Okay. We are going to talk about it. Depression. And I apologize if it sounds, well, depressing. To be honest, I have had a very hard time trying to approach this subject. It's so weighty. It's so consuming. Maybe I'm scared I will write something that leads someone in the wrong direction. Or maybe I am not finished wrestling out my own issues with this subject. Maybe it's because I tend to be an optimistic person and I want to run from darkness and talk of weighty matters. Give me light-hearted banter, jokes and joy any day.

But really, isn't that the very reason that depression is what it is? No one likes it. Nobody wants to have to fight with every fiber of their being just to be able to get up out of bed. Nobody wants to feel like they are drowning.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not talking about “feeling a little blue” or about “being in a funk.” I'm talking about soul-deep depression. The type that leaves you breathless and desperate for just one ray of light.

Chonda Pierce describes depression as being like walking around with a heavy weight on your head and shoulders and wearing dark sunglasses nonstop. For me, it was feeling so overwhelmed and crushed in spirit that I just wanted to escape. Didn’t care when or how.

**I Was the Poster Child**

“That is depression, that force of trying to hold your head up and trying to see the world on a sunny day but to you it just seems dark and cloudy. That is what depression feels like on a good day. On a bad day, you don’t even want to get out of bed.”—Unknown

Back in 2002, I had the worst year of my life. I had heard about depression all of my life, but you know, sometimes things just don’t click until it hits you personally. Looking back I can see the signs so easily: weight gain, lack of concentration, lack of focus...I was like a Chihuahua! It didn’t matter how deeply I set my mind to do something, my ability to focus...
flattered around like a moth on crack.

Not that I was hyper, by any means. I remember having to force myself out of bed. It wasn’t that I was melancholy or just wanted some extra “down time.” It literally took every amount of grit and determination I had just to rise in the morning. It’s odd because at first, it just felt like “I am really tired tonight.” Follow that up with day after day of feeling “really tired.” Before too long, seven or eight hours of sleep wouldn’t do. Then it’s nine hours, ten hours… and the more I slept, the more exhausted I became.

All I could think of was “When can I crawl back into bed?” I went to my university classes, ate my meals, worked in the music department, went to church…but every night I would collapse into bed, mentally begging those cool sheets to relieve me of my exhaustion.

And when you are that exhausted, nothing sounds like fun. I couldn’t laugh and joke—concentrating on having fun took too much effort. Things that I had loved to do before—reading, writing, singing, playing piano or painting—held absolutely no interest for me. Everything was bland. There was no color and no sparks.

Most of all I just wanted to escape…leave all my responsibilities behind and run. And I didn’t know how.

I have talked to many people over the past few years who have battled depression, and here are other symptoms that they experienced:

• insomnia, some of them could only sleep about one hour a night
• significant weight loss or gain
• non-stop crying for no apparent reason
• detachment from loved ones
• a feeling of numbness
• nervousness
• pondering suicide
• panic attacks
• outbursts of anger (particularly in men)
• overwhelming feelings of sadness
• feeling abandoned by God

Now, I’m going to stop right here for a minute and tell you that when I was diagnosed with depression, I said “No way. I’m a Christian and Christians aren’t supposed to get depressed.” Well, let’s look at that for a moment, shall we?

**Living Victorious…Right?**

When my doctor told me I was depressed, I couldn’t believe it—I almost did a spit-take. Me? Miss has-it-together-preacher’s-kid-Pollyanna-wanna-be-who-loves-Jesus? Not possible.

But, in fact, I was depressed. I couldn’t escape that fact and it seemed at war with everything I had known and had been taught in churches for years. If you love well-intentioned Christians say this and it makes me want to pull my hair out!

Let’s look at King David. He penned psalms after psalms, many of them crying out in his despair. He was dealing with rough stuff.

“Give me relief from my distress….”—Psalm 4:2

“Heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in deep anguish. How long, O LORD, how long… I am worn out from groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears.”—Psalm 6:2-3, 6

“The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me.”—Psalm 18:4,5

Yet, look at some of the conclusions David came to:

“I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.”—Psalm 3:5

“The Lord has heard my cry for mercy….”—Psalm 6:9

“But I trust in your unfailing love….”—Psalm 13:5

“He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me.”—Psalm 18:16-17

You see, the focus isn’t on whether David should or should not have been depressed. We feel what we feel. But what is important is Who he cried to for help. God called David a man after his own heart, not because David always had it together and did everything right, but because David continually turned to the Lord—in moments of joy and in times of despair.

In Larry Crabb’s book *Inside Out*, he notes that Jesus said “Come,
you who are thirsty and drink of the water of Life freely.” Notice that Jesus doesn’t condemn us for being thirsty. He’s God and he knows we are a messed-up, broken, pitiful people. All he wants us to do is to reach to him to quench our spiritual thirst.

Please, Somebody Tell Me Why!

“I know God will not give me anything I can’t handle. I just wish that He didn’t trust me so much.”
—Mother Teresa

So what causes depression? I wish there were a simple answer to that. A simple answer would mean a simple solution. The reasons are varied from person to person and often take many, many years to figure out.

Here are just a few possible causes:
- traumatic life changes, like death, divorce, etc.
- genetics
- hormonal changes
- high levels of stress and/or conflict
- abuse—past physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- certain medications
- prolonged physical illness
- perfectionism/people-pleasing

This list is just scratching the surface. Depression is usually highly complex and multi-faceted. And yes, sometimes there might not be any explainable reason. Chemicals in the brain don’t function like they used to and depression forms. Be careful not to judge or analyze someone suffering from depression. There might not be a discernable cause.

Speaking for myself, my own depression was a result of being a perfectionist people-pleaser, eventually working myself into such an exhausted state that the serotonin in my brain was depleted. I became so fixated on keeping everyone happy, that I lost sight of my Savior. Jesus’ burdens are light. Human burdens are far heavier. I was physically unable to function anymore.

If a person has diabetes, don’t they take insulin? If someone’s heart is weak, don’t they swallow pills to keep themselves from having a heart attack? And if your eyes are bad, don’t you wear glasses? Depression is no different. There is something chemically wrong that needs to be fixed.

One night in 2002, something inside me snapped. I lay on the bathroom floor sobbing until three a.m. The main thing that I remember was feeling like I was drowning. I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t escape. And with every fiber of my being, that is what I wanted...to escape.

Finding Summertime Again

“In the midst of winter, I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer.”—Albert Camus

If you are reading this and are currently fighting the crashing waves of depression, I want you to know that there is hope. I promise. I’ve been there. God loves you far beyond what you can even imagine.
ine. I have come out on the other side and I can tell you my walk with God is so much stronger for having survived it. Depression is treatable.

Here’s some basic advice from friends and acquaintances who have battled this illness and won:

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1) Seek medical attention. Depression usually results from a chemical imbalance. It takes an extremely long time for these chemicals to replenish, if at all. It just depends on the person and the reason. Medication will help give you relief from the symptoms while you work on finding the cause.

2) Listen to upbeat, inspirational music. Music can be enormously soothing to a troubled soul.

3) Pray. Even if it is hard to form the words to pray, just cry out to God.

4) Share what is going on with someone you trust. But make sure the person is “safe.” A safe person is not one who will immediately condemn you. This is a person who will listen, be there for you, and speak the truth in love. Confiding in an unsafe person will only deepen your feelings of hopelessness.

5) If you can, read your Bible. I had a friend who battled depression and she was physically unable to read. Her eyes blurred and she couldn’t concentrate on a single sentence. That’s okay. Get the Bible on CD. Even if you are in your bed, let it play and soak it in.

6) Make small goals. Some people have functional depression. They can get up, go to work, take care of their kids but collapse into bed later. Some are completely unable to rise from bed. In this scenario, it’s especially important to take your recovery slow but steady. For starters, make a victory journal. Jot down any progress. Even if you are only able to rise out of bed for 30 minutes and move to a different room, that is a victory! Write it down. Work a puzzle. Do a load of laundry. Go to a movie. These may seem small but they are monumental in helping you reclaim the life God intended you to have.

The best advice I was given was to do an intense study of Jesus...In doing so, I realized that Jesus is not a people pleaser...Jesus is a God pleaser...I discovered that was the source of my depression: I was exhausting myself to find unconditional love in conditional people.

The best advice I was given was to do an intense study of Jesus—not just his teachings, but how he interacted with people. Did he take time away? Was he always nice?

In doing so, I realized that Jesus is not a people pleaser...Jesus is a God pleaser. This realization helped me jump over a big hurdle. A huge burden lifted off of me. I didn’t have to work so hard and exhaust myself. I found freedom...God’s love is unconditional! I discovered that was the source of my depression: I was exhausting myself to find unconditional love in conditional people.

HALT!

Halt is a great way to remember to take care of yourself. And that is something that is very, very important. HALT stands for: don’t let yourself get Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired. If you leave yourself vulnerable to these things, it’s a very quick spiral down again.

If you are a bit tired, don’t ignore it. Get some extra rest. Don’t run around all day skipping meals. This will wreak havoc with your body. Be aware if you are pushing people away—that will make you more vulnerable. It’s important to be proactive.

And, yes, it is possible that your depression will come back again. But you know what? If it does, it does. At least you will be better equipped, better prepared, wiser and stronger than you were before. I have had two smaller bouts of depression since 2002 and they were less intense than the first time because I knew the tools God gave me. I was familiar with them. I understood my body much better. I understood my relationship with God better.
Here's the thing about depression: you cannot operate based on how you feel. You have to cling to what you know. I think the most terrifying thing for me was feeling so far from God. I was numb. I couldn't sense Him with me. Just like King David, I felt like I had been abandoned. But God was there with me the whole time. I had to keep reminding myself of his promises.

This is why it is critical to nurture your relationship with God. Stay close to him. Looking back, I know that Jesus was the only reason I made it through.

**Being the Hands of Jesus**

“Whenver someone sorrows, I do not say, ‘forget it,’ or ‘it will pass,’ or ‘it could be worse’—all of which deny the integrity of the painful experience.” — Peter Koenstenbaum

So maybe you are reading this and thinking “Hey, this ain’t me! I haven’t ever been depressed.” That’s wonderful and I pray that you never are! But there is still something to learn here, because it is likely that someone you love may end up going through depression. You can be the hands and feet of Jesus to them when they need him most.

Helping someone with depression requires patience and tact. Don’t accuse. Don’t try to psychoanalyze them. Just love them. That is what they need.

Try not to be hurt if they push you away. That’s part of depression. It’s like telling a child “Don’t crave candy!” Be gentle, sensitive and patient. Depression usually doesn’t hit overnight, and it won’t be healed overnight. It takes time.

Don’t try to reassure them by saying things like “You shouldn’t feel that way...” or the like. This only tends to compound the depressed person’s guilt and feelings of isolation. Lots of TLC is required.

Be careful with the spiritual encouragement you might give. Although well-intentioned, it can be painful. Implying that by simply sharing a scripture with a depressed person should be all the help they need to recover will only cause more hurt.

You’ll never go wrong by just listening. Bringing flowers. Reading the Bible to them. Praying with them.

I distinctly remember every single person who listened and was patient with me when I was at my worst. Their love was like a lifeline when I felt like I was drowning.

Always remember that Jesus loves you. He loves you so much that he died for you. And he will walk with you over every mountain and through every valley.

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