



The Church Can Keep People Connected

(Part 3 of a three-part series)

When you hear a friend is physically ill, how do you respond? You call, visit, take food, offer assistance with physically demanding activities until they are able to resume their normal functioning; and pray for and/or with them. Sometimes physically ill persons can be demanding especially when they require extensive home care and are angry and grieving over their diagnosis or adjusting to a disability. We seem to understand and accept responses to physical challenges.

Reflect for a moment on what our response is if we hear someone is depressed? Do you call, visit, take food or try to socialize with them? Do you try to keep them involved in the social structure of the church? Or, do we avoid them partially because we don't know what to say or do.

When someone is depressed giving support can be slightly more challenging than with a physical illness. Understanding that their responses are from the emotional illness (depression) and are not directed at you personally is important. The individual may lack motivation, energy and concurrently be reluctant to get out of their home to 'do things'. Additionally they may or may not always seem to be appreciative of your efforts. In fact they can be irritable, withdrawn or conversely angry and hurtful. Do not take it personally; it is the illness speaking and you are not responsible for fixing the circumstances. Only the individual can make the changes; you can be the compassionate, patient person who acts as

an encourager; a support person to keep the person moving ahead to do the things necessary to become better. Simply ask them how you can be of support or what you can do to be of assistance. (Be careful not to belittle them by saying "snap out of it" or similar directives—recovery is not that simple.). Encourage them to stay involved in things they have enjoyed in the past.

In a church setting it is important to be watchful for individuals who were always involved in activities and gradually or suddenly stop attending functions. Unlike physical illnesses that are more likely to be reported to the church, temporary or long-term emotional challenges can occur gradually over time and therefore are harder to identify and respond to. Requests for prayer may be one of the few identifiable clues. We need to give the same care and consideration to an individual with an emotional illness that is given to persons with physical challenges. However, due to the person's depression it may take repeated attempts to make contact with them or for them to even realize they need support. We are called to honor the command given us by Jesus to "...: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13: 34-35. You can shine God's light into an otherwise dark time in a life. Being present, listening and offering hope can nurture the soul and

provide healing. Empowering an individual to know they have self-worth and friends that are sincerely interested in their well-being can provide a ray of hope, during this challenging time. Consider being present

during the challenges as well as the joyful seasons of a life. *Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.* James 5:13.

As a support person there are things you can do:

- Make a telephone call, send cards or visit
- Spend time with the individual; read, go to movies, or participate in other mutually agreeable activities
- Pray for and with them
- Plan lunch out; perhaps weekly
- Exercise with the individual on a regular basis
- Take a healthy meal to them occasionally
- Offer to provide transportation to church functions—Bible studies, services, social functions
- Offer to have a Stephen's minister visit them regularly
- Ask them how you can be of support
- Take a prayer shawl to them
- Help the person grieve; encourage participation in local support group
- Emphasize it can take time to find the most effective medication
- If medications are not being taken; assist or encourage them to discuss "why not" with their health care provider
- Continually encourage them to keep doctor or therapy visits
- Listen to them; discourage them from putting themselves 'down'

Feeling purposeful and involved is restorative. Keeping people connected to each other and God is vital. Having hope and trust in the Lord are powerful motivators. During crisis times we often become more sensitive to the Spirit of the Lord and to the suffering of others. This is a time to seek the Lord. *The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.* Psalm 9:9-10

Finally, whenever you are interacting with a depressed person know the resources they have available. Ask the individual for the name of a contact person or family member who can be supportive of their needs. Be concerned if a person has excessive behavioral changes from their usual or normal conduct, appearance and

functioning. As in any situation, if you feel a person is a danger to themselves or others never hesitate to **call 911 for help**. Then notify the **pastor** and **responsible contact person or family member whose name you have**.

There is also a national **suicide hotline**: 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433) and a national suicide prevention lifeline: available 24 hours a day, every day: 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

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