

Light in the Darkness

Bible Study on Mental Health

by KerriAnn Schmid

Introduction for Leaders: Thank you for taking the time to open up discussion with your youth about this important topic. It has been my experience that the majority of youth who have come through our youth ministry program have felt that they have dealt with feelings of depression at some point in their life. It has also been my experience that for many of them, simply having a safe place to talk about what they think and feel with a caring adult is extremely beneficial. Let them know that you are there for them but also encourage them to talk to their parents and be aware when they are experiencing something that would be better handled by a mental health professional.

Faith and Depression: Depression, like other illnesses, was not part of God's original plan. Instead it is the result of sin entering the world through the Fall. Sin affects Christians and non-Christians alike on a daily basis. No part of our life is immune. Sin can affect our bodies, minds, thoughts and emotions.

As Christians, we can find peace and comfort in God's grace given through the gifts of Holy Absolution, Holy Communion and God's Word, which is full of God's promises which we can hold onto in the midst of darkness.

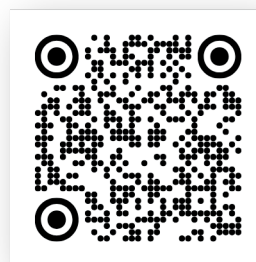


Leader Notes: A Few Facts About Depression

(Excerpts are taken from the National Institute of Mental Health)



National Institute of Mental Health Resources



YouthESource Mental Health Resources

What is Depression?

Everyone occasionally feels blue or sad. But these feelings are usually short-lived and pass within a couple of days. When you have depression, it interferes with daily life and causes pain for both you and those who care about you. Depression is a common but serious illness. There are several forms of depressive disorders.

Major Depression: Severe symptoms that interfere with your ability to work, sleep, study, eat, and enjoy life. An episode can occur only once in a person's lifetime, but more often, a person has several episodes.

Persistent Depressive Disorder: Depressed mood that lasts for at least 2 years.

Who is at Risk?

Major depressive disorder is one of the most common mental disorders in the United States. Each year about 6.7% of U.S adults experience major depressive disorder. Additionally, 3.3% of 13 to 18 year olds have experienced a seriously debilitating depressive disorder.

How do Children and Teens Experience Depression?

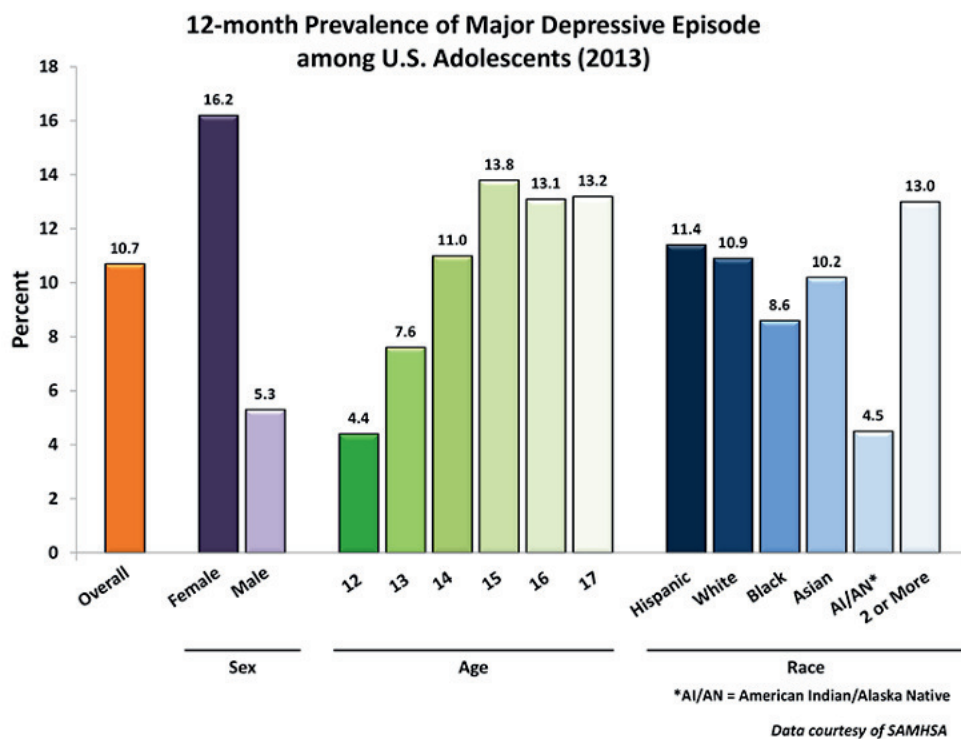
A child with depression may pretend to be sick, refuse to go to school, cling to a parent, or worry that a parent may die. Older children may sulk, get into trouble at school, be negative and irritable, and feel misunderstood. Because these signs may be viewed as normal mood swings typical of children as they move through developmental stages, it may be difficult to accurately diagnose a young person with depression.

Before puberty, boys and girls are equally likely to develop depression. By age 15, however, girls are twice as likely as boys to have had a major depressive episode.

Depression during the teen years comes at a time of great personal change—when boys and girls are forming an identity apart from their parents, grappling with gender issues and emerging sexuality, and making independent decisions for the first time in their lives. Depression in adolescence frequently cooccurs with other disorders such as anxiety, eating disorders, or substance abuse. It can also lead to increased risk for suicide. Childhood depression often persists, recurs, and continues into adulthood, especially if left untreated.

Major Depression Among Adolescents from the National Institute of Mental Health

- Major depression is one of the most common mental disorders in the US.
- The 12-month prevalence data for major depressive episode presented here are from the [2013 National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#) (NSDUH). Based mainly on the 4th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), in the NSDUH study a major depressive episode is defined as:
 - A period of two weeks or longer during which there is either depressed mood or loss of interest or pleasure, and at least four other symptoms that reflect a change in functioning, such as problems with sleep, eating, energy, concentration, and self-image.
- In 2013, an estimated 2.6 million adolescents aged 12 to 17 in the U.S. had at least one major depressive episode in the past year. This represented 10.7 percent of the U.S. population aged 12 to 17.



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Opening Activity: Ask for a volunteer. Show them a designated path you would like for them to take around the room; have them go around things, step over things, etc. After you have finished demonstrating, have them complete the path. They will most likely be able to complete this easily. Next, put one backpack full of books on their back and ask them to carry two more bags full of books and complete the same path. This should make the path significantly more difficult.

Discuss:

- How did the first time you walked the path compare to the second?
- Have you ever experienced times in your life where you felt as though you were carrying a huge weight? Explain.

Say:

Many people describe depression as a weight that they are forced to carry that can make even simple things seem difficult. It feels as though a weight is literally pressing down on them. The weight affects every part of life and it feels as though it is crushing and there is no way out. Don't despair! God offers light, hope, forgiveness and peace in the midst of darkness!

Discuss: Why Do Christians Face Depression?

Depression, like other illnesses, was not part of God's original plan. Instead it is the result of sin entering the world through the Fall of man. Sin affects Christians and non-Christians alike on a daily basis. No part of our life is immune. Sin not only affects our actions; but can also affect our bodies, minds, thoughts and emotions.

God does not leave us to face depression and darkness alone. As Christians, we can find peace and comfort in God's grace given through the gifts of Holy Absolution, Holy Communion and God's Word.

While Scripture does not discuss depression specifically, it does present situations where people faced various kinds of darkness. It also provides hope, forgiveness and promises which we can hold to in the midst of darkness.



Part 1: Help in the Darkness

Notes: This story comes at the end of a day that Jesus had spent teaching by the lake. Jesus had to stand in a boat to teach because of the growing crowds and people wanting to touch Him. The Sea of Galilee was a deep lake surrounded by mountains, but open at its north and south ends. This created a bowl shape that often resulted in perilous storms.

While there is no indication that the disciples are depressed in this situation, they were facing fear and darkness. Depression can certainly feel like one is in the middle of a storm, helpless against the force beating them down. The experience of questioning where Jesus is and if He cares is one to which many high schoolers will be able to relate.

Read Mark 4:35–41.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you generally handle situations that seem out of control? Face them head on? Ask for help? Pray? Retreat or shut down? Just hope they go away?
2. If you had been one of the disciples in the boat, what would you have done? Thought? Felt?
3. What can we learn about Jesus from this miracle? (Jesus is God, he is all-powerful, he is able to save them. His Word is powerful enough to calm the wind and waves, there is nothing he cannot handle including the storms in our lives).

What About You?

1. What is a personal “storm” you have had to face? How did you get through it?
2. What would you tell someone in the middle of a storm in their life who may ask as the disciples did, “Jesus, don’t you care...?” (Sometimes when we go through difficult times we feel that either Jesus is not there or He does not care, we rely on our own judgement of the situation rather than trust God’s character and promises).
3. Why doesn’t Jesus calm all the storms in our lives? (God never promises that life will be easy; but He does promise to be with us through it all. God can see the big picture; He knows what we need when we need it. If we are facing a storm, He may not calm the storm; but He can get us through it and use it for our good and to His glory.)
4. What lessons can we gain from this miracle when we face “storms” in our lives? (Jesus is with us in every “storm” we face. He cares for us and loves us and helps us when we call out to him. He never promises that we won’t face hard times; but we do have his promise that he is always with us and will help us in the darkness.)



Part 2: Hope in the Darkness

Notes: Those who have faced depression have described it as feeling like they are in a pit with no way out. The pit Daniel faces must have seemed to most like a hopeless situation for which there was no way out; but Daniel finds hope in the darkness through his faith.

King Darius has just taken over the kingdom. He appoints 120 satraps to rule the kingdom with three administrators over them. Daniel was one of these administrators. He distinguished himself above the others so much so that Darius was going to put him over the whole kingdom. The other administrators and satraps started looking for things Daniel was doing wrong but they couldn’t find any. So, they came up with a plan...

Read Daniel 6:5–28.

Discussion Questions:

1. How would you have felt or acted in Daniel’s shoes?
2. Logically, this situation seems hopeless for Daniel. Why does Daniel seem fearless? Why isn’t he hopeless? (Daniel’s faith gave him hope in a situation that seemed hopeless.)

What About You?

1. Have you ever felt hopeless? Have you ever faced a “pit” that seemed inescapable? How did you respond?
2. What does the king believe saved Daniel (see v. 23)?
3. In what ways is faith a “game-changer” in hopeless situations? (God does not fit into our logic. With God, the possibilities are endless. Daniel’s logic would have told him he was going to die as soon as he was thrown in the pit; but Daniel’s faith told him to trust God.)
4. Depression and darkness can feel like an inescapable pit. What hope can we find in the story of Daniel when we face those situations? (There is no situation too hopeless or too difficult for God. When all hope seems lost, we should trust in God rather than our own human understanding (Prov. 3:5). Remember to take into account the “God-factor”—with Him all things are possible.)



Part 3: Overcoming the Darkness

We should not be surprised that people in the Bible seemed to have experienced similar feelings of despair and depression that we face today because they were real people. Their despair is always contrasted with a certain hope, a new joy, a God who cares and rescues.

When Jesus died and rose again, He conquered sin, death and the devil. He never promises that life will be easy; but He does promise to be with us. In John 16:33, Jesus says, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world!"

Spend some time reading more of God's promises and words of comfort that we can hold onto when we face storms in life. Discuss what each one can mean for us in our daily lives:

- Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."
- Romans 8:35–39: More than conquerors!
- Romans 15:13: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."
- 2 Cor. 4:7–9, 16–18: "...we are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed...we do not lose heart...we fix our eyes not on what is seen; but on what is unseen..."
- 2 Cor. 12:7–10: "...My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness..."
- Phil. 4:4–8: "Rejoice in the Lord always...do not be anxious about anything...peace of God will guard your hearts and minds..."
- 1 Peter 5:6–9: "...cast all your anxiety on him...he will restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast..."



Closing

No one is immune from going through dark times in their life, including Christians. If you have not faced any yet, they will come. The question is, when you are going through them, how will you respond? Will you run to God or away from Him? Will you remember and trust His promises? Will you rest in the knowledge that the God who can calm the wind and the waves with His words and shut the mouths of lions is big enough to get you through whatever you may face? Jesus has overcome sin, death and the devil. He will be with you through the storm and in the pit. He will deliver you and rescue you!



A Few tips for Youth

Some things to remember about depression:

- Run to God, not away from Him. Trust His promises and His character. Use the powerful tools He has given us: prayer, Scripture, absolution, Holy Communion.
- It can happen to anyone; Christians aren't immune. It is not a character flaw or weakness.
- If you've never experienced it, you're probably not going to understand; but that doesn't mean you won't be able to help.
- It is okay to not be able to explain why you feel the way you do; don't feel guilty for your feelings, they are what they are.
- There is no shame in asking for help.
- Do something; it's not just going to go away.

What you can say and do if a friend is going through depression:

- Be supportive. Pray, use God's Word. There is power in both, they are tools and weapons to fight. God's promises to the hurting are powerful. His presence is cause for hope and the means to deliverance.
- Don't think that they can just snap out of it or simply change their attitude.
- Listen and ask questions
- Affirm; there is help and there is hope. They don't have to live with it.
- Remember you're not a counselor; don't pretend to have all the answers or try to diagnose someone.
- Encourage him or her to talk to someone (their parents, their pastor or youth leader, a school counselor). Recognize when it's something different or more than temporary sadness and get help.