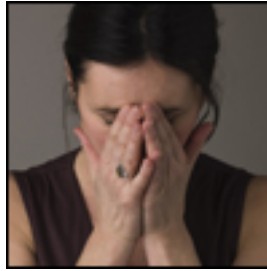


# Handling Tragedy in Your Small Group



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## When a Group Member (or Spouse) Passes Away

*What a group leader should do, and not do, in a tragic situation.*

by Rick Howerton

I was driving home after a day's work when my cell phone rang. A woman's shaky voice spoke on the other end of the line: "Pastor, I'm on my way home from work and I just got a call from my daughter. She came home from school and found her dad—she thinks he's dead." Her broken tones evolved into uncontrollable wailing.

"I'll be right there," I told her. Immediately, I called her small-group leader. He and his wife beat me to the house. Sure enough, the woman's husband was gone, with no hope for resuscitation. It was a tragedy, certainly. But astoundingly effective small-group leadership carried the day to help her and her family through that day, and is still doing so months later.

Serving as the primary caregiver to someone who has experienced a tragedy is a daunting task for any small-group leader, especially when someone has passed away. But such situations become a reality every day, and they can strike quickly. What a small-group leader does over the next few hours, days, weeks, and months will be vital to the emotional and spiritual health of everyone involved.

### **Respond Quickly**

Whether it's a group member that has passed away or a group member's spouse, the first few hours are critical. In those moments, the surviving family members are overcome by waves of varied emotions and disbelief; they find themselves in a sea of disturbing numbness and confusion.

In many instances, waves of people will begin to flow onto the family's front porch once the death becomes public knowledge. Some will truly be the deepest friends of the grieving family, while others will drop by out of a sense of urgency to do something or a desire to follow some kind of etiquette—which is probably the most insensitive thing they could choose to do. And that's after the phone begins to ring off the wall. In addition, family members will need to be contacted and the church made aware of the situation. If the deceased's body is at the home, the police and a coroner will soon be on the scene.

In the midst of this chaos, a small-group leader has an amazing opportunity for ministry.

### **The Ministry of Presence**

Upon arriving, the small-group leader needs to embrace the grieving spouse both physically and emotionally. There has been great loss—a trauma of indescribable proportions. If you are the first to arrive, stay physically close to the individual for as

long as he or she chooses. When others begin to arrive, assure the spouse that you are not leaving, and that you and the rest of the group will be with them as long as they need you to be. Don't leave the room without letting him or her know that you'll be back in just a few minutes.

Sometimes it can be tricky for a group leader to know when to leave. Honest communication is the best way to solve this puzzle. If you feel like the grieving person is ready for some space and would like you to leave, ask him or her if they would like to be alone. As family members and close friends begin to arrive, your presence may no longer be necessary. Still, be sure to ask the grieving spouse if they are okay with you leaving, and communicate that you can return if needed again.

Here are some other things to keep in mind as you carry out the ministry of presence:

- **Use wise silence.** When people don't know what to say in a tragic situation, they often resort to trite clichés. This is almost always harmful. Phrases like "He's in heaven now," "She's better off," or "We'll see him again someday" may need to be spoken eventually—but not in the early days (and maybe weeks) of the loss.
- **Assist in communicating the news.** There are multiple groups of people that will need to be made aware of the situation: The church leadership, family members, the workplace of the deceased (and the spouse), the school the children attend, close friends of the family, and the rest of your small group. Ask the spouse if you or someone in the group can assist with those phone calls.
- **Offer protection.** Every person responds differently to a loss of this nature. Some people want to be surrounded by a house full of people; others would rather not speak to anyone other than a few of their closest friends and family members. Someone may need to serve as protector, greeter, card collector, and food organizer so that the grieving spouse can have space.

## The Ministry of Organization

There are many tasks that will need to be completed during the first 24 hours after the death. Your small group will be the best team to help with these responsibilities.

1. **Conclude what is best for the children in the first few hours.** If necessary and agreed upon by the spouse of the deceased, help find someone to be with the kids. The youth pastor is a good option, or another group member if he or she has a strong relationship with the children of the deceased. Also, the children may choose to be someplace other than their home. If so, you may need to arrange for someone to drive them to and from the friend's home where they are most comfortable.
2. **Clean the house.** In a few hours, family and friends will probably be arriving from out of town. Assembling a team to clean the house prior to their arrival is very helpful.

3. **Get someone to do the laundry.** The entire family will need clothes to wear and the guests that will be arriving will need clean towels and washcloths.
4. **Organize meals.** Find someone in your group with the ability to organize meals for the family and have that person work with the church to arrange every meal up to the funeral. If possible, continue feeding the grieving spouse and children for another three days following the funeral.
5. **Find lodging for family members, if necessary.** It is possible that there are more family members coming to town than there is lodging at the deceased's home. If this is true, the church can prove her Christlikeness by housing family members as they come to town for a few days.
6. **Look for what is overlooked.** Back to the story at the beginning of this article—After the small group and our church had completed a massive number of tasks for the family, our Missions Pastor came to the home carrying at least 15 rolls of toilet paper. I wept. Her love was so deep and her sensitivity so authentic that she had gone through the house to see what we might have missed. She knew the family should not have to think about anything except one another.

## Moving Forward

There will continue to be needs in the weeks and months following the funeral. These may include:

1. Help with financial decisions, including teaching the remaining spouse how to take care of the family's finances;
2. Wading through insurance situations with the family;
3. Fixing things around the house, changing the oil in the car, and so on;
4. Getting the kids to and from ballgames and school events;
5. Offering childcare so the newly single person can have a social life; and
6. Whatever other needs the group can meet.

You may be thinking, *This all sounds so pragmatic*. No doubt about it, but remember Jesus' words: "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

The weeks and months following the funeral will be difficult for the family, as well as for your small group. All will be grieving, yet all will be unified by their love for the deceased and one another. The group will need you to lead through grieving in a healthy fashion. Remind them of the biblical fact expressed in 1 Thessalonians 4:13: "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope."

— Rick Howerton; copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International

## When a Child Dies

*A pastor and his wife share principles for helping a family with their loss.*

by Peggy and Clayton Bell

Whether you're a pastor or a friend, helping those who grieve requires special wisdom.

**1. Although God's love and comfort come through people, comfort is still God's work.** Although there is "one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus," we ministers are called to "fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church." (Col. 1:24). God alone is the God of all comfort—he is the source, we are the channels.

A competent physician knows how to clean a wound, apply antiseptic, suture where necessary, bandage, and then wait for the natural healing process. A doctor is not a healer. He aids the healing process that God controls and has built into the forces of nature. A good doctor knows his limitations and has the patience to wait for "nature" to heal.

The same is true with the wounds of grief. God is the healer and fellow Christians (whether pastors or laypersons) can mediate his comfort. Yet they also must know how to keep their hands off to allow God to do his own healing.

**2. In ministering to grieving people, be convinced of the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ.** Did Jesus Christ rise from the dead? Was he telling the truth when he said, "I am going there to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2)? Does his resurrection really give us the assurance of eternal life—as when he said to Mary and Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25–26)? Is there a real existence beyond this life known as "heaven"? Does God really forgive sins and accept sinners? Do we have a hope in Christ beyond this life?

The unequivocal answer of the New Testament to all of these questions is a resounding yes! The caregiver can convey this hope on firm ground. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the bandage that binds up the wounds of grief, and the presence of the Holy Spirit is the balm that soothes and comforts raw nerves.

**3. Accept the validity of the grief process.** Is it wrong for a Christian to grieve? Are tears a contradiction of faith? Or is faith supposed to eradicate tears?

The psalmists often wept during sorrow. In the New Testament, after Stephen had been stoned, we're told, "godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him" (Acts 8:2). Even living that close to Christ's resurrection, the early Christians deeply mourned

Stephen's loss. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, we have the balanced teaching of the early church that we “grieve, but not like the rest of men who have no hope.”

Whether grief comes from death, desertion, alienation of affection, or divorce, tears are natural. Tragically, some devoted Christians believe that grief is inappropriate for one who believes in the resurrection. The attempt to deny the reality of grief through the bravado of faith is terribly destructive. Anyone wishing to minister to those in sorrow must follow the biblical injunction to “mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15), and to endure patiently the tears of those who must face massive new vacancies in their lives.

**4. Make sure someone is there when needed.** The question asked by people who must call on a person during bereavement is “What shall I say?” But words are not nearly as important as being there. A simple embrace and the words “I’m sorry,” or “I love you,” may be all you need to say. It’s important for the bereaved to feel that they’re surrounded by people who care deeply and who are available.

**5. Give the bereaved opportunities to talk about their lost loved ones.** Kaleidoscopes of memories and emotions flash across the screens of their minds, and it’s very important to the grieving process for them to articulate these memories. The sympathetic ear is often the best tool in grief therapy.

**6. Touch is important as a means of communication.** One grieving person told us that after her loss she didn’t hear much that I said, but when Peggy and I sat on her bed and held her hands and prayed, she received strength. During those early days when she would lie crying on her bed, Peggy would sit beside her and rub her shoulders and back, not only to relieve physical tension, but to communicate caring and emotional support.

**7. Remember special times in the bereaved’s life.** A phone call, a card, or some other response from friends lets people know they are thought of and supported on those days. Each event is a poignant reminder of loss and can reopen the wounds. It’s especially important that the bereaved be supported when such events reawaken grief.

**8. Be ready to give readings to those who sorrow.** A hand-written list of Psalms and other Scriptures for daily reading and meditation work well. I say hand-written for the same reason doctors hand write prescriptions. When a person is really sick you don’t give a patent medicine, but rather a personalized prescription for healing. Some people need the language of the psalmist to ventilate their own feelings in prayer. Others need the theology of the resurrection to undergird their hopes. Carefully evaluate how these can be blended together.

**9. A bereaved person is vulnerable; be discreet and accepting.** In the agony of sorrow, things may be said, feelings vented, or secrets divulged which the one ministering must absorb and turn over to the Lord. In grief, as in any other matter of pastoral concern, a cloak of confidentiality must be thrown around the relationship.

**10. Be part of a ministering team.** In my case, I'm extremely grateful to the Lord for a wife who shares my ministry with me. Peggy's perceptions and sensitivity have been great assets in ministering. She is able to do for widows what would be inappropriate for me to do. Others who are not able to share with their spouses this way will want to draw on wise and compassionate men and women of the church to complement what one person can do.

John tells us that in heaven God "will wipe every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 21:4). Until God does that, it's our privilege to be channels of comfort and hope for those who grieve. It's not easy. But it is God's work. He gives us the magnificent opportunity to lift our eyes and the eyes of others to that one who is life, and who promises reunion and the fullest measure of joy.

*— For many years, Rev. Clayton Bell and his wife Peggy served congregations in the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA).*

## When a Group Member Has a Financial Crisis

*Here are several realistic steps a group can take to help.*

by Linda McCullough-Moore

Real life doesn't wait outside while we attend our small-group meetings. Fortunately, a small group is a place where burdens can be shared, and often will be shared. But what happens when the really big problems hit? At what point do group members move beyond listening and praying for group members in trouble, and move toward offering concrete help?

One example is when a group member faces a financial crisis—perhaps the loss of a job, falling behind on a mortgage, getting into serious debt, and so on. What should the group do? What should the group not do?

There is no step-by-step manual for a situation like this, but there are some definite guidelines that can be very helpful to both the group and the group member in crisis.

### **Identifying the Need**

When a group member shares a financial crisis, the first thing the group must do is give the individual a chance to share openly about the particulars of the situation—what led to the crisis, what circumstances were beyond control, what overspending or imprudent behavior may have contributed, what are the likely eventualities and consequences of the current crises, and what resources might be explored.

In this situation, it's particularly important that the group recommit to their covenant of confidentiality. Financial losses, particularly to the breadwinner in a family, can be shattering emotionally and psychologically, as well as practically. Gossip about such matters is sin; it is harmful to the church community as well as to the individual.

It's also important that the group demonstrate genuine care to the person or family in need. The Bible tells us we are to “weep with those who weep”; what this means most of all is that we imagine how we would feel in the other's place. If we are able to walk a mile in the other persons' shoes, we will be better equipped to show and speak our true and deeply felt sympathy for the pain of the current moment. We do this without any predictions of the future or attempts at explaining it away. We simply say, “This is so hard, and I am so sorry you suffering through this. I care so much for you.”

One thing that a small group can offer is a reminder that economic success or failure is not a measure of a man or woman in God's eyes, nor is it a measure of the bounty and grace of God. A struggling person suffers more when made to think that some spiritual failing has caused the problem, or is made to question the provision of God. A lot of false

ideas and principles have seeped into our culture in recent years—ideas and principles that might lead one to believe that financial success is a measure of God’s favor. Having a group member suffer financially is an opportunity for the group to explore Scripture’s teachings on these aspects of our faith walk.

Once the situation has been shared and heard, it is critical for the group to pray to God together, asking grace and wisdom not just for the person experiencing the need, but for the entire group. Pray that all of you might know how best to be helpful.

## **Deciding How to Help**

Scripture tells us that if we see a brother or sister in need, we are never to say “Go in peace, may your problems be solved” without becoming involved ourselves in giving real help. A crisis for one member is an opportunity to reaffirm the teaching that we are indeed our brother’s keeper.

Still, any group must acknowledge that no matter how much its members care for one another, it is very unlikely that the resources exist for the group itself to solve the entire financial problem. Difficulties will often arise that require huge amounts of money, and any group’s resources will never be boundless. The group should discuss how members of the congregation might be in a position to help, and just how the one in need might best share his or her situation with others in the church.

With these considerations in mind, it is then important for the group to devote some time to an exploration of what the individual can do, what options exist, and how the group can be of practical help. This discussion should be deeply practical. Can a car be lent for transportation to job interviews? Can babysitting be offered? Can food be shared? How can one member help the person in crisis get needed information, do required paperwork, and meet with necessary people or agencies that may help? This has the advantage of demonstrating that the individual is not alone—that we are part of one body.

When such a meeting occurs, it is important that the person in trouble be included. This demonstrates deepest respect, and not doing so means that the group presumes to know more than, or be superior to, the one who is in need.

There may be times when one person in the group is in a position or is led by God to offer very specific financial aid. It may be very important that this person, for whatever reason, make his contribution privately or anonymously. This inclination should always be honored. It is common practice in many churches for money to be given to clergy members with the express wish that it be transferred to a particular person in need, and that the person not be told who the donor is.

Here are two more things to consider when deciding how to help:

1. **Equality among membership.** Financial crises can sometimes reveal a sort of double standard in a small group—particularly if a family is involved, or if the member is very well-liked by the group. In those situations, there can be an

inclination to jump in with aid in an amount and a proportion that would not be available should another member have a similar need in the near future.

A group needs to develop an understanding of itself as a balanced and fair gathering of people. In certain circumstances, it can happen that one member becomes the ongoing recipient of the group's charity, even while others in the group are also in need. Of course, there really is no way to make certain that everyone is treated "fairly," but groups need to be aware of the possibility of deeply wounding one member while helping another. The situation calls for wisdom and true discernment.

2. **A separate meeting.** When life problems are overwhelming, it is possible that a group may find itself devoting much or all of its meeting time to one member's crisis. This might not best serve the group, nor the individual member. In an instance where it is apparent that a member's current crisis will require significant time in the group, this should be addressed directly in the meeting. It may then be then decided that the group wants to devote the current meeting to discussion of the member's crisis, or it may be decided to hold a separate meeting—perhaps at another time or as an extension of the usual group time.

## **A Chance to Grow**

This may sound insensitive, but a financial crisis within a small group can be a great opportunity for growth—not only for the person experiencing the crisis, but for the rest of the group, as well. When a group is faced with such a challenge and works and prays together to offer real help, the results often include a stronger bond among members, a feeling of deep trust, and a sense of real joy in being of use and service to one another.

A financial crisis can also be the opportunity for each group member to examine prayerfully his or her own value system when it comes to money. This is a great chance to talk very openly about the choices we make with our money. How much do we give away? Why? How do we decide? How do we make decisions about purchases and entertainment that are not necessities? These questions can be explored as a group, which creates a wonderful opportunity for group members to take an honest look at how financial decisions are made, priorities determined, and charity supported. There is no one who cannot benefit from periodic examination of the uses we make of the money God has placed in our hands.

In the end, if a member is able to share his financial needs with the group, and to receive caring help and support, this will encourage others to share their needs, as well. This might include needs for companionship, for activity, for rest, for friendship, for solace, and so on. Every member of every group will struggle with something. When the group is seen as a safe place to share these struggles, God can be glorified as members love, serve, pray, and truly care.

And what a witness to the world when that happens. “See how they love one another.”

— *Linda McCullough-Moore; copyright 2009 by the author and  
Christianity Today International.*

# When Group Members Struggle with Major Sins

*How to fight for the integrity of individuals and the entire group.*

by Rick Lowry

Three mature, spiritually active ladies sat with their pastor in his office, seeking advice about a serious situation concerning one of the members in their ladies' small group. This group member had been sharing her marriage struggles with the group for some time, and the other ladies were concerned that her marriage would not last. But they did not anticipate that when their friend did decide to leave her husband, she would do so for another woman.

In trying to process this, the women wrestled with one of the most challenging moments in the life of a small group: how to respond to the sinful choices of a group member. On the one hand, they were repulsed by the choices she was making; on the other hand, they wanted to love this person as Jesus would love them.

Our society is experimenting with ever deepening levels of sin. And as new people come into the church, many of them carry heavy worldly baggage that involves years of healing. Even lifelong Christians face greater temptation than in the past, and many stumble. This reality affects much of church life, but especially small groups.

Churches create small groups so that people will be cared for and know there is a place they can go and be loved, despite their flaws. But how far should we carry our acceptance of sin? Should we look the other way? Or should we become actively involved in helping a friend out of their sin? If so, how do we handle such situations? Below are a few tips to help groups struggling with the sin of a group member.

## **Be Proactive**

A good small group works constantly at building the kind of relationships where personal problems can be shared. This is a healthy exercise that reaps benefits for both the present and the future. When we make a weekly habit of opening up to one another, we are preparing ourselves for the next crisis in the life of the group. If we've practiced opening up to each other when things are calm, we'll be prepared to respond to whatever predicament visits the life of our group.

One of the best ways to be ready to address sin in the lives of group members is to create an atmosphere where people can share their burdens and know they will not be judged, but be loved and helped.

## **The Secret Sin**

Often, the members of a small group do not find out about a person's sin from the person who is sinning, but in some other way. (For example, the recovering alcohol

accidentally spotted in a restaurant bar.) In this case, perhaps the person in the small group who is closest to that group member could take them aside in a private moment and lovingly confront them. If two or three group members have a strong friendship with the person, several might go along.

At this point, the person can either reject the approach from the other group member(s) or accept it. If they accept it, ask for permission to have the group gather around them and support them in whatever way is needed. If they reject the person who approaches them, the group response may depend on the nature of the sin. The leaders of the church sponsoring the group may need to intervene if it is a serious sin that fits the biblical guidelines for such action. If the sin is not of this nature, the group could at least let the person know they are still welcome at group meetings and that group members would still be available to encourage them (though most people in this situation choose to withdraw due to guilt or anger).

If group members do the best they can to speak the truth in love and still the confronted person rejects them, it may be time to let it rest. This is difficult because of the loving relationship they have built with the individual, but we only control our end of a relationship; the other person has to respond, as well.

Sometimes a small-group leader is in a unique position to offer spiritual encouragement to a group member who approaches them privately about a sin they are struggling with. In such cases, it may not be necessary to bring the rest of the group members into the confession/healing process. For example, Chad ran up a tab of \$120,000 in back taxes before the IRS caught up with him. He came privately to confess this sin to this group leader and ask for prayer and guidance. The leader decided to keep this between him and Chad, and he continued his support as Chad worked through a multi-year process of reconciling his wrong.

No matter what the circumstances, helping people with their sin involves a heavy commitment on the part of any small-group member who chooses to stand behind a sinful person. Sins that are grave enough to impact a person's life in a major way also weigh heavily on anyone who comes near. If you decide as a group to help a person through their sin, be ready to stand behind them—for years.

## **When a Leader Sins**

Sometimes the leader of a small group is the one struggling with sin. What can group members do in this situation?

Hopefully the group has developed the kind of relationship where the leader, like everyone else, can bring his or her struggles to the group. When this happens, prayer and support are appropriate. In the case of some sins, the leader may need to step down from leadership for a time. If this happens, other group members should be prepared to take up the slack in the life of the group.

If you are the only one who knows about your small-group leader's secret sin, meet with them in a loving, private confrontation. If the concern about the leader's sin rises

from the group (several members have noticed a sinful practice on the part of their leader and have begun to discuss it with each other), the person closest to the leader might speak for the group in a one-on-one setting with the leader. If several have a good relationship with the leader, a group confrontation may be in order.

## **Biblical Guidelines**

The following Bible passages offer advice in dealing with the sins of other believers:

- **Matthew 18:15–17.** Jesus walks through a progression that can be used when confronting someone about sin. It involves an ever-widening circle if the person does not respond. First, the two of you talking about it alone; next, you take a few others along; third, bring the leaders of the church into the process; and finally, if the person still does not repent, the relationship may be ended.
- **Galatians 6:1.** Spiritual people can restore a sinner gently, but they must also be careful, lest they get caught up in the sin. Verse 2 is also a helpful reminder of our need to uphold the person who has fallen as we bear one another's burdens.
- **Romans 15:14.** God has made us competent to counsel (or instruct) one another in the church.
- **James 5:16.** Confession of sin to others combined with prayer results in healing.
- **1 Corinthians 5:1–13.** A grave reminder that some unrepentant sin is serious enough to ask a person to leave the fellowship.
- **1 John 1:8–10.** We are assured of forgiveness through confession.

— *Rick Lowry; copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International*

## **When Divorce Visits Your Small Group**

*What to do in the likely event of a marital crisis.*

by Lee A. Dean

Whether your small group is open or closed, or whether or not you always leave an empty chair, there's one uninvited guest hovering around the meeting place ready to barge into the proceedings. The longer your group lasts, the more likely this intruder is to make an appearance. The name of this party crasher is divorce.

The chances are good that either a couple or an individual in your small group will have to wrestle directly with this crisis, which means the entire group will deal with it as well. What should a small-group leader do to prepare for the impact of divorce on individuals, couples, and the group?

### **Be Prepared**

The statistics about divorce are by now all too familiar. Half of all first marriages end in divorce, while 60 percent of remarriages eventually fall apart. The divorce rates among evangelical Christians are little better than the rates of the population as a whole. Now plug these statistics into the life of a church small group. Logic tells you that small groups would not be immune to the problem, and logic would be correct.

This is especially true if the group stays together for a longer period of time. Dennis Anderson—pastor of adult ministries at Crossroads Covenant Church in Loveland, Colorado—estimates that if a group has been meeting for three or more years, the chances are better than 50-50 that someone in the group will deal with divorce. In addition, almost every group has members who are affected by the divorce of a family member or a friend.

### **Be Alert**

A small group leader must be alert to warning signs that a marriage is in trouble. The leader must also know how to deal with divorce after the fact. The bottom line is that small-group leaders should always be on the lookout for signs of marital breakup and ways to minister to people affected by divorce. But on the lookout for exactly what?

**Verbal clues.** Watch for how a husband and wife talk to each other, both in the group and in non-group social settings. Be alert for someone criticizing his or her spouse in front of another group member. Behavior at social events can be a telltale sign of impending trouble, because some people are less inhibited at social events than at group meetings.

**Physical clues.** Leaders should watch for how couples touch each other, their posture, and how closely they sit next to each other. "Is there warmth?" asks Rex Minor,

pastor of adult discipleship at Calvary Community Church in Westlake Village, California. “If you’re in a group with people for six weeks, you can just tell if there’s marital warmth or marital distance.”

**Behavioral clues.** Watch for changes in behavior. If a person is usually talkative and begins to brood or is unusually quiet, it may be time to ask whether there’s a problem. Watch for flashes of anger from a normally calm and quiet person. The surest sign of trouble is when one or both of the couple stops attending the meetings.

**Hidden clues.** Another sign of trouble is more hidden: when an individual does not open up or become vulnerable enough to share their struggles. Your course is to continue to be observant and gently challenge people when their words don’t match up with their attitudes, postures, and behaviors. “We’re not called to be mind readers, but we are called to love each other and ask questions,” says Minor.

## **Be Proactive**

Because timing is so important when dealing with sensitive issues, leaders should keep the following in mind:

**Too soon is better than too late.** When a small-group leader suspects someone is struggling with a potential divorce, when is the best time to get involved? As soon as possible, say both Anderson and Minor. Some leaders may feel reluctant to intervene, especially early in the life of the group, if the leader is inexperienced, or if there is a fear of jumping to conclusions. In practice, however, most leaders move too slowly.

**Say it in private.** The first step is to have a private conversation with the person or the couple. Share the things you have noticed and ask, “Are you okay? If not, there are ways we can help.” You will not always get the person to open up about their problems on the first try, but you will at least serve notice that you’re watching and that you care.

“More often than not, people want to get help, but they don’t know how to ask for it. They may be ashamed to,” said Minor.

“They may say that everything’s fine. Then you can say ‘I’m confused by these two or three signals I’m getting,’” Anderson explained.

If possible in these private conversations, men should talk to men and women to women. This approach is especially appropriate when talking to a couple in crisis. If this approach isn’t possible, a leader could still contact a member of the opposite sex, but only with the foreknowledge of the other partner.

**Ask for help.** Small-group leaders need not feel like the Lone Ranger when addressing divorce. Leaders should get pastors, staff members, and other appropriate church leaders involved, but not immediately. Some pastors may want to step in too quickly and do the work of the group leader. The better alternative is for the pastor to become aware of the problem and then offer insight to the leader on how to proceed.

Then the pastor steps back and lets the leader tackle the problem. If the small-group leader keeps coming back for help, the pastor may want to take a more active role. Even in this instance, Minor is less likely to step in and more apt to use the experience as a teaching tool for his group leaders.

**Confronting sin.** If the divorce has taken place or is in process, the group leader needs to evaluate and confront the situation from a posture of grace. Each party shares some degree of responsibility for the end of the marriage. But when should a leader confront a person whose sinful behavior is largely responsible for the divorce?

The leader should alert the person to the harmful effects of their behavior, both to the individual and to the group. Set a boundary: if the person persists in the behavior, the fellowship of the group will be withdrawn. The leader should continue to pursue the erring person as a lost sheep by maintaining contact and expressing concern.

## **Be Unified**

Perhaps the most powerful assets available to a leader in ministering to someone suffering through divorce are the other members of the group.

**Talk as a group.** If the person or couple needing help isn't at the meeting, this provides a great opportunity for group members to talk about how they can provide ministry to the hurting person. "The leader should avoid the common mistakes of overkill and undercare," Anderson explains. Leaders should consider who in the group has the best relationship with the person and let them take on the primary ministry roles, with the other group members playing supporting roles.

**Serve as role models.** Small groups can be a great place to be for people having marital difficulties or who are already divorced. Group members who have successfully saved threatened marriages, or who have navigated the rocky waters of divorce with success, can provide wise counsel to people in crisis. This kind of advice and encouragement is crucial.

**Have a plan for when the wounded person wants to share.** Sometimes a person wounded by divorce will want to share his or her feelings and needs with the group. How much time should the leader give this person? The best leaders do not plow ahead with the planned activities if someone is crying out for help. Be prepared to give over the proceedings of at least one entire meeting to the needs of the suffering person. Let them vent and get their feelings on the table.

From that point on, leaders can be flexible. Some leaders may want to avoid having subsequent meetings dominated by the person's needs while at the same time making sure that the person receives care outside the meeting. Other leaders may want to devote as much group time as necessary to help steer the group member past the worst part of the crisis.

“You really can’t put a time limit on something like this,” said Minor. “I’ve seen some groups take three months. That feels too long, but at the same time, to limit it to one night doesn’t seem reasonable.”

**Encourage ministry between meetings.** One of the most effective times for other group members to minister is outside the official group meeting times. Encourage your group members to pray for the person, make encouraging telephone calls, and invite them into their homes for meals. If there is a workshop or support group meeting coming up, encourage the person to attend and offer to go with them.

— *Lee A. Dean is a freelance writer and editor based in Plainwell, Michigan.*

## **An Uneasy Victory**

*A plea from a Christian husband and father who daily resists his homosexual desires.*

by Anonymous

I am a business executive, congregation president, youth-group leader, athletic coach, happily married man for more than 25 years, and proud father of a couple of teenagers. Oh—I'm also gay. My admission requires some explanation and perhaps some supporting evidence. You see, except for some experimentation during adolescence, I have not acted on my desires. From the outside I've looked and acted like a normal heterosexual male.

I was raised Conservative Baptist (emphasis on *conservative*). From as early as I can remember, I knew right from wrong, white from black, good from evil, righteousness from sin. There was no moral gray, no ambiguity. I felt irreparably condemned by what I knew.

When my wife and I were ready to choose our own theological home, we became part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The message of grace alone is what attracted me to Lutheranism. Unfortunately, we Lutherans are not all that good at living in and sharing that grace, and sometimes I still feel condemned by what should be good news.

On the inside—in my psyche, feelings, and attractions—I'm as certain of my gayness as I am of my sex. I first became aware of my sexual orientation when I was 9 or 10 years old, at church summer camp. At that time, I had no idea what sex was. I was nonetheless aware of the overwhelming emotional attraction I had to another boy my age. It was an experience that would repeat itself over and over. As I entered adolescence, it would take on a more sexual nature.

By the time I was in high school, I had experienced a number of serious crushes on other young men. Most of these were simply teenage friendships, but in a couple of instances, they included some physical expression. The physiological and emotional drive to be intimate with another person of my own sex became almost overwhelming. So was the guilt associated with succumbing to this drive.

While my high school buddies were bragging about their heterosexual exploits, I was trying desperately not to have the homosexual encounters I so desired. For all of us, adolescence includes some alienation from others and from self, but for me the sense of aloneness and self-loathing was more than I could bear. I developed a variety of coping mechanisms, including alcohol, drug abuse, heavy smoking, and forced heterosexual encounters, but they proved ineffective in distracting me from my homosexual urges. By the time I was a high school senior, I was frequently depressed and seriously thinking about suicide.

## Strangely Normal

In the summer between my first and second year of college, I became a Christian. Given my church background, I had known about Christ for many years. Nonetheless, I had never been able to make a meaningful connection between the conservative theology of my family and my inner turmoil. At age 19, when I found myself in the throes of suicidal depression, Christ was my last resort.

I thank God that much about my life changed as a result of that choice. I recovered from my depression, got my drinking under control, quit smoking, and straightened out my sexual life enough to begin a healthy relationship with a wonderful woman. In time this led to marrying a person who truly knows me and has supported me more than I could ever deserve. But as great as all this was, my sexual orientation did not change; I still was not then, nor am I now, a normal heterosexual male.

I wish I could be normal. I've tried just about *everything* to become that—counseling, therapy, prayer, healing—you name it. But for all my trying, all I've managed to do is control the behavioral manifestations of my sexual orientation. In his grace, God has given me the power to live a fulfilling heterosexual life, together with the grace to live with knowing I'm still homosexual. It hasn't been an easy victory.

There are times when maintaining this dichotomous life is nearly overwhelming. Over the years I've continued to struggle with emotional attractions and attachments to other men. At times that has torn away at my insides and eroded my confidence in myself and in God. I continue to struggle with thoughts that my wife and sons would be better off if they didn't have to deal with such a moody husband and father, especially his recurring bouts of almost suicidal depression.

Yes, mine is a victory in the sense that I have managed to maintain life, love, and fidelity in my marriage, but this victory has required a daily battle that comes at considerable psychological cost to me and to my family.

I have no regrets about my commitment to maintain faithful within a heterosexual marriage. Nothing has taught me more and been a greater source of joy than the relationships I have with my wife and sons. But I am sometimes angry that I have had to do this on my own, without the support of friends or of a caring Christian community.

## Shroud of Silence

Christian literature on homosexuality is full of polarizing rhetoric. One side says that we should welcome our gay brothers and sisters into Christian fellowship; that we should recognize this is how God made them and therefore it must be how God intends for them to live. The other side recites the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, uses words like *abomination*, and gives us anecdotal evidence of people being changed. From my perspective, I cannot help but conclude that both positions are naïve.

My position on homosexuality—while grounded in experience—seems to offend many and please almost no one. My fervent belief that God intends us to live in heterosexual and monogamous fidelity offends liberals who think I should accept and live out my

supposedly God-given sexual nature. At the same time, my experience that grace abounds but doesn't make it easy for me to live the straight life offends conservatives who preach and demand a clearer victory over my sinful nature. Rhetoric seldom provides us with an accurate representation of reality. My story is real. I believe it is shared by many more than just me but disclosed by few.

Why haven't I told my story to my church friends? Why is my identity anonymous? Because, despite all the claims by my heterosexual friends to "love the sinner but hate the sin," I do not trust them. I do not believe that they could know this about me and still want me to be their congregational president, their youth-group leader, their sons' coach. Perhaps I'm hypersensitive in not trusting, but I've overheard too many jokes and seen too many expressions of hate directed at homosexuals to believe that these same people could be my friends if they *knew*.

To be honest, I myself sometimes have a hard time loving the sinner while hating the sin. Sometimes this takes the form of self-hate, but more often I struggle with hating promiscuous heterosexual men because they seem so self-justifying and because some people—even some Christians—seem so accommodating of that sin while so condemning of mine. Just last week I was talking with a Christian friend about concerns I had for members of our youth group. His response was something like, "Well, you know, with all those hormones ... " I don't get it. Do young male heterosexuals benefit from some special dispensation? Why is their giving in to urges so understandable while my giving in to mine would be an abomination?

The debate on homosexuality is tearing at the fiber of almost every mainline Christian denomination while leaving many of us who actually *are* homosexual feeling misunderstood, marginalized, and ignored by the dialogue.

I am not trying to argue in favor of homosexuality but to simply acknowledge the reality of my condition. I acknowledge my homosexuality as a manifestation of my brokenness. But I do not believe I am any more broken than the person who sits in the pew next to me. The greedy, the liars, the drunkards, and the single yet sexually active heterosexuals are all like me in this brokenness.

Sin is sin and grace is grace. We are all sinners and we all—whether heterosexual or homosexual—are offered the same grace. Ours is no easy victory. It would be a whole lot easier if our churches would try to understand and accept those like me who claim victory nonetheless.

— *The author lives in the western United States.*

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# Ministering to the Depressed

*Seventeen million people each year suffer from depression. Here's how you can minister to them.*

by Enos D. Martin

Throughout all the ages depression has plagued mankind. Nebuchadnezzar's tortured nights of sleeplessness, Lincoln's suicidal ruminations, Churchill's "black dog" moods—the dark thread of depression is woven throughout history. It has beset rich and poor, strong and weak, believers and nonbelievers.

Depression undermines the lives of those closest to us: our neighbors, our friends, our families. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that 7 to 15 million Americans suffer from serious depressive symptoms. Only 10 percent seek help from mental health professionals; the rest either don't know depression can be treated, or fear that it implies weakness or mental deficiency.

Church leaders are an extremely important resource for their depressed parishioners; people who need help with problems turn more often to the clergy than to any other professional.

An understanding of depression is formulated by the way a church perceives and responds to a depressed person.

## Roots of Depression

Some churches espouse a spiritual explanation. To many, despair and depression are linked to unbelief and sin. Treatment for this sin is spiritual: One repents and renews his or her faith in God. But there are sincere Christians who, though they confess all known sins, remain depressed. Exhortation to return to God only adds to their depression.

Other pastors believe depression is primarily psychological. They feel it most often stems from internalized anger. They see self-expression as the remedy, and they tell people that to feel better they must "get the anger out." Although anger is a prominent part of depression and expressing it can be helpful, openly expressing anger can violate people's sense of self-control, sharpen their guilt, and deepen their depression.

A third group sees depression as primarily a medical condition—the product of a chemical imbalance that requires medication. It's true many people have loosened the stranglehold of deep depression with antidepressants, but medication can cause a drugged feeling and can drain the energy needed to deal productively with depression.

The church leader who blends all three of the above approaches into an overall perspective will be better prepared to respond to depressed people.

## **Common Traits of Depression**

Different types of loss can trigger depression. Depression often begins with a real loss, such as a relationship severed through death or separation, a loss of health, or an end to an occupation or financial security. Paradoxically, a loss can also occur with a positive experience such as a job promotion or a religious conversion. When a person is promoted, the security of the old, familiar job can give way to a fear of being unable to fulfill new expectations. Similarly, although becoming a Christian leads many people to reorganize their lives and mature emotionally, others, when the benefits of conversion fail to continue as expected, fall into depression and feel even God has let them down. These people particularly need pastoral attention to prevent suicidal despair.

People often succumb to depression when they lose hope of fulfilling a goal. If a person finds self-worth in the pursuit of a goal, the loss of that possibility can cripple the person's self-image. For example, a man who thinks of himself as someday becoming an Olympic figure skater may sink into depression if he breaks a leg and thus loses his dream of becoming a champion.

A symbolic loss can be just as devastating. A middle-aged man became seriously depressed after he demolished his prized sports car, which symbolized the youth, vigor, and power that he felt slipping from his life.

Real losses frequently go hand-in-hand with symbolic or fantasized losses. A woman who continued to grieve two years after her husband's death was actually mourning the end of the fantasy that someday she would be able to have a good marriage and rectify the poor relationship she had with her husband.

Depression often affects personality: relationships with others and with God, thoughts, and especially mood. Depressed people complain of feeling sad, down-in-the-dumps, blue, low, irritable, helpless, and hopeless.

Feelings show in people's faces; they look down in the mouth even on a happy occasion. A rare smile in a moment of distraction quickly fades to sadness. Thinking changes; the focus is on loss and themes such as "I'm not worth anything" or "Things will never improve." Pleasures lose their appeal, and the depression seems never-ending. People sometimes become so engrossed with depressive thoughts, they can no longer concentrate on reality; things don't register with them, and they feel they're losing their memories.

Social relationships suffer. In trying to replace what they have lost, depressed people often cling to their families and friends. Then they grow angry and irritable when they awaken to the futility of this. If they feel guilty about their negative emotions, they eventually can withdraw from others completely.

Depressed people often feel estranged from God. They lash out in anger, wondering why God, who is able to do all things, has failed to answer their prayers. They wonder why God is distant and unloving, why he hasn't lifted them out of despair.

And depressed people experience physical changes. They nearly always battle insomnia. They have problems falling asleep or staying asleep or waking up too early. Sometimes they sleep too much as an escape from their depression. Other physical symptoms might surface as well: blunted appetites and weight loss are typical; others overeat to deal with depression; sexual interest may vanish; headaches and backaches occur.

## **Types of Depression**

Depression can be classified into three basic types. The type that develops depends largely on certain predisposing factors in the person who experiences a loss.

*Normal grief.* The “normal grief reaction” is a healthy response to significant loss. Predisposing factors play a minimal role. There might be physical symptoms such as insomnia and loss of appetite, but they’re usually transient and not debilitating.

Self-esteem remains intact. If bereaved people criticize themselves, it’s for not having done more to prevent the loss. Although the social circle may narrow, close friends are a source of strength and support. People may question God, but they maintain their relationship with God and sometimes even strengthen it.

Grieving helps to reorganize bereaved people’s lives. The pain of loss forces them to change attitudes and habits. The painful mood gradually paves the way for a new mode of living. Reorganization usually begins in less than three months, and the depression shows signs of lifting by that time.

Here’s an illustration of the dynamics of a normal grief reaction.

Bob had worked as a machinist at a steel plant for 15 years and assumed he would be there until retirement. His company became too highly specialized and permanently laid off many employees, including Bob, who had seniority and good work records. For weeks following the layoff, Bob’s friends noticed he didn’t seem himself. He looked sad and was deeply concerned about how he would support his family. His wife often found him sitting in the darkened living room, sobbing into his hands. He had trouble falling asleep and lost his appetite.

Bob’s pastor noticed his depressed appearance and preoccupied manner. He approached him after a Sunday morning service and said, “Bob, you look sad. Could we talk about it?” After a half-hour conversation in the pastor’s study, Bob seemed a bit brighter in mood. The pastor commented, “Bob, you really seemed to be depressed over losing your job. I’d be glad to meet with you a few more times to talk about how you might want to reorganize your life.” Bob readily agreed.

*Neurotic depression.* This type of depression develops in people who are psychologically predisposed to depression, usually because of a loss experienced during childhood, such as the death of a parent. Sensitized by this pain early in life, as an adult the individual has the tendency to react to loss like a frightened and abandoned child.

People susceptible to neurotic depression usually think poorly of themselves, but at the same time burden themselves with unreasonably high ideals. Parents often communicate these traits to their children, who build them into their self-concept. Throughout life, no matter how well they perform, they always feel they should have done better.

Early experiences like these frequently lead people to depend on others for fulfillment. A middle-aged woman, who lost her mother during childhood, felt that if she always agreed with her husband and pleased him, he would never leave her. Despite her efforts he did leave her, and she fell into a serious depression. She knew no role but her subservient one.

Neurotic depression differs from a normal grief reaction in several respects. Although usually precipitated by a loss, the fantasized or symbolic aspects of the loss predominate. The depression doesn't seem equal to its causes. A grief reaction usually resolves within three months; a neurotic depression can recur episodically over months and years. Further, the neurotic depression does not serve to effectively reorganize life. It actually prevents the person from recognizing and dealing with grief from the early childhood loss. The neurotically depressed person who tries to reorganize life often fails, which deepens the sense of loss.

*Endogenous depression.* Endogenous depression is related to a chemical imbalance in the body. Frequently, a family history of depression strongly suggests an underlying hereditary component. Although a loss might trigger endogenous depression, the cause of depression might not be immediately obvious, or the depression itself might seem grossly out of proportion to the degree of suffering.

Physical symptoms are usually severe and persistent. A poor appetite is typical: Weight loss can be up to 20 pounds over several weeks. There is a loss of interest in sex. Insomnia may be severe; the person may lie awake restlessly for hours or wake up fitfully during the night. Waking up too early typifies this kind of depression. Physically, endogenously depressed people often feel their worst in the morning but improve somewhat as the day progresses.

Thoughts of suicide are more common with endogenous depression than with any other type. Intense depression and unrelenting suffering prompt thoughts of suicide that become more and more persistent. Suicide seems to be the only solution.

This deep, unremitting depression can last up to six months if not treated. It sometimes alternates with periods of elation; the person becomes hyperactive and talkative. During these high periods, which can last for weeks, the depressed person uses extremely poor judgment, sometimes going on a shopping spree or behaving in ways that embarrass the family.

Medication can alleviate the chemical imbalance that causes endogenous depression. When the depression recedes, counseling can help the individual to reorganize living patterns and reduce vulnerability to future depressive episodes.

Matt, a middle-age college professor, became deeply depressed over a one-month period. He couldn't sleep or eat, and he lost ten pounds. He lost interest in his favorite pastime of golf, withdrew from his family and friends, and either sat motionless or paced the floor, wringing his hands in agitation over the doom that was going to befall him. He feared he was losing his mind and talked repeatedly about suicide.

His family searched for an explanation for the depression. Although they couldn't identify any precipitating incident, they knew his mother had had several nervous breakdowns with depression in mid-adult life. In a similar episode 15 years earlier, Matt had responded to a series of electro-convulsive therapy treatments.

Matt's pastor recognized the signs of serious depression and helped the family get in touch with a local psychiatrist. The psychiatrist immediately hospitalized Matt because of his intense agitation and suicidal intent.

## **Ministering to the Depressed**

As a church leader, you can reach out to depressed people at a Sunday morning worship service, in a pastoral visit, or during conversation at a meeting. Be sensitive to the needs of parishioners who have suffered a loss.

Watch for signs of depression. Keep alert for nonverbal and verbal clues. Nonverbal clues take many forms: a downcast face, avoidance of eye contact, sighing or tearfulness, moving from an accustomed pew to a place near the door to leave quickly and avoid people. All of these may signal depression.

Although indirect verbal clues are more common, a person may come right out and say that he's depressed. Someone who asks how to help a friend with depression might be seeking help for himself. Or physical complaints may mask a plea for help. For example, a deeply troubled woman frequently asked her pastor to anoint her with oil for myriad physical problems and insomnia. However, when he counseled her about fears and anger and her sense of loss, her physical complaints diminished, along with her desire to be anointed frequently. If negative themes such as loss, helplessness, or hopelessness pervade a person's conversation, this should prompt the pastor to inquire gently whether the parishioner has been feeling depressed.

Of course, many pastors learn a parishioner is depressed through a relative or a friend. A casual inquiry such as "How's Bob? I haven't seen him for several weeks?" might be answered with, "Bob's not doing well; he's depressed. Could you visit him?"

Keep open communication with a depressed person. Effective communication is dependent on several factors.

- **Arrange an appropriate setting.** If you notice a depressed parishioner during a church service or group setting, decide whether there's enough privacy to approach the person afterward or if you should arrange for another time and place to talk. The church office can provide a setting for

confidentiality and freedom from distractions, and a visit in the home can help make the session non-threatening.

- **Communicate your observations.** Open a conversation by saying you've noticed some signs of depression. You need to be confident about discussing sensitive, personal subjects. If you're apologetic or indirect, the depressed person will have trouble dealing with his feelings openly and directly. You might say, "I've noticed over the past several weeks that you appear to be troubled; can we talk about it?" or "I know it must be difficult to go through what you've been experiencing; could we talk about it?" Statements such as these convey that a person hears, feels, and understands.
- **Allow the ventilation of feelings.** Now that you've stated your observations with understanding and confidence, invite the depressed person to share his own feelings. The parishioner should feel confident of your ability to handle his pain and confusion without becoming judgmental or overwhelmed.
- **Avoid premature reassurance.** Although advice and reassurance can do wonders for a depressed person, if they are offered too early they can stifle the expression of feelings. A person who is told to "snap out of it" or that "everything will be all right," or even "let's pray about it" might infer you don't want to listen anymore. Thus, the person will not only oblige by not saying any more, but probably also withdraw even further into depression.
- **Determine the type of depression** to clarify how you best can minister to a depressed person, keeping in mind the three types of depression: grief reaction, neurotic depression, and endogenous depression. You might have to ask about sleep habits, fatigue, appetite, weight loss, sex drive, previous periods of depression, and depression in family members. Carefully explore the type and extent of any loss suffered.
- **Most important, determine whether the person is suicidal.** Rather than being abrupt, ask a series of questions such as "How depressed do you get? Do you think you would yield to the impulse to take your own life? What means have you thought of using to end your life? How would ending your life affect your loved ones?" Some counselors fear that questions like these will introduce thoughts of suicide, but the opposite is true. Admitting suicidal thoughts can bring relief and even prevent an impulsive suicidal act.

## **Response to the Depressed**

After you've gathered enough information and tentatively diagnosed the kind of depression, tailor your ministry accordingly. You might refer the person to a professional or decide to offer your own pastoral counseling; in all cases, provide effective pastoral support.

Be alert to the need for referral. A person who is endogenously depressed might need antidepressant medication and therefore require evaluation by a psychiatrist or knowledgeable family physician. If you've been counseling a parishioner who becomes worse or does not improve over several weeks, referral is necessary. Of course, prompt referral is essential when a person has suicidal thoughts.

You should tell the parishioner your impressions and recommendations, directly stating that you want to refer the depressed person to someone who can be of more help. Assure the person of your continued involvement through visits and phone contact, but emphasize that you will not participate in the treatment process. Ask the parishioner for reactions. A simple "How do you feel about my suggestions?" is adequate. Many people interpret the need for psychiatric help as weakness of character or a sign of mental disturbance. A parishioner who feels this way may resist referral. You can then point out that admitting a problem and seeking help for it is actually a sign of strength.

When the referral is accepted, contact the referral person to say you are having someone call. A good referral includes keeping accurate records of any interventions and recommendations along with the parishioner's responses to them. Then encourage the parishioner to make an appointment, keeping in touch to make sure he does. If the parishioner is suicidal, arrange for someone to stay with him until he is under the referral person's care.

## **For Pastors**

Keep specific guidelines in mind when you counsel. A depressed person needs encouragement and definite limits in many areas.

**1. Define the ground rules.** The time, place, and length of the counseling sessions depend on your time limitations and the needs of the parishioner. An arrangement might include weekly, one-hour sessions for five weeks. If the parishioner has unrealistic expectations, such as requesting lengthy sessions several times a week and the liberty to make unlimited phone calls, you need to gently but firmly limit these demands.

**2. Inspire hope.** The adverse and destructive elements in a depressed person's life overwhelm him. Because he has no hope, you must convince him of his own hope. Your willingness to spend time boosts the depressed person's self-esteem, and your certainty that the depression will soon pass casts doubt on his depressive outlook. By listening patiently, you communicate that you see time as an ally of progress, not as an enemy that must be defeated by pushing for quick recovery.

Reminding the depressed person that he shares the struggles of many biblical figures who overcame their depressions—Elijah, David, Jonah, John the Baptist—helps him gradually develop the conviction that "If they can do it, so can I."

Giving emotional and spiritual support helps the depressed person define and take realistic steps toward practical, immediate goals. A depressed person loses hope that any actions can be fruitful; but since hope grows with evidence of progress, emphasize positive changes in his life. For example, you could close a session with "You were able to

talk about some very difficult things today. Although you're still pretty discouraged, you don't appear quite as depressed as you did at the beginning of the session." Confidence grows as the depression lifts, and he once again will begin to hope that his next steps will lead him closer to his goals.

**3. Help manage anger.** Depressed people often become angry toward their families, their friends, or even God. The parishioner sometimes blames the pastor for failing to magically replace a loss and resolve the depression. You should expect such anger and help the parishioner feel secure about expressing it. But anger should not be expressed prematurely. A person who doesn't have enough self-control to express anger appropriately might feel guilty and anxious and sink even deeper into depression.

**4. Alleviate guilt.** Guilt results from a sense of failure to live up to "what ought to be." If the depression began after a violation of the person's conscience, ask about discrepancies between the person's values and behavior. If a moral transgression actually caused the depression, accept the person's confession and help him find forgiveness and reconciliation with people he might have harmed. This usually relieves the depression and raises self-esteem.

Neurotic guilt, however, is immune to the forgiving process and seldom motivates constructive change. It reflects an inability to accept or forgive oneself. Rising in part from excessive blame and punishment during childhood, along with limited praise and love, neurotic guilt is the product of a distorted conscience that castigates the depressed person beyond reason.

The loving, accepting relationship developed with a pastoral counselor enables the person who is burdened with guilt to question his punitive self-assessment. As he learns to forgive and accept himself, his guilt dissolves and the depression begins to lift. The pastor's role is to help him develop a healthier, more functional conscience.

**5. Discourage social withdrawal.** Depressed people avoid social contact, either because they are convinced no one could replace their loss, or because they feel no one would want to bother with them in their depressed state. If unchecked, their withdrawal eventually seals them off from any source of social support, thus worsening the depression. Encourage depressed people to spend time with a few supportive friends, but be careful not to push them into potentially overwhelming social situations. Reinforce even the smallest effort at social interaction. The success of this approach is illustrated by a depressed businessman who withdrew from his work, community, and church-related social contacts, except for continued interest in teaching a Sunday school class. The pastor encouraged him to continue teaching, though on a reduced, biweekly basis. Later, after the depression lifted, this man gratefully recalled his teaching as "an island of hope and self-esteem in a sea of despair."

**6. Protect from self-destructive behavior.** Although suicide is the ultimate self-destructive behavior, there are other, more subtle forms. A medical student who drops out of school to become an orderly, or a businessman who turns down a promotion,

might both have self-destructive motivation. Try to deter people from endangering themselves or their future.

A man who thought his brother was taking advantage of him in their business partnership told his pastor, “What’s the use of working so hard and having no say in what happens? I’m going to give my brother the business, and when my money is used up I’ll go on welfare.” Noting that the man’s depression was mixed with anger, the pastor responded, “You’re angry at your brother, but you’re angry at yourself too. I think if you leave your business you might be hurt and suffer more than anyone else. Perhaps you can wait and decide a little later on what is in your best interest.”

By suggesting what to do, the pastor avoided taking control of the person’s life, yet protected him from a self-destructive decision.

**7. Clarify patterns that lead to depression.** The way people respond to life and its stresses can set them up for repeated depressions. Depressed people are often blind to their behavior patterns and fail to see how they lead to depression. A forty-year-old mother of four habitually looked to her husband for direction. She responded to his every whim. She was, in effect, saying, “I’ll do whatever you ask, but then you must take care of me.” When her husband started a new business and had less time for her and the children, she became deeply depressed and turned to her pastor. Counseling revealed that she felt her husband had failed to keep his part of the unspoken bargain. Her dependence and submission, along with neglect of her own thoughts and feelings, set the stage for her depression. As she realized this, she assumed more responsibility for her own life and learned to express her feelings to her husband and share in their decision-making.

Provide the support needed to work through depression. As Victor Frankl points out in his book *The Unconscious God*, “Despair is suffering without meaning.” Even the most trying experience can be endured if the suffering has meaning. Help people view depression as an opportunity for spiritual growth rather than a sign of spiritual failure. Having descended into the dark depths of despair and survived, they can then face life with unprecedented vigor and the confidence that nothing, not even depression, can separate them from the love of Christ.

If a depressed person feels spiritually distant and alienated, use biblical passages to acknowledge the person’s feelings of abandonment while fostering trust in God’s continued presence. You can point out how Christ cried out in the midst of his suffering, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” and yet in the end reaffirmed his faith: “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” Prayer strengthens the depressed person’s spiritual contact when he feels estranged and angry at God for not lifting the depression. When you offer a prayer, mention those feelings of alienation from God. You might say, “Sometimes, God, you feel far away and don’t seem to care; we feel angry and sometimes want to give up. Yet we know you’re still there and that you care.” By acknowledging negative feelings in the prayer, you imply that both the depressed person and God can hear about them without recoiling in horror.

The family of a depressed person needs guidance in understanding their depressed relative, as well as help in coping with the situation. They might resent the depressed person for overreacting to a loss they might have to deal with too. If the person suffers from a depression of the endogenous type, the family will need to understand how the depressed person's mood, thoughts, behavior, and physical symptoms are part of illness. If the person suffers from a neurotic depression, family members may be inadvertently contributing to the condition.

For example, a husband may discourage his depressed wife's attempts to express her feelings about their relationship. You can tactfully point out this kind of situation, sensitively exploring the family's thoughts and feelings about it. You should, however, be careful to avoid a blaming or accusing tone.

Friends often try to help at first, but then draw back in confusion when the depressed friend rejects their well-meant efforts. Explain the depressive symptoms to them, emphasizing the seriousness of social withdrawal. Encourage them to continue to meet singly or as a group with their depressed friend, and help them learn how to be supportive. Such involvement can strengthen personal relationships and can be an important factor in the resolution of depression.

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## Further Resources

*Books and resources to help small groups assist in tragic situations*

**SmallGroups.com.** Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

- “Dealing with Divorce in Your Small Group” Survival Guide
- “Becoming a Great Listener” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Recovery Ministries” Training Theme

**BuildingChurchLeaders.com.** A great place to find practical tools on a wide range of church-ministry topics.

- “Death of a Child” Urgent Care Training Pack
- “Death of a Spouse” Urgent Care Training Pack
- “Marriage in Crisis” Urgent Care Training Pack

**LeadershipJournal.net.** This website offers practical advice for pastors and church leaders.

**Financial Peace: Revisited** by *Dave Ramsey*. Updated version of the bestseller *Financial Peace* includes new chapters on marriage, singles, kids, and families (Viking Adult, 2003; ISBN 978-0670032082).

**Getting to the Other Side of Grief: Overcoming the Loss of a Spouse** by *Susan J. Zonnebelt-Smeege and Robert C. DeVries*. The authors share their stories as living proof that if worked through properly, grief will lead the way to a fresh new life (Baker, 2008; ISBN 978-0801058219).

**In His Hands: Reclaiming Your Life after Tragedy** by *Leslie Ostrander*. A practical book that can be given away to comfort those who need it (Ambassador Press, 2008; ISBN 978-1932307986).

**Is God Really in Control?** by *Jerry Bridges*. There's no more crucial topic in today's world than understanding what God is up to in the midst of personal and global tragedy (NavPress, 2006; ISBN 978-1576839317)