

Against the Current
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When Darkness Reigns

It's a place, but you won't find it on a map. It's real, but you can't touch it with your fingers. Like the wind, you can't see it - only its effects. And its effects, like those of a violent wind, can be deadly.

Depression has reached epidemic proportions in our society. It's the single greatest cause of absenteeism at work or school. It's virtually certain that you or someone you know - someone in your family, a friend, a fellow student, or a co-worker - is suffering from depression at this very moment.

By depression we don't just mean feeling down, sad, or tired. Everyone has these feelings from time to time, and it's a natural part of life in the fallen world. I'm talking about a medical condition called clinical depression.

The symptoms of clinical depression include: appetite or sleep disturbance; decreased energy; difficulty concentrating; feelings of worthlessness and/or suicidal thoughts; loss of interest or pleasure; feelings of guilt or low self-worth. If a person suffers from a depressed mood and lack of interest in most activities lasting at least two weeks while experiencing all or most of the symptoms listed above, they are deemed to be suffering from clinical depression.

The good news is that in the vast majority of cases people suffering from depression can be cured, or at least control the condition and live happy, productive lives.

This information is especially important for you, members of the "young adult demographic", as people in your age group are most likely to experience an MDE (Major Depressive Episode). Over the course of a lifetime there's about a 10% chance that any one of us will experience an MDE. Young women aged 15 - 25 are especially susceptible, themselves having a one in ten chance of having an MDE during these years. The rates go down as we get older, then rise again when we reach our later years. If we've had one MDE we have an increased chance of having another.

What causes depression? There is no simple answer. Depression might simply be the result of an imbalance of chemicals in the brain, but usually results from a combination of biological, psychological, and social elements. Traumatic events, like the death of someone we dearly love or breaking up with a girlfriend/boyfriend, divorce, losing our job, etc. can result in depression. Other factors which can contribute to depression include single motherhood, not completing high school, living off social assistance, living alone, smoking, and heavy drinking. People who have suffered mental, physical or sexual abuse also have a higher chance of becoming depressed. Severe depression is often accompanied by other psychiatric problems such as an anxiety disorder, a substance use disorder, cutting oneself, or an eating disorder.

If you, or someone you love has lived through a major depressive episode I don't have to tell you how scary and debilitating this condition can be.

When we're young we tend to think of ourselves as immortal. "I won't get hurt"; "bad things only happen to other people"; "everybody does it" are tales we tell ourselves when our mind or our conscience is trying to warn us of something. Some activities, such as premarital or promiscuous sexual activity and alcohol or drug abuse, contribute to a greater chance of becoming clinically depressed. In such cases it's often difficult to determine which came first - the unhealthy behaviour or the depression.

On the other hand there are also behaviours and activities which lower our chance of becoming depressed. Besides remaining chaste, not using drugs, not abusing alcohol, and doing well in school, having healthy friendships, a good family relationship, and being active physically are all beneficial. Religious faith and practice also have a very positive effect in lowering our chances of becoming depressed, as well as helping us out of depression if it strikes.

If you or someone you know is showing symptoms of depression, see a doctor. If your family doctor comes to a tentative diagnosis of depression s/he'll probably give you some type of medication to take, and refer you to a psychiatrist. It is very important that you take the medication, and pay very close attention to the effect they are having on your thoughts and feelings. It usually takes about 4 - 6 weeks for the medication to take full effect, and during the first 2 - 3 weeks you may feel that they are not doing any good at all. This doesn't necessarily mean they're not working, so don't stop. Likewise, try to see a psychiatrist as soon as possible, as the psychiatrist will have more experience and available resources in dealing with this condition.

One of the really big problems in dealing with depression is that it affects our thinking process. Depressed people often think they can deal with it themselves, or are embarrassed to admit that something is wrong. Trying to tough it out on our own won't work. And there's no reason to be embarrassed. If your pancreas doesn't work right you take insulin, and no one thinks the less of you for it. If you have an imbalance in the chemicals in your brain and need medication to get them balanced again no one will think less of you for that, either. And if anyone does, well, they have a bigger problem than you do.

Another factor which is very helpful in dealing with depression is religious faith and practice. This is confirmed by both the medical literature as well as pastoral experience. Being connected to the Church both spiritually and socially helps protect us from falling into depression in the first place, and helps us come out of it sooner if we do. Prayer, worship, and participation in the sacramental life of the Church have a very positive effect on our inward, psychological state if we let them.

Here we need to say a special word about confession. As was noted earlier, certain sinful behaviours like premarital sex, alcohol or drug abuse, etc. predispose us to depression. As Orthodox Christians we believe that no matter what sin we have committed, if we truly repent God can forgive us. The Holy Mystery of Confession is the guarantee of God's forgiveness. Every one of us should have a trusted confessor to whom we open our hearts and confess our sins regularly and often. If we have drifted away from the Church and done things we shouldn't have we must remember the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15 11:32) and never doubt the fact that we will be joyfully received back into the Father's house.

But feelings of guilt are often a part of depression even when we have nothing to feel guilty about. It's part of how the illness works. Even when there might not be any sin involved, confession can be a very powerful tool to help the depressed person recognize and acknowledge their condition, be assured of God's mercy and help, and receive the grace which will help them conquer these negative feelings.

Depression is a horrible sickness. It sucks away our joy, our health, even our personality. It's scary how depression can take an intelligent, talented, hard working human being and reduce them to a state of despair and total apathy. If

untreated depression can cause a person to lose their friends, their family, their livelihood, even their life.

People who are depressed need medical help, and they need spiritual help. No less importantly, they need friendship. I can't overemphasize to you the good you can do just by being a friend to someone who is depressed, by helping them recognize that there is a problem, by sticking with them and supporting them. This will usually involve reminding them in a gentle, loving, yet firm way that they need to take their medicine; assuring them that all will be well, that they are loved, that they are not their disease; or just listening when they need to express their thoughts, feelings, hopes, and frustrations.

If you suspect someone may be depressed, or if they show signs of the behaviours which often accompany depression (if they're cutting themselves, have an eating disorder, if they're into binge drinking or are acting out sexually) don't be afraid to ask them directly about depression. Ignoring depression or treating it like an "elephant in the room" can be harmful. As uncomfortable as it might feel, being very direct is often much more effective than beating around the bush - assuming that we're willing to listen and help, of course.

If we do suffer from depression probably the most difficult thing is to humbly accept our condition, and gratefully accept the help our family and friends offer us. None of us likes to feel dependent. But we're all dependent creatures - dependent on nature, dependent on one another, and dependent on God. So never feel guilty, don't feel like you're a burden, and don't worry. True friends will gladly do everything they can to help, just as you'd do the same for them. That's what friendship means.

St. Paul tells us that God wishes us to be happy (Phil. 4: 4-7). Jesus tells us not to be anxious (Mt. 6: 25-34). But sometimes we are unhappy. Sometimes we are anxious. And sometimes we're depressed.

God has given us medical knowledge, He has given us spiritual knowledge, and He has given us love - the love of good friends and family. By humbly accepting and making use of all these gifts we can help prevent the appearance of depression in our lives, and more quickly overcome depression when it does appear.