Husband is the Minister for our Northwest congregation) and partly through some of my own battles.

Depression and anxiety can be hard to understand. About one in ten of us will experience significant depression in our lives. It's not very helpful when friends tell us "Don't worry! You'll get over it!" Or "Think of how you'll be able to help others in the future!" At least not when you are in the midst of your suffering! In time you may be able to do just that. When I have told people that I have anxiety and depression, most are sympathetic; some have been incredulous or laughed in my face. After all, Christians aren't supposed to get depressed...we have eternal life, the Holy Spirit, all the answers...in theory. We may think that we should be able to just pull ourselves together, or that depressed people just need a 'kick in the pants'.

First take a look at the accompanying list of common symptoms of anxiety and depression. Read through these together for a few minutes, think about your reaction. I am always amazed by the link between our physical and mental health. What strikes you from the list? What is your reaction?

Now we will think about passages with the Bible that touch on the problem of anxiety and depression. There are very many, the following are passages which I have found particularly helpful. You could do a more extensive study yourself using Biblegateway.com

Great Men and Women in the Bible Suffered too

The Bible acknowledges again and again the grief, sorrow & pain that we may face in this life. Many of us love the Psalms...because the reality of suffering is so well put, and we find comfort there. Thankfully there are many examples in the Bible of godly people who struggled deeply in very tough situations, e.g. Elijah, Job, Jeremiah, Jesus, the Psalmist, Paul.

Psalm 31:9 Be merciful to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes grow **weak with sorrow**, my soul and my body with **grief**.

Psalm 51:8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the **bones you have crushed** rejoice.

Psalm 13:2 How long must I **wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart**? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will **sleep in death**;

In Rom 9:2, the Apostle Paul says “I have **great sorrow and unceasing anguish** in my heart.”

God suffers too

When all is bleak, and I am unable to reason with myself, I have learnt to draw close to God because he’s been there too, and sometimes you just have to grieve with him.

Jer 13:17 But if you do not listen, I will weep in secret because of your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly, overflowing with tears, because the LORD's flock will be taken captive.

Isaiah 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men, **a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering**.

God has compassion on us when we are discouraged

Isaiah 42:3 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.

When I am down, God does not treat me harshly, but is gentle. In a similar way we all need a good friend who can listen and acknowledge our pain. All of us would do well to learn the skills of ‘active listening’.

God promises to help us through

God promises to help us through. Remember the famous ‘footprints’ poem? And the rest of Psalm 13 from verse 5 ‘But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.’ God enables us to learn to rejoice. This is not the same as being happy.

Ultimately our suffering helps us to help others

Here’s a moving quote from the 17th Century.... Eventually you will be able to help others.

John Donne Devotions XXIII

“Diseases which we never felt in ourselves come but to compassion of others that have endured them; nay, compassion itself comes to no great degree if we have not felt in some proportion in ourselves that which we lament and condole in another. But when we have had those torments in their exaltation ourselves, we tremble at relapse.”

Final Thoughts

I have not covered the causes of anxiety and depression, or the various treatments that are available. This is just an introduction, an opportunity to acknowledge the problem. It’s also a call to support each other patiently in love.

See the additional sheet ‘Some Recommended Mental Health resources’ if you would like to find out more. Please note, all Bible quotes are taken from the New International Version.

Penny Cox April 2010