

Out of the Depths

Bible Studies on Depression and Hope

'But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.'

2 Corinthians 4:7-9

Helen Rienits



ACORN PRESS

Published by Acorn Press Ltd
ABN 50 008 549 540

Office and orders:
PO Box 282
Brunswick East
Victoria 3057
Australia
Tel/Fax: (03) 9383 1266
International Tel/Fax: 61 3 9383 1266
Website: www.acornpress.net.au.

© Helen Rienits 2010

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Author: Rienits, Helen.
Title: Out of the depths: bible studies on depression and hope / Helen Rienits.
Edition: 1st ed.
ISBN: 9780908284986 (pbk.)
Subjects: Depression, Mental – Religious aspects – Christianity.
Hope – Religious aspects – Christianity.
Dewey Number: 248.8625

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, no part of this work may be reproduced by electronic or other means without the permission of the publisher.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible. Copyright ©1973, 1978 International Bible Society. Used by permission.

Cover design and text layout by Les Colston, www.zealart.com.au.
Cover photo: Donovan Wilson/Streamline Trees.
Printed by Openbook Howden Design & Print, Adelaide.

Contents

Introduction	1
Dear friend ...	3
1. ‘Where am I? What’s wrong with me?’ In the Black Hole: Depression	4
2. ‘I’m frightened Lord, I can’t stop worrying’ Anxiety and panic attacks: when is worry out of control?	10
3. ‘How did I get here? Was it my fault?’ Causes of depression and anxiety; stress overload and stress management	15
4. ‘Can I be a Christian if I’m depressed? Is it a sin?’ What is ‘Victorious Christianity’? Where is God in all this?	25
5. ‘Why did God let this happen? Why doesn’t God help me?’ Suffering and spiritual warfare	30
6. ‘What happens if I can’t cope anymore? Will God forgive me?’ Breakdowns, suicidal thoughts and self-harm	36
7. ‘I’m worthless and useless; it’s all my fault; I can’t stop myself’ Low self-esteem, false guilt, obsessions and compulsions	42
8. ‘I’m a failure; I don’t want anyone to know’ Pride and the social stigma of mental illness	47
9. ‘Why don’t others understand me?’ Caring for the depressed and anxious; could my child be depressed?	52
10. ‘How long will this go on for?’ The road to recovery	57
Notes for study questions	63
Additional reading material	83

Introduction

Who will benefit from this book?

This book is designed for use by those experiencing mental and emotional illness, as well as those who would like to improve their skills in caring for people in this situation.

It is designed primarily for use by groups, but is also of benefit to individuals wanting to learn more about anxiety and depression.

In the group setting, this series of ten studies may be used as a tool for Christian churches or fellowships to help support and encourage those in their group who are struggling with depression or anxiety. This book can also provide a format for a 'depression group' to follow as they help each other to cope with their illness. This is particularly important, as group interaction is an important aid in the recovery process.

These studies also provide some biblical teaching on the special spiritual problems that arise for those who are struggling with mental and emotional illness, as well as some basic medical knowledge to help those who suffer understand more about their problems and what can be done to help.

If you are struggling in the above areas, this book will help you to learn

- about depression and anxiety and a little about the underlying chemical problems
- how stress causes and worsens these conditions
- to recognise stress overload and begin working out how to reduce it
- that it is not your fault but it *is* your problem to deal with
- that you are still 'victorious' and able to serve God even when depressed
- that God allows suffering to help you grow in maturity in your relationship with him
- that you are not worthless or a failure
- that you will recover and be able to help others in similar situations.

How to use this book

Each study should take about 1½–2 hours depending on your group. If you are leading a group, try to keep the group on track but allow time for those who need to share. Try to give everyone a chance to say something. This is not easy, as there are some people who will want to tell their life stories and others who will not want to talk at all. Ideally, the group should not have more than ten people.

You may find it helpful to have tea, coffee and light refreshments available in an adjacent room, and encourage people to help themselves whenever they wish.

Sometimes people just need a little time out from the group and this can give them 'space'. A box of tissues may be useful also. Try to keep the atmosphere as relaxed and casual as possible and to inject a little humour wherever appropriate. Confidentiality is important and a list of names of group members should *not* be available for public scrutiny.

At the back of this booklet you will find a full set of notes to accompany each study.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my husband Ian Rienits and my friends Libby Wilson and Julie Sinfield for their love, encouragement and practical assistance as I have written this book.

I would also like to thank the people of St Paul's Shellharbour who were so willing to be my 'guinea pigs' as we worked through the studies together.

Finally I would like to acknowledge my patients who have taught me so much. I salute you as you struggle on so courageously despite your depression and anxiety.

Dear friend ...

Welcome to our depression and anxiety support group. This group is designed for those who

- are currently struggling with depression and anxiety and need help and support to understand what is happening and what they can do about it
- have struggled with depression and anxiety in the past and would like to understand, learn from and reflect on the experience
- care for friends or relatives who struggle with these illnesses and want to learn how they can help and support those they love.

There are ten studies in this book – try to complete as many of them as possible. You do not need to do any homework or preparation, and you should feel free to share as much or as little about yourself as you feel comfortable to share. All the Bible references we are looking at will be printed in the notes using the *New International Version*.

This book is not designed to be an ‘in-depth’ theological study, as people who are struggling with depression and anxiety are often not able to cope with that. It is also not designed to be a medical textbook, although, as a general practitioner, I have provided some medical explanations that have helped my patients understand what they are going through.

If you work through the studies and discussion questions as a group, there are a few things to bear in mind:

- many of the questions do not have a right or wrong answer, and we need to let others have their own opinions
- feel free to share your experiences and feelings, but remain aware of time constraints and let others have a chance to share as well
- by all means share what you have learnt about yourself with those outside the group if you wish, but be careful to maintain the confidentiality of others in the group
- despite what I have just said above, try to be wise with what you share, and remember that some people find it very difficult to maintain confidences or recall where they heard certain information
- in some churches or fellowships, it would not be appropriate for you to even mention the names of others in the group.

I hope and pray with all my heart that you will find these studies of great help and comfort in your journey with the Lord.

Yours in Christ,

Helen Rienits

1

‘Where am I? What’s wrong with me?’

In the Black Hole: Depression

Depression – What is it? How do you know if someone is depressed?

This study is intended to introduce the subject of depression and give a general overview of the main issues surrounding it. It is also an opportunity for people to get to know each other if this book is being used in a group setting. Don’t try to go into great depth, as most of the issues will be dealt with again in later studies.

We all have days when we feel down. However, if these days turn into weeks and it becomes difficult to keep going with day-to-day living, then you may be suffering from the illness known as depression. It is not a personal weakness and it is not a trivial illness. There are a number of causes, and some people are more vulnerable to developing it than others. Your genes, world view and life stresses will all play a part.

The symptoms of depression include:

- overwhelming sadness, feeling that life is not worth living
- crying easily
- loss of interest in things that you usually enjoy
- withdrawing from friends and activities
- sleeping too much or too little
- changes in eating and/or weight
- feeling tired all the time, no energy, nothing to look forward to
- feeling worthless or unreasonably guilty
- trouble concentrating and making decisions
- being angry, irritable or restless
- thinking about suicide and dying.

Having three or more of the above symptoms for three or more weeks might mean that you have depression. People with depression often do not know what is wrong and will sometimes develop other symptoms as the body tries to tell them that something is not right.

Psalm 88:1–18

We don't know much about the writer of this psalm, Herman the Ezrahite, but he does express clearly what it is like to be in the depths of the 'black hole' of depression. He is a songwriter and he uses his gift to express pain and despair very effectively. For those who are or have been in that black hole, you will understand that pain and may find that his words help to express some of your feelings too. Words such as these are included among the psalms so that we can use them as our own and as a way to tell God of our personal experience.

¹O LORD, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you. ²May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry.

³For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave. ⁴I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like a man without strength. ⁵I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.

⁶You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. ⁷Your wrath lies heavily upon me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. ⁸You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; ⁹my eyes are dim with grief.

I call to you, O LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you. ¹⁰Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do those who are dead rise up and praise you? ¹¹Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction? ¹²Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?

¹³But I cry to you for help, O LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you. ¹⁴Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

¹⁵From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death; I have suffered your terrors and am in despair. ¹⁶Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. ¹⁷All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me. ¹⁸You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.

1. Verses 1–2: The writer begins by directing his cry as a prayer to 'the God who saves me'. Despite his trouble and pain he reminds himself that the one thing he can hang on to is the hope that God is Saviour. Have you been able to hang on to this belief even in your blackest moments? If you couldn't, how would/did you feel?

2. Verses 3–5: Here the writer appears to be crying out from the brink of death. Perhaps he feels as though God has already cut him off. What do you think might be the difference between being mentally and physically on the brink of death?

3. Verses 6–7: God has done this! The writer knows no reason for it, but he knows that God's hand is in it. This deepens his anguish and helplessness. Do you think God causes us to feel depressed? Is it okay to say things like this to God?

4. Verse 8: Even the writer's friends are gone, and he feels that they have left him because he has become repulsive to them. Often when people are depressed they withdraw from their friends. Why do you think this happens?

5. Verses 9–12: What's the point? The writer says that he cannot praise God from the grave. Is he at the point of giving up? What could you say to him?

6. Verses 13–14: The writer is still crying to God for help and he wants to know why he has to suffer like this. Is this a helpful question to ask? Why or why not?

7. Verses 15–18: The writer looks back over his life and says that he has been suffering for a long time. Is he exaggerating, or can people be depressed all their lives?

Admitting that you have depression is the first step to recovery. It is important to know that however bad you may be feeling now, you will get better, and there are many things that can help.

8. Why is it often so hard to recognise depression in yourself or in others?
9. Why is it hard to seek treatment? How could you encourage someone who is depressed to get help?

Many people are embarrassed about having depression and are afraid to admit it. Sometimes family, friends and church members have not been very sympathetic in the past and this makes it hard to talk about. Depressed people may try to ignore or deny their pain, hoping it will go away. Sometimes they will try to cover it up by playing the clown and laughing it off. Most often, they hide away and withdraw from their friends and activities they once enjoyed. They avoid church and other social situations.

10. What other unhelpful things can you think of that depressed people do?

There are many helpful things that depressed people can do to manage and treat their depression.

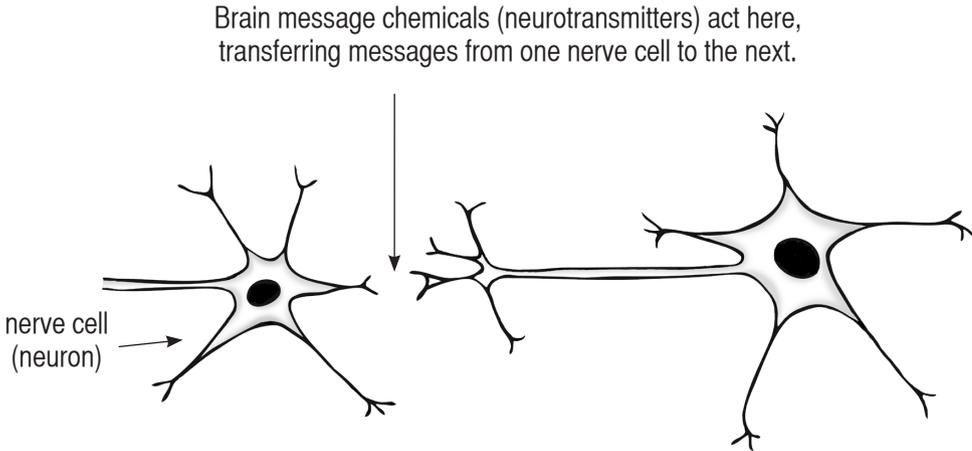
11. Consider the following lifestyle changes which can help depression. What could you do to implement these?
 - increase daily exercise – for example, walking, swimming or cycling
 - improve nutrition – a healthy diet with lots of fruit and vegetables
 - establish a regular sleep routine and aim for at least eight hours of sleep a day
 - establish a regular daily routine which includes some spare time
 - increase contact with people
 - plan simple things that you enjoy – a little treat – each day
 - what are other things that you have found helpful?

12. It is also important not to underestimate the value of talking about how you are feeling. Who can you talk to? What are the pros and cons of talking to these people?
 - your friends and family
 - your doctor
 - a counsellor
 - a clinical psychologist.

13. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Interpersonal Therapy are common counselling techniques used by professionals to treat depressed people and they can be very helpful. Do you think Christians should have counselling? Who from?

Nerve cells in our brains transmit messages to each other using chemicals called neurotransmitters. There are many different types of neurotransmitters and scientists have discovered that inadequate amounts of a neurotransmitter in the brain can cause a neurological illness. Depression results when the quantities of neurotransmitters called *serotonin* and *noradrenalin* are reduced. Medications

called antidepressants work by reversing some of these changes. There are many different types of medications, and most of them take some weeks to work. The newer ones are very effective for most people. They are safe, have few side effects and are not addictive.



14. Should Christians take medication? Why is there a stigma attached? What would be your reactions to suggestions that you should take medication?

Recovery from depression is the rule, not the exception. Stay positive!

Close in prayer – for sufferers and those caring for them.

For more information about depression, you can visit the beyondblue website:
www.beyondblue.org.au.