

Suffering with Depression (part 1)

Carol: How can you tell if a person is going through depression or just having a bad day. How do you recognize the symptoms in yourself and get help? We'll talk about this next!

Tammy: Welcome to Women of Hope, I'm Tammy and it's so good to have you with us today. I love that music - and it always says to me that it's time to sit down with my friend. But now let's listen for a moment to a different kind of music.

Tammy: I really hope today is a good day for you. But I'm sure you know what it feels like to 'have the blues'... to be sad, anxious, and feeling low in mood.

Carol: I know I sometimes feel down if I have lost something that I value, or if I'm disappointed. You may be grieving because you've lost someone special. Maybe you feel anxious because there is conflict in your family or work place. You would not be human if you didn't sometimes feel sad.

We all feel sad or anxious at times, but that's different to having depression as an illness. Imagine the time when you have felt most down. Think about what happened? What did it feel like? ...Now imagine feeling like that nearly all the time, for week after week...and it seems that there's no hope of ever feeling different... That's what depression feels like. Today we're going to talk some more about Depression.

Carol: You're listening to Women of Hope. Tammy, do you know my friend Rose?

Tammy: Oh yes, I think I know who Rose is. Is she the tall, curly-haired woman, with a daughter at school - and a little boy about three years old?

Carol: Yes, that's her. She was a teacher before she had her family.

Tammy: I remember her as a nice person... always happy and interested in things. I used to talk to her when I took the children to school.

Carol: You're right... she was a happy person. But I'm a bit worried about her. She doesn't seem happy now, and she never seems to want to come out with her friends any more. She says it's too hard. When I see her at the market her face looks sad, and she doesn't look me in the eye the way she used to... She just mumbles hello. I asked her once if anything was the matter, and she just said she was a bit down but nothing was really wrong.

Tammy: Have you seen her since then?

Carol: Actually, I went to visit her last week, to take a gift for Tommy - that's her little boy. He is so cute, and he loved the toy car I took. Rose said thank you, but it seemed an effort for her to chat... and the house was not as clean as usual. She's usually very tidy and proud of her home. She looked tired... heavy around the eyes... so I asked her how she was sleeping. She said she

often wakes up in the night and can't get back to sleep. She's lost weight too. And I noticed that she gave me biscuits with our tea but she didn't eat anything.

Tammy: Did she say what was wrong?

Carol: Well, she said she had the flu a few weeks ago. That seems better now but she is still depressed, and now she seems to be worrying about what will happen if she stays like this. She's afraid her husband will get tired of her, though I know he loves her very much. And she was worried about the children, though they seemed just fine.

Tammy: You said you were worried - what are you worried about?

Carol: Well, one thing made me very anxious... Rose said she sometimes thinks about dying, and that it would be a relief for her and her family. I told her not to be silly, and she said, well, of course she wouldn't do anything. But still, I didn't feel sure that she would look after herself.

Tammy: Well, I'm not an expert, but it sounds like she could have depression...the illness we've been talking about. We need to find out a bit more.

Carol: We have asked our friend Fran, who is a counselor, to tell us more about Depression. Let's take this opportunity to ask her some questions about it...

Fran: Thank you for inviting me to your home today. I guess you will know someone who suffers with depression, and you may have had it yourself. Depression is actually very common... it is sometimes called the 'common cold' of mental illness.

Carol: How common is it, Fran?

Fran: Some studies show that about one in 4 or 5 people suffer with clinical depression at some stage in their lives, and up to one in ten people are depressed at any time. So that means we all know people with this problem. Yet in spite of that, we are often embarrassed about having this illness. People talk about it in whispers, as something to be ashamed of. It is important to talk about it openly and understand it better.

Tammy: What do you mean by clinical depression?

Fran: 'Clinical' means it can be diagnosed by particular signs and symptoms. Doctors have a list of things they look for. There are some that affect the body.

The most important body changes are

- *changed sleep patterns

- *changed eating patterns, and weight change... you can gain weight or lose it.

- *slow movements... feeling tired, with no energy. It is hard to get out of bed. However sometimes depressed people are quite restless and can't sit still.

Tammy: Lots of other things could cause those changes - like having young children, for example.

Fran: That is so true, and a doctor would look out for other causes. But more important are the changes to a person's thoughts and feelings. For example:

- * they almost always feel flat, sad, miserable, and despairing, for most of the day, nearly every day. They may cry easily.
- * they mostly lose interest in life... they don't enjoy things that usually they would, and nothing makes them laugh. They don't feel like doing their normal activities. These things are almost always true for depressed people.

There are other thoughts that people who are depressed often have:

- * they don't feel good about themselves... seeing only their weakness and not their strengths and the good things they can do.
- * they often feel guilty for no good reason
- * they often feel anxious when there is no real danger
- * they find it hard to pay attention or remember things
- * they have thoughts about death, which may lead to thoughts and plans about suicide.

If you have several of these signs, and they are there every day for two weeks or more, that would make your doctor or health worker think you are depressed. That is unless, of course, you have another illness... or you have had a serious loss - like losing a family member.

Tammy: Are there any other physical signs?

Fran: Yes. Other signs might be digestion problems such as heartburn, feeling full, or constipation. Depressed people usually lose interest in sex, and often have headaches and other vague aches and pains.

But of course these may be caused by something other than depression. The doctor or health care worker will make sure there are no other reasons for these symptoms.

Depressed people act differently to their normal ways...just like Rose did...remember when Carol went to visit her, her house was not as clean as usual. Often they stop looking after themselves and don't bother to wash or dress well. They stop going out to meet people, and can't be bothered doing their usual activities. It is as if they are paralyzed in their desire to do things. They may be grumpy, or think all the time about their worries.

Carol: I can imagine how this could cause problems in relationships too. It could be very hard for a husband to understand why his wife is so unhappy.

Fran: Yes... and then some people start to use alcohol or drugs to try to feel better; usually this makes it worse and causes trouble in the family. Depression also can change our relationship with God. It can feel too hard to pray, and there may be anger that God would let this happen. It can feel as if God is very far away.

Tammy: So it sounds like Depression is an illness that affects every part of you. You said it involves your body... your feelings... what you think about... and the things you do. It's no wonder Rose feels awful!

Carol: So Fran, what causes Depression?

Fran: Well Carol...there is not just one cause...

- Sometimes it seems to start with thinking... perhaps you may be brooding – or thinking over and over about a situation, imagining how bad things might become... and before long you really believe it. If you have done something really bad, and you keep thinking about your guilt instead of asking for forgiveness, it can be like an infected wound, making you sick.

- Sometimes it starts with a bodily illness like the flu, or hormones that are not quite right. Many women feel depressed just before their monthly period or during menopause, sometimes called the change of life.

- And depression is quite common after having a baby. You may have heard people call this 'post-natal depression.'

- Other causes could be a reaction to a medicine... a food allergy... or having pain for a long time.

Whatever the cause is, the chemicals in the brain of a person who is depressed are changed. Then the messages do not travel properly. These chemicals affect how you think and feel.

Carol: Can you inherit it? I mean, Can it be passed on by a parent? My friend Rose told me once that her mother and grandfather both had 'breakdowns' in the past.

Fran: It does seem that some people are just born more likely to get depressed; often there are other people in the family with similar problems. But something usually triggers it off...

- It may start when there are problems in your relationships... or you are worried about money... or you are under a lot of stress.

- Sometimes the depression comes after you have been working very hard, and now you can relax a bit - like athletes after the Olympic games.

- A child who grows up being abused, frightened or neglected is more likely to become a depressed adult. So is a child whose parents always expected too much from them.

Tammy: Are teenagers more likely to be depressed? They often seem to have all those signs.

Fran: Yes, they may, though they often are just reacting to a period of great change in their lives.

Another group at risk of depression is older men, especially if they have lost their wives. We often hear about men having a 'mid-life crisis'!

For older women it may come when they experience all the changes of menopause.

You can never be sure about the cause, and usually there is more than one cause. In a way it does not really matter where it starts – in the mind, or in the body, because soon all the other parts become involved. Your body slows down... your thinking becomes hopeless... your relationships are not so happy... you feel bad about yourself but don't seem to be able to do anything to improve it. It becomes a terrible spiral, getting worse as you feel more helpless.

Carol: It sounds awful... you've really helped me understand how hard it must be for Rose. What advice should I give her now?

Fran: Well... first of all, don't give advice! Show her understanding, be a friend who listens and shows love and support.

Then you could suggest that she should go and talk to her doctor, or health care worker, and be honest about how she's feeling. Some people don't feel like they can go to the doctor when there is nothing to show, so your encouragement may make her realize that it's ok. The doctor may find a cause that can be treated, or suggest medicines or some other treatment.

Tammy: Fran, this has been very helpful. I would have thought I should give Rose advice. But now I will do as you say and just show her love and support. Could you come back and talk to us more about how we can help a person with depression?

Fran: Of course! Next time, perhaps we can talk about the things we can do to help - and there are many. Not all of them are medical treatments, some are very simple. Don't give up hope if you are depressed; you are not alone, and there is help.

Carol: You're listening to Women of Hope. Fran is still here with us and she's going to share something from God's word...

Fran: Do you think that all the people in the Bible were always happy? I'm afraid that is not true. The Bible has many stories of people who suffered all kinds of problems, including depression. Even Jesus cried, in sympathy for others... and when he was facing death.

Listen to this prayer from the book of Psalms (Psalm 102, paraphrased). The psalms are in God's word, the Bible, and they are a collection of poems and songs that are still used in worship. This was written down thousands of years ago, and yet it could have been spoken today by a woman of faith, who is depressed. You could pray it with her.

O God, listen to my prayer
and let my cry come to you.
Please don't turn away when I am so distressed.
My life is passing away like smoke in the wind
my bones feel like they have turned to ash.
My heart withers away,
I forget to eat my food.
I feel alone like a vulture in the desert
an owl in the ruins, a lonely pigeon on a roof!
I lie awake in the night

with voices that torment me.
I feel far from you—
God, you lifted me up; now have you thrown me away?

Fran: What is she telling God?

Carol: I think she is saying how bad she feels.

Fran: How does her body feel?

Carol: As if she is slowly dying... fading away.

Tammy: I noticed she compared herself to several wild birds - an owl, a vulture and a pigeon... and all of them were alone!

Carol: So, has she stopped trusting in God?

Fran: No, a woman who is praying like this has not stopped trusting in God, even though she feels so bad. She knows that if she turns away from God, there is nowhere else to turn. And this woman holds onto the fact that God loves her. Listen to the next part of the prayer.

But you are the Lord forever.
Your name stands strong through the generations.
You will come in the time you know is right.
Let this be written down for generations to come,
So that children who are not yet born will praise the Lord;
Say that he looked down from his holy place, to hear our groans,
To set free those who felt like they were dying.

Fran: Why does she still trust? ...

Tammy: I think she remembers God's help to her and her people in the past.

Fran: And what does she hope for? ...

Tammy: She wants her children and grandchildren to be able to remember how God helped her too.

Fran: Have you seen God help you or your people in the past? ... Then give him thanks.

Tammy: I have seen him help - and I will tell my children those stories.

Fran: Good! Then the praying person remembers how great God is, how much power he has, and she trusts that God will be with her and help her. She has more to say:

You built up the earth from nothing

Your hands shaped the stars above us
They will all come to an end, but you will last for ever
You will change the heavens and earth like worn-out clothes
For you are beyond time and space
And with you, I am saved... and my children who are yet to come.

Fran: If you have a Bible, you could read some of the psalms; look in the index under the letter P. You spell it P-S-A-L-M-S. Or you could ask someone to read it to you. You will find they give you comfort. There is a special promise in another psalm. It says 'The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit. That is in Psalm 34:18. It is such a comfort to know that God does understand and is with you in all of life's difficult times. Make sure you turn to him, tell him how you feel, and rest in his love.

Tammy: Well, I think I understand Rose much better now, and it is good to know that there is hope for her.

Carol: It's been good to share our hearts today about some hard things. If you would like to know more, or to share your story, write to us.

Tammy: And it's good to remember that God is always close to us, especially when we feel blue and sad. Goodbye for now.

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