**Depression Resource Paper**

**Lightbearers resource papers are designed as a resource to Lightbearers staff as they interact with students and partners and are asked to provide wisdom on a variety of topics. These papers should not be considered a doctrinal stance in competition with your local church but an internal resource providing clarity on a sound evangelical stance on particular issues. Please seek out the counsel of the church under whose authority you have placed yourself as needed in responding to specific situations.**

**Foundational to each paper is the perspective that the Gospel is primary. No topic competes with the message of the Gospel for primacy in the church. At the same time, the Gospel impacts every corner of life (1 Corinthians 6:20); therefore, we aim to provide staff with direction that is Biblically sound and points them to view any issue through the lens of the Gospel—the good news that we are far more sinful and God far more holy than we thought but the life and grace that God offers through Christ’s death and resurrection is far greater than we dare to hope.**

The term depression refers to a low mood affecting a person’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviors over a long period of time. This is not to be confused with someone who is generally a melancholy or low-key personality or a sense of feeling down that everyone feels from time to time. Symptoms often include distinct changes in sleep, appetite, mood, and energy. Depression is not an easy topic to understand. John Piper, in his book *When The Darkness Will Not Lift* addressing the topic of depression, wrote “I am aware I have put my oar in a large sea.” Nevertheless, it is an ever-increasing struggle for students and the population at large. In 2011, the American College Health Association study of college students revealed that 30% of students have felt “so depressed that it was difficult to function” in the past 12 months.

**Different Views**

There are a number of views on the cause of depression. If we’re honest, no one really knows the cause of depression. It’s elusive. It’s different for different people. The most widely held and often debated views are summarized below. Every individual’s situation is different and may be contributed to by one or more of these areas1:

* Spiritual – Unwise and sinful thoughts, not believing in God’s sovereignty and goodness. This may also include attacks from Satan. The psalmist wrote in 42:11, “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”. We get a sense that when our eyes are turned on ourselves we will become disturbed and over a prolonged period of time depressed, but when we are turned to Christ that we will be restored with hope and joy. Others might argue that the depression is the natural result of unrepented sin our life, as David writes, “When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted way through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me.” (Psalm 32:5)
* Physical – Chemical imbalance in the body (i.e., serotonin, norepinephrine, dopamine). Scripture teaches that we are made of matter and spirit. 2 Corinthians 4:16 tells us that our bodies are dying, wasting away. We live in a dying world. If diseases like cancer are present in our world and bodies, why would we not also believe that afflictions of the brain could be as well? Whether the imbalances are the root cause or simply a reaction to the other areas is indeterminable.
* Emotional – the natural response to the hardships of life, left untended (unresolved grief, lack of forgiveness/anger turned inward). Lamentations 3:19-24 is a good example of Jeremiah’s journey of loss, grief, and ultimately hope in Christ. He remembers his affliction. It is always before him. Ultimately, however, he does not leave his grief untended. Through his journey of remembering and grieving his loss, he finds comfort in the mercy and faithfulness of God.

A number of evangelical leaders do not believe in the physical aspect as a cause of depression. This group believes that placing depression in the category of physical takes away the responsibility of an individual for their thoughts and behaviors. They cite Ecclesiastes 12:7 and James 2:26 as evidences that the body is dead and the spirit is alive. A smaller number of evangelicals today, however, believe that there can be physical aspects to depression as a result of the fall. Depending on the group, one of these areas may be overlooked for an emphasis on another. In the secular, medical world the spiritual aspect is often overlooked while in the Christian, church world the physical and emotional aspects are at times under-emphasized.

**Practical Tips**

The National Alliance on Mental Illness reports that 40% of individuals who feel depressed do not seek help. Christians often have a greater sense of guilt for experiencing depression because they feel it is lack of faith or personal sin. No matter what one may believe about the origins of depression, we are called to respond to those struggling with depression with love and hope. In a 2011 Barna study, 18% of young Christians said that their faith did not help with depression or other emotional problems. The most important part of discipling someone who you believe may be battling depression is not necessarily for them to get out of it, but to know God is with them in it (Romans 8, Micah 7). Below are some practical tips when ministering to a student who struggles with depression.

We take our example from Elijah and the Lord. Elijah in his depression cried out to God “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life…” (1 Kings 19:4). The Lord did not tell Elijah he needed to renounce Satan, turn from his sin, or have more faith, he said “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you” (1 Kings 19:7) and provided him food, rest, more food, and more rest. And Elijah revived. Taking the Lord’s example, some tips are below along with some suggested questions:

* Ensure you understand what they are experiencing (How does it look practically? What does it mean to them?) Too many times we hear the word depression, assume we know what they are talking about, and move on. Understand what it looks like in vivid detail.
  + What does depression look like for you (i.e., can’t get out of bed, feel lonely in a crowd, foggy thoughts)?
  + How is it impacting your life and your relationships with God and with others? Get specifics (i.e., I don’t respond to texts because it’s too overwhelming, I can’t concentrate when reading my Bible).
* Encourage them to be honest about the hurts and trials of their life. Too often, we overlook the emotional component of depression and though well meaning, give pat answers that prevent the individual from fully experiencing life. Psalms 6 says that David’s tears flooded his bed.
  + What are the hardest things you have been through in your life? How have you grieved them?
  + What are the 3-4 things that have happened in your life that make it difficult to experience joy?
* Gently and firmly call them out of sin and selfishness
  + Is there any unrepentant sin in your life? Perhaps review the areas of life and ask them to talk about each one of them, looking for areas of sin that they may not see or want to confess.
  + At times this may require a firm “You need to stop \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (anger, jealousy, lust, etc.) and turn to God in repentance.
  + How is God’s word speaking into this area of your life? Have you talked to Jesus about this?
  + How have you allowed the church to enter into your life?
* Encourage them to keep doing the things that bring life to them (e.g., community, exercise, worship). Charles Spurgeon, who struggled with lifelong depression said, “Don’t wait until you’re out of it to move on in life, move on in the midst of it”.
  + What are the 2-3 things that in the past have restored your soul that you could commit to do in the midst of this struggle?
  + When do you feel the closest to God?
  + Where is the place where you feel total peace and safety? How do you experience God there? Community?
* Disciple each person toward reconciling their whole self (head and heart) to God, them self, and others.
  + What are the triggers for you to start feeling depressed? If they can’t answer that, help them explore and start to notice what those are. They are there.
  + When did this start happening for you? It’s possible, and often likely, there is a family component to depression and/or unresolved losses.

**Recommending Counseling**

Knowing when to recommend professional counseling is at times difficult. An individual’s situation may become more than you feel capable to handle or just make you feel stuck. That’s okay. Gently and relationally help them find a counselor that can spend more directed time with them. Counseling is often specific and directed while discipleship is holistic and life-on-life. A sign that it’s time for counseling may be that when you meet with someone it is consumed with the one thing that the individual cannot move away from or incorporate into holistic discipleship. We are all going to experience periods of sadness for days or weeks. Experts say that depression lasts more than a few weeks, this is also a good gauge as to when you may want to suggest counseling.

When referring someone to counseling, ensure the Campus Director is aware of the referral. When in doubt, ask the Campus Director. If the depression moves from general despair and lack of interest in life toward ideas and/or plans of suicide, elevate the situation immediately and connect the student with a counselor in your area.

References:

*1Christian Doctors on Depression*, The Journal of Biblical Counseling, Volume 18, Number 3, Spring 2000

Resources for further reading:

Charles Spurgeon on depression: <http://www.haventoday.org/spurgeon-on-depression-gd-434.html>

John Piper, *When the Darkness will not Lift*

Martin Lloyd-Jone*s, Spiritual Depression*

Village Church’s ways to battle depression: <http://www.thevillagechurch.net/the-village-blog/9-ways-to-battle-depression-condemnation-and-anxiety/>