

# DEPRESSION

AND HOW TO DEAL WITH IT AS CHRISTIANS



VEMKAR TOPICAL SERIES



BY THE ORDER OF  
BISHOP MESROP PARSAMYAN  
PRIMATE



Published by the Bishop Zgon Trust Fund  
of the Diocese of the Armenian Church  
of America (Eastern), New York



ST.VARTANPRESS2024

*Written by Very Rev. Fr. Shahe Ananyan*

# DEPRESSION

## AND HOW TO DEAL WITH IT AS CHRISTIANS

### DEFINING DEPRESSION

In contemporary society, mental health conditions increase worldwide affecting people from all backgrounds, including priests and religious workers.

Depression (late Middle English from Old French *dépresser* from Late Latin *depressio* which means to press down, oppress), has been known since ancient times. In many ancient societies, it was simply known as sadness, and Hippocrates (c.460-c.370 BC), described it with the Greek word “melancholy.” The effects of depression are varied, also affecting the family and society. Generally known as “common mental disorders,” depression is a worldwide disability and varies according to diagnosis and duration (weeks, months, and years). It is usually considered a physical and mental disorder and differs from sadness, stress, and phobia, which are viewed as inseparable parts of every human experience.

This brief overview of the results from the fields of modern psychological and global health is more than sufficient to show that depression is a disorder that refers to human psychic, mental, psychosomatic, and, in some cases, physical health. From the point of view of a Christian,

depression tends to affect the human personal entity, i.e., the human being as a whole person. When suffering from depression, the balance between the spiritual and physical dimensions may be at risk. Thus, from the beginning of the 20th century, many Christian churches and denominations have launched special programs for studying depressive disorders in light of Christian spiritual and moral teaching. These studies have brought forth several important questions, among which are the following: a) Can depression also affect the spiritual and moral dimensions of the human person? b) How can Christians overcome depression?

These two questions have not lost their importance in our time, especially if we consider statistical studies, according to which, the increasing severity of depression has brought forth another dangerous phenomenon: the rise of suicide.

## CAUSES FOR DEPRESSION

In recent studies on Christian spirituality, the term “spiritual depression” has been formulated, which is perhaps one of the most appropriate ways to name depression in Christian life<sup>1</sup>.

Spiritual depression involves the following symptoms<sup>2</sup>:

- 
- inner struggle and anxiety, in most cases, an inner struggle against God
  - a sad mood and indifference to spiritual life
  - lethargy, low energy, and excessive sleepiness
  - negative feelings towards everything connected with what is spiritual and religious
  - hopelessness and dissatisfaction
  - false guilt and worthlessness
  - decreased interest in regular activities and routine
  - insomnia
  - regular stomach pains
  - regular thoughts of death, dying, and suicide

Depression affects the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of the self, generally referring to a loss of spiritual vitality and joy. Its symptoms negatively affect both our interpersonal relationships and our relationship with ourselves. In Christian tradition, such feelings in a fallen world may be seen as a natural part of human existence that do not need to lead us to evil or self-destructive behavior. Rather, according to the apostolic exhortation, they should be combated with all the spiritual armor at our disposal and can be overcome through the power of Christ's victory over death and evil: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the

rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people" (Ephesians 6:10–18).

If we ignore depression symptoms and are unwilling to overcome these, we will find ourselves in a spiritual deadlock. Moreover, constant neglect and indifference toward spiritual processes can badly damage the human personality as a whole. It is for this reason that Church Fathers describe depression as an "evil thought."

It is true that depression is an expression of our human personality, and the healing of depression restores spiritual balance. That is why, according to the Desert Fathers, "*like grass crushed on the road, so in the mind damaged by evil thoughts nothing can be cultivated*" (Lives

and Sayings of the Holy Fathers, II 26)<sup>3</sup>.

According to the Christian understanding, depression is like an alarm that forewarns us that something is in trouble in our inner spiritual world. Therefore, one must carefully and attentively reflect on and examine this process in order to detect the reasons and attendant issues. The causes of depression can be of different nature and character. They relate not only to most areas of our daily lives (facing the ordinary trials and stressors of everyday life), but also can be due to tragic losses or sudden changes. The main reasons which can often trigger feelings of depression in our spiritual lives are the following<sup>4</sup>:

- **Challenging life situations and experiences that feel impossible to overcome.** The lasting effects of these feelings are the main cause of depression.
- **Focusing more and more on past mistakes and transgressions than on changes you can make to restore peace and wholeness in your life.** No one can live his life without sin or mistake. But when we obsess over past mistakes rather than do what is in our power to avoid making them in the future, we subconsciously cultivate a sense of false guilt, which is to be distinguished from the appropriate feeling of remorse and regret for a wrong committed.
- **Lessening the rhythm of prayer life,** which can damage our spiritual “schedule.” If med-

itation, biblical readings, active engagement in parish and community life, and attention to spiritual 'hygiene' had an important place in our daily activities, and then, we started to neglect them, such deterioration would produce a negative feeling of loss and nostalgia, as if we were constantly failing to find something very precious and valuable.

- **Doubt and uncertainty in our faith**, which can also cause, both physically and psychologically, feelings of indifference and sadness. People who are experiencing grief, misery, distress, personal loss, hardship, social injustice, etc., very often struggle with feelings of confusion and anger against God. Spiritual reflections and meditations can help to overcome the feelings of grief, misery, distress, personal loss, hardship, and social injustice, and make one become more spiritually and mentally mature, while lack of reflection and self-examination enables depression.

It is important to remember that depressive disorders can often be the cause of cognitive distortions, which in some cases may have irrevocable effects. For example, one starts focusing on one event while excluding others. This irrational perception can lead to depression. Or, drawing an unjustified conclusion based on an ambiguous situation. One looks to unfairly blame oneself in a general catastrophe, which leads to further depression and the cultivation of the feeling of false guilt. All these cognitive distortions can

---

damage one's spiritual life because, without a rational and awake mind, it is impossible to find harmony and peace in one's life.

## HOW TO DEAL WITH DEPRESSION?

### THE BIBLE AND DEPRESSION

In the Bible, many passages relate to anxiety and worry. Everyone, in some period of life, will experience moments of disappointment, anxiety, and dissatisfaction, and such moments can have short-term or long-term effects. One can find the most visible symptoms of the depressive state in the Book of Psalms, where they are listed as follows: sadness, a lack of interest, a reduced capacity for work, disturbances of sleep, feelings of guilt, suicidal thoughts, etc.

- Psalm 42: 4-5, 6, 11-12: "My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" These things I remember as I pour out my soul... Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior, and my God. ...My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, "Where is your God?" Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior,

- Psalm 55:5-6: “Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me. I said, “Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest”.
- Psalm 88:1-6: “Lord you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you. May my prayer come before you turn your ear to my cry. I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength. I 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. You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths”.

In all these psalms the psychological and corporeal symptoms of neurotic depression are recorded as an expression of agitated behavior. This phenomenon was already documented in other biblical verses. For example, in I Kings (III Kings, Arm.) 21:27-28 the reaction of king Ahab to the prophecy of Elijah reminds us of the same agitated behavior that we find in certain psalms: “And when Ahab heard those words, he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth on his flesh, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about dejectedly”. Tearing one’s clothes, putting on sackcloth, fasting etc., are all forms of behavior that are associated with mourning.

Another important issue that the Bible brings to our attention is our natural fear facing death.

---

We are inclined to reflect on the vanity and futility of life, due both to our capacity for making wrong choices and our consciousness of death. From ancient times, we have associated the first cry of a new-born baby with the sorrow, grief, and loss that is an inseparable part of human life. The specter of death is more troublesome because of its sudden arrival. The Bible addresses the same phenomenon, associating inner anxiety with the reality that all humans live between life and death:

“A great anxiety has God allotted, and a heavy yoke, to the children of Adam, from the day they leave their mother’s womb until the day they return to the mother of all the living. Troubled thoughts and fear of heart are theirs, and anxious foreboding until death. Whether one sits on a lofty throne or grovels in dust and ashes, whether one wears a splendid crown or is clothed in the coarsest of garments—there is wrath and envy, trouble and dread, terror of death, fury, and strife. Even when one lies on his bed to rest, his worries disturb his sleep at night. So short is his rest, it seems like none, till in his dreams he struggles as he did by day, troubled by the visions of his mind, like a fugitive fleeing from the pursuer. As he reaches safety, he wakes up, astonished that there was nothing to fear” (Sirach 40:1-7).

It is clear from these biblical examples that depression was known in the biblical world. But what answer does the Bible give to it? The answer is in some fundamental biblical beliefs which are also remedies for spiritual depression. First of all, the world is not hostile to man, because the world expresses God's care towards the whole of creation (Psalms 9-10). Secondly, man is always loved and appreciated by God, who is near to man (Psalm 8). Thirdly, it is normal for everyone to express their own inner feelings (Psalm 6:2-8).

It is important to bear in mind the following Biblical message: to be Christian does not mean to live with only overwhelming feelings of fear or anxiety about death. Whether on a lofty throne or in dust and ashes, everyone is conscious of life's shortness. Without that feeling, it can be hard to confirm the rational nature of human beings. Homo sapiens is the only creature who can reflect on his own being.

Sinful human inclinations may create situations when we have to face depression, anxiety, and disappointment: "Truly the light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun; but if a man lives many years and rejoices in them all, yet let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. All that is coming is vanity." (Eccles. 11:7-8).

Yet, in our despair and anxiety, even a whispered thought about God's love, mercy, and healing presence is sufficient to direct us away from dangerous and harmful feelings. There is a truth

---

that can awaken the human soul. Walking in the footsteps of Christ, we will discover that amidst everyday life difficulties, injustice, and shocking and stressful realities, life is a divine gift.

As Christians, we can live our lives in the knowledge that we have access to the Kingdom of Heaven now, always bearing in our hearts, minds, and souls God's comforting presence.

## THE GREAT LIES OF DEPRESSION

**T**he Apostles and Church Fathers described depression as dejection and sorrow, a great sin. "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death," wrote St. Paul (II Corinthians 7:10). This death is not necessarily of a physical nature but also refers to spiritual death when man cuts himself off from all interpersonal relationships and puts a roadblock between him and his love for God. According to the Church Fathers, dejection is an "irreversible loss" (Lives and sayings, V 98)<sup>5</sup> and is directly connected with an abnormal desire to remain in depression. Indeed, dejection is the last phase of the human personality's total destruction, preceded by disappointment and hopelessness.

Depression relates to *delusion*, a dangerous phenomenon for our spiritual and mental health. In most cases, people facing depression become victims of their own problems, denying the re-

ality of their condition. In spiritual life, delusion creates several pseudo-convictions and assumptions.

Here are some great lies of depression that can damage the harmony of our spiritual life, cutting us gradually off from reality:

1. "This depression is just a phase, I just need a good night's sleep, and tomorrow I will forget all about it."

As helpful as it may seem, this approach can be a trap that prevents us from addressing the real issues causing depression. The disposition to be freed from these feelings is the first step to healing our mental and spiritual wounds.

2. "The only reason for depression is that my faith is weak."

This is a common expression, especially for those actively engaged in parish and Church life with some degree of spiritual experience. For such people, it is important to remember that depression is also a mental and physical disorder, a destructive reality for our personality and body. This is why it is unacceptable to try to overcome depression only with the help of one's own mind and religious convictions, as it is impossible to heal other diseases without medical and professional intervention. Moreover, in some cases, weakness of faith may not have any connection with depression or depres-

---

sive disorders. One of the Desert Fathers describes the harmony between body and soul as follows:

“My son, the body is the vessel of the soul, and one should maintain it in order. The body must not grow fat, otherwise, it could throw the soul from the mountain, nor should it be weak, for in that case, because of laziness, it will become useless for good works... Thus, one must keep the balance between body and soul until death separates them.” (Lives and sayings, V 106)<sup>6</sup>.

3. “I am guilty of some terrible sin and God has abandoned me”.

“False guilt” is one of the symptoms of depressive disorder. The Bible says that *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23). In that sense, we are all sinners and fail to reflect the likeness and glory of God. This should not lead to hopelessness but should be an impulse to awaken our minds to the fact that we all have a need for forgiveness and grace found through Jesus Christ. Every Christian, aware of his/her sins and transgressions, should seek to find forgiveness through the mercy and love of our Lord. False guilt entails an erroneous conception of remorse that leads to the highest level of disappointment and hopelessness.

True repentance and the need to be reconciled with God generate joy and exultation in our soul, allowing us to become clearly aware of the grace of forgiveness through Jesus Christ: “Never be disappointed, but rejoice, because God decided to clean the scars of your sins here, in this world” (Lives and sayings, VII 79)<sup>7</sup>. False guilt puts roadblocks in our minds and wipes all important memories which would have allowed us to remember God’s healing presence in our lives. As a result, our mind remains in a state of hopelessness, failing to recognize the love and mercy of God.

4. “I am not important, and my life has no value.”

Depression decreases the self-esteem of the person. This void creates a negative inner reflection of oneself and weakens the capacity to react well to everyday issues and experiences. A negative narration may follow, such as, “I have no importance in God’s eyes or in those of my relatives.” This can then spiral further into something terrible like suicidal ideation.

Some may experience this feeling but mistake it for humility, one of the most important Christian virtues. This is a trap. According to Christian spirituality, humility is when a person becomes aware of his sins and wrongs and constantly seeks to find forgive-

ness and reconciliation (cf. Lives and sayings, X 116). I remember quite well when a man, during confession, repeatedly told me that according to the Bible (Genesis 6:1-8 and I Kings 19:4), God is disappointed in humankind because of the terrible sins they have committed. His spontaneous and illusionary convictions were blocking his mind and he was not able to see that in Genesis 6:9, the story of Noah, another salvation narrative starts, and in I Kings 19:5-8, God not only rejects the desire of Elijah for Him to "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors" (I Kings 19:4), but even feeds, strengthens, and appears to him in a cave on Mount Horeb.

## STEPS FOR OVERCOMING DEPRESSION

**E**ffective clinical and psychotherapeutic intervention can help a person better manage depression. Depression is also an occasion for a Christian to better recognize his/her own personality and inner world. Therefore, one should not consider depression an incurable disease. Indeed, following the Christian spiritual tradition, we do confirm that the first step in healing any disease is to conceive of the disease as such, with all its effects and consequences. In this way, there is no need to reject clinical intervention: the peculiarity of the Christian way is to fully accept man as a triune entity of body, mind,

and soul. Thus, the healing process should also be considered a necessary cure for these three parts of the human person, along with modern clinical psychology and psychotherapy.

As indicated above, one of the symptoms of depression is a negative attitude towards reality. And this is not only a psychological, but also a spiritual issue. God has bestowed upon man, by His divine power, freedom of will and choice. However, man is not capable of changing the laws of nature or the biological processes of the human body. He has to accept them as a given reality. Anania of Narek († 978), one of the great teachers of the Armenian Church, mentioned this fact as an authentic sign of human rationality and wisdom. "God has created man as a wise creature so that he can be aware of the nature and character of every subject...For if you come closer to the wild beast, considering yourself as a lamb, he, because of his wild nature, will kill you. And if you throw yourself into the fire as if it were water, because of its burning nature, it will scorch you."<sup>8</sup>

Facing reality is the very important first step a person suffering from depression takes towards his/her healing. In this respect three questions are helpful<sup>9</sup>:

1. Where is the evidence?
2. Is there any other way of looking at the situation?
3. Is the situation as bad as it seems?

---

Alongside clinical intervention, prayer, Church Sacraments, and selected spiritual reading are also important remedies. Nevertheless, special attention should be paid so that a person does not misinterpret the basics of the Christian faith. For example, there are many biblical verses, full of beautiful and poetic images that describe the inner experience of dejection and remorse.

The wrong interpretation of these verses can cause someone to make that despair their own, thus increasing the depression. The essential principle for overcoming depression is participation in the Divine Liturgy, prayers, and Sacraments of the Church, and sharing thoughts with the parish priest and fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. The healing power of the common prayer and the Sacraments of the Church is a decisive factor for overcoming depression. Sharing thoughts with the parish priest is also a crucial step toward liberating us from the depressive state. For many believers who are facing depression, these consultations with the parish priest become one of the important spiritual remedies. The priest does not and cannot know all the answers to the questions and issues which are spiritually and mentally “torturing” us...but he is able to point out the answers which we failed to notice in our inner world.

For Christians, depression has a different postulation: It has to be seen in the light of Jesus Christ’s Cross and His redemptive action. Christian faith “is...capable of delivering man from sin/anxiety, provided that he opens himself up to

that redemption and its conditions. In the place of sin/anxiety, it provides him with anxiety-free access to God in faith, love, and hope..."<sup>10</sup>. Having been healed from depression and anxiety doesn't mean that we are immunized against mental disorders. We still remain sinful human beings, who often make dubious or wrong choices. But healing transfigures our mind and understanding so that we can be able to perceive any sickness in the new light of our Lord's Cross and Redemption.

One spiritual writer described the process of overcoming depression with the following words: "Gifts of Depression"<sup>11</sup> meaning that if we succeed in overcoming depression, we will become more attentive to our mental and spiritual capacities and will realize the limits of our human nature. We will reach a new level of self-understanding and self-knowledge. Thus, understanding depression and analyzing its causes enriches and broadens our mental and spiritual experience.

---

## FROM THE HEALING PRAYERS OF ST. GREGORY OF NAREK

“Grant me life, a compassionate one.  
Hear me, merciful one.  
Show favor, forgiving one.  
Save, forbearing one.  
Defend, protector.  
Be benevolent, mighty one.  
Deliver, omnipotent one.  
Revive, restorer.  
Raise up again, astounding one.  
Enlighten, heavenly one.  
Heal, resourceful one.  
Grant pardon, inscrutable one.  
Reward with gifts, generous one.  
Adorn with grace, affable one.  
Reconcile, immaculate one.  
Accept, charitable one.  
Wipe away transgressions, blessed one”.

*Book of Prayers, 2.4*

“Mental sentiments held secretly in my thoughts,  
as compartmentalized categories of evil deeds, I  
lay before you with confession, my God and Lord.  
...With you is salvation, and from you comes  
atonement;  
with your right hand, restoration, and with your  
finger, strength;

with your face, enlightenment, and with your countenance, delight;  
with your Spirit, goodness, and with your anointing oil, consolation;  
exhilaration with the dew of your grace.  
You give comfort.  
You banish despair.  
You lift away the darkness of sorrow.  
You turn the sighs of lamentation into laughter”.

*Book of Prayer, 9.3-4*

“Blessed, blessed, and blessed again!  
Having accepted me by that same faith,  
raise me up from my fallen state, O Benefactor;  
cure me of the maladies of disease, O Merciful;  
bring me back to life from the edge of death, O Life;  
for I am yours, so make me live, O refuge.  
Grant me, a dead person, the breath of life, O Resurrection”.

*Book of Prayers, 42.2*

*From the Depths of the Heart: Annotated translation of the Prayers of St. Gregory of Narek by Abraham Terian (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press Academic, 2021)*

---

# Notes

---

## REFERENCES

1. **D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones**, *Spiritual Depression. Its Causes and Its Cure*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1965, pp. 10-11.
  2. **Crystal Raypole**, «Understanding Spiritual Depression», <https://www.healthline.com/health/depression/spiritual-depression>
  3. *Lives and Sayings of Holy Fathers* (in Armenian), Holy Etchmiadzin, 2016, p. 88.
  4. **Fr. George Morelli**, «Overcoming Depression: Cognitive Scientific Psychology and Church Fathers», <http://ww1.antiochian.org/node/17967>
  5. *Lives and Sayings of Holy Fathers*, p.212.
  6. *Lives and Sayings of Holy Fathers*, p. 214.
  7. *Lives and Sayings of Holy Fathers*, p. 265.
  8. *On Patience and Peace* (in Armenian), Armenian Classical Authors, vol. X, Antelias: Lebanon, 2009, p. 338.
  9. **Fr. George Morelli**, op. cit.
  10. **Hans Urs von Balthasar**, *The Christian and Anxiety*, tr. by Dennis D. Martin and Michael J. Miller, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2000, pp. 96-97.
  11. **Thomas Moore**, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1994, p. 137.
- Cover:** Painer Krikor Artsakhetsi (Tzaghgogh), *Nativity* (fragment), 13th century, MM, manuscript 2743, [www.art365.am](http://www.art365.am)





ԱՌԱՋՆՈՐԴՈՒԹԻՒՆ ՀԱՅՈՑ ԱՄԵՐԻԿԱՅԻ ԱՐԵՒԵԼԵԱՆ ԹԵՄԻ  
DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA (EASTERN)

630 Second Avenue, New York, New York 10016  
[www.armenianchurch.us](http://www.armenianchurch.us)

[www.vemkar.us](http://www.vemkar.us)