



HOPE

Prevails

HOW TO HELP A
DEPRESSED LOVED ONE

by

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How to Help A Depressed Loved One **By Dr. Michelle Bengtson**

“When three of Job's friends heard of the tragedy he had suffered, they got together and traveled from their homes to comfort and console him.” (Job 2:11 NLT)

“When ‘I’ is replaced by ‘we,’ even illness becomes wellness.” Malcolm X

How to help a depressed loved one could be an entire book of its own, and perhaps one day it will be. My goal here is to provide a few words to help guide loved ones of those suffering with depression. Heather Funk Palacios, a pastor's wife who battled through depression, has said it this way: “Mental [health] awareness is two-fold: One learning to live with it; The other learning to love through it.”

If you have never suffered from depression, it makes it difficult to relate to the experience of one who is suffering. As such, it may lead to thoughts, attitudes, and actions that may in fact be counter-productive. Here are some tips focused on how to help and not hurt the healing process for a depressed loved one.

Ways To Help

“Honey, I don't know what to do to help you right now,” my husband whispered.

“I don't know either.”

I hate the images that replay in my mind when I think back to those days of despair when I fought to find my way out of my own dark well. I had never before felt such helplessness, nor questioned my purpose and my identity so repeatedly. Whenever I encounter another struggling soul, I remember my own experience. While I don't enjoy recalling my days of despair, I also never want to forget them. For to forget might dampen my compassion for all who suffer now.

When concerned family and friends accompany their loved ones to my office, they frequently ask, “What can I do to help my spouse/child/friend who is depressed?” While everyone who is suffering might need support in a little different way, the answer always comes back to the universal need to feel loved, accepted, and not alone.

We must remember depression does not discriminate...everyone is susceptible. Depression is estimated to be our greatest epidemic worldwide by 2020. You may or may not be able to personally relate to your loved one's experience, but it's a common problem. Many biblical greats like Elijah, Jonah, Jeremiah, David, and Job suffered.

Realize that depression is not just the blues. Depression is a medical disorder that without appropriate treatment can last weeks to years. Accurate diagnosis is essential. Encourage your loved one to consult their doctor. If your loved one does not have a primary care physician, consider an appointment at a community mental health center.

In fact, **you may have to make the appointment and take them** to the doctor or it may not happen. Depression can make the simplest tasks, like taking vitamins or brushing their teeth, seem overwhelming. Routine activities like getting out of bed and getting dressed can feel like it takes too much energy.

Encourage your loved one to remain active but keep your expectations reasonable. **Celebrate their successes, no matter how small, and recalibrate your expectations.** Getting out of bed and getting dressed can be a huge accomplishment at times. So in supporting a depressed loved one, be thankful, for example, if they get up and go to school instead of caring so much about their grades on an exam. That may be all they can accomplish in a day.

Make plans with them. Take a walk with them or engage them in something else they enjoy. A depressed individual also battles diminished energy, interest, and motivation. Without encouragement to engage, they often become increasingly isolated and lethargic. And without the presence of a loving companion, they may withdraw into the dark oblivion of loneliness. Recognize, however, that even if you attempt to make plans with them, they may not be ready for the demands of such an activity or expectation (see “Celebrate their successes, no matter how small, and recalibrate your expectations” above). Also, keep in mind that an invitation to engage is different than coercion, manipulation, or persuasion.

Remain encouraging and positive, but avoid platitudes. People experiencing depression can sense insincerity. When you’re unsure what to say, admit it. Just listening and providing an honest response will mean more than a quick but disingenuous response. Be willing to say, “I’m sorry for your pain. I wish I knew what to say.” That will mean more than preaching, or pretending you can relate to their pain when you can’t.

Ask how you can pray for them. A specific prayer can be more significant and encouraging than the general statement, “I’m praying for you.” Asking, “How can I pray for you?” shows your desire to be supportive. Then, pray for them.

Be willing to just sit and be with them. We often try to fill uncomfortable silence with meaningless words. That’s exhausting for you and your depressed loved one. Take a lesson from Job’s friends. Show your support by just being with your loved one, sitting with them, letting them be exactly who they are right then.

Human touch is powerfully healing. If they are open to it, and not all are, **offer a heartfelt hug.** Sometimes more is conveyed through an unrushed hug or a hand on the shoulder than could ever be eloquently put into words.

Recognize that depression leads to increased risk of suicidal thoughts. If you are concerned that your loved one is considering suicide, ask. Some worry that by asking the question, they will raise the likelihood of suicide. Asking conveys concern and allows for an honest dialogue. If they are considering suicide, a call to the 24-hour National Suicide Prevention Hotline may be necessary: 1-800-273-TALK (8255). If they are in imminent danger, you may need to call 911 or the local authorities.

Above all, always **convey there is hope**. Sometimes the depressed individual no longer feels hopeful. In times like this, they may need to borrow your hope.

Further, recognize that as a concerned loved one of an individual with depression, while there are many things you can do to help, ultimately you must surrender and entrust them into God's care. It's not your responsibility or within your capability to "fix them" or "heal them."

What Not To Say

What we say has a significant impact in not only our own lives but the lives of others. Proverbs 18:21 indicates the power of our words: "The tongue can bring death or life." Our words also impact our emotional health.

What we say and the attitude our words convey to our loved ones can help set them free or can hinder them. Just because we haven't experienced depression or anxiety doesn't minimize or invalidate their experience. Yet what we say may communicate just that.

Here are a few things NOT to say to someone struggling with depression:

- "It's all in your head."
- "Snap out of it."
- "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps."
- "This too shall pass."
- "What doesn't kill you will make you stronger."
- "Others are worse off than you."
- "I know how you feel" (unless you *really* do know how they feel, and they know it)

These comments are derogatory to an individual in the darkness of despair and don't reflect understanding, empathy, and acceptance. About the worst thing you can do is to convey in your words, attitudes, or behavior that your perception is that they can control their depression. Believe me, if I could have snapped out of it, I would have. Depression isn't something people aspire to. It is even more discouraging if they perceive you want them to "just get over it," or believe they can. Like diabetes, epilepsy, or cancer, depression is a medical condition. We can no more expect someone with depression to will themselves out of it than we can someone with cancer.

Such comments can leave a person with depression feeling worthless, invalidated, and minimized. These words convey that their pain isn't serious or isn't important, or that you believe they choose to suffer. People who suffer from depression, already often struggle with self-esteem, guilt, and shame. They need to be encouraged, loved, and uplifted, not shamed or made to feel inadequate. What they long for is to know that regardless of their suffering, they are loved, accepted, and not alone.

Individuals suffering from depression are often believing lies about themselves and others. For a more thorough discussion on what depression is, where it comes from, what perpetuates it, it's important to understand the spiritual roots of depression. This is discussed in depth in my book, *"Hope Prevails: Insights From a Doctor's Personal Journey Through"*

Depression” which is available through most major book retailers or through my website at: <http://drmichellebengtson.com/hope-prevails-book/>

What To Say

Over the years in my office, I have heard comments to or about depressed loved ones that demean their experience. I usually don't think their intent is to hurt, but they simply don't know better. The Bible says “My people perish for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6). My own family and friends have made statements that left me feeling more discouraged and ashamed than the depression itself — comments which suggested I was expected to put on a happy face rather than express my despairing heart.

Have you ever wondered what to say to help a depressed loved one? Let scripture be your guide: “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Here are a few things TO say to someone struggling with depression:

“I love you.” Saying I love you to a depressed individual is like a breath of air to a drowning man. You may have said this 1000 times before, but they need to hear it repeatedly because yesterday's profession of love is like yesterday's breath and doesn't sustain today. Because of entertaining an unloving spirit, the depressed individual struggles to love themselves and wonder if others will give up on them and stop loving them too. When you say I love you to your depressed loved one, you not only affirm them and help sustain them, but you provide an expression of God's love that they have difficulty finding for themselves at that moment.

“I'm here for you.” This sounds like such a cliché, but a depressed individual has often unknowingly agreed with the lies of the spirits of rejection and abandonment. They feel alone in their pain, so this heartfelt comment dispels those lies and brings comfort. This verbal expression is the epitome of Romans 12:15 (NLT): “When others are happy, be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrow.”

“You are important to me.” It's critical to someone with depression to know that they are still acceptable, accepted, and loved. It's an encouragement to them to know that their value to you or to God does not change just because their mood does.

“I'm sorry you are hurting.” It is frequently communicated to the person with depression that they should be able to control how they feel. By expressing your sorrow for their pain, you express that you care, even when you don't fully understand.

“Is there something I can do for you?” Frequently, daily tasks (like folding laundry or making lunch) become overwhelmingly burdensome to one under the weight of depression. Your willingness to do a trivial task may offer great relief. Sometimes just offering your help is enough to lend comfort and encouragement, even if they don't have an imminent concern. But as an aside, don't offer if you don't intend to see it through. That would make things much worse.

“You may not believe this now, but you won't always feel this way.” Perhaps obvious to the non-depressed loved one, but to the depressed individual, they often need reminding that

there is hope. The Bible tells us “Joy comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5) and that’s a reminder the depressed need to hear.

“What might help you feel better?” This question can help change the perspective of a depressed individual towards a more proactive mindset rather than focusing on the negative.

“What might be making your depression worse?” This question may help highlight those thoughts, attitudes, or behaviors that exacerbate their condition that they may not otherwise be aware of.

“Is there a time when your depression is worse?” This question helps you discern when support is most critical. For some, the start of a new day can be overwhelming, while for others, nighttime loneliness makes them feel worse.

“We will get through this together.” This communicates your support, participation, and presence. It also reduces feelings of rejection and abandonment that often accompany depression. As Solomon said in Ecclesiastes, “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help him up!” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 NIV)

Say nothing. Sometimes you don’t need to say anything—instead, offer your presence. I’m reminded of the passage in the Bible when Job encountered great hardship. Job 2:13 says that Job’s friends came and sat with him for seven days and nights. During that time, they didn’t speak a word because they saw how great his pain was. Words could do nothing to help his misery, but their company spoke volumes.

Pray for your loved one. Sometimes the most loving and beneficial thing you can do or say for a depressed loved one is to pray for them. If you aren’t sure what to pray, something such as the following sample prayer would be appropriate: *“Dear God, my loved one is hurting and in pain. I commit them to you and ask you to bring your comfort and healing. Your word says that you never leave us or forsake us, so make your presence known to them now. Your word says that while weeping may last for the night, joy comes in the morning. I ask you to bring a return of joy to their life. While the thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy, you have to come to give life and to give it to the full, bring a full life to my loved one, and in return help them to then comfort others with the comfort you have given. I ask all these things in Jesus’ name, Amen.”*

Remember, when you are speaking to a depressed loved one, your goal is to encourage and uplift them. “But if it were me, I would encourage you. I would try to take away your grief” (Job 16:5 NLT).

Your Prescription (Rx):

1. Look back over the tips in the first section regarding how to help a depressed loved one. Choose one or two items from that list that you will commit to doing to help support your loved one.

2. Look back over the list of things not to say to a depressed loved one. Have you said any of those things or any comments similar to those? If so, I'd encourage you to seek your depressed one's forgiveness. Just doing that will show comfort, love, and support.
3. Now look over the list of things to say to a depressed loved one. Choose two or three and commit to expressing them to your loved one frequently.
4. In your Bible look up the following verses: Proverbs 18:21, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Romans 12:15, and Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. Then handwrite them on index cards and place them where you will see them frequently. Read each of these scriptures ALOUD three times daily, committing them to memory.

My Prayer For You:

Father, it can be hard to sympathize with the specific sufferings of another when we have not experienced it ourselves. We know from your word, however, that you are acquainted with our suffering. I pray, Lord, that you would help this Dear One know how to adequately express love and concern for the loved one currently in depression's grip. I pray that this precious child of yours would be like Job's friends, sympathizing and comforting the depressed loved one. I pray that you would give this one a greater ability to see the depressed loved one through your eyes of love, and that by your Holy Spirit, both would feel comforted. Let them not tire or grow weary of doing good. Thank you for your eyes of love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Recommended Playlist:

If You Want to Love Someone. Jason Gray. © 2014 by Centricity Music
No Man is an Island. Tenth Avenue North. © 2014 by Reunion Records
Speak Life. TobyMac. © 2012 by ForeFront Records
Not Right Now. Jason Gray. © 2014 by Centricity Music

Do you want to learn more? Do you want to learn how to identify the early warning signs of depression? Do you want to learn more tips for how to help someone battling depression? Pick up a copy of "Hope Prevails: Insights From a Doctor's Personal Journey Through Depression."

After treating patients for over 20 years as a board-certified neuropsychologist, Dr. Michelle Bengtson suffered her own bout of clinical depression. She understands the pain and despair that individuals feel. But, she learned how to overcome depression's grip and walk victoriously. Since then, Dr. Bengtson has helped hundreds of patients limit depression's power over their minds and recover the life they used to enjoy.

Dr. Bengtson is the author of "Hope Prevails: Insights From a Doctor's Personal Journey Through Depression," releasing August 16, 2016. Her personal experience and professional expertise reveal the unseen issues that keep people chained in despair, while handing readers the keys to freedom. Even though someone may seem hostage to depression, it never has to be the final destination.

"Hope Prevails" is available for preorder by visiting <http://drmichellebengtson.com/hope-prevails-book/>