

Overcoming the Blues:
Finding Christ-Centered Hope and
Joy through Serving Others

LEADER'S GUIDE

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About the Author

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Disclaimer

The ideas presented in this *Leader's Guide* are in no way intended to be a replacement for proper medical care (including medication) or for specialized, professional counseling or psychotherapy. If you are in imminent danger of harming yourself or someone else, you need to seek professional help immediately. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 988 (available 24/7). Their website is: www.SuicidePreventionLifeline.org.

Introduction to Leader's Guide

Welcome to the Leader's Guide for *Overcoming the Blues*! This teacher's manual is intended to serve as a supplementary resource for small group leaders, Bible class teachers, Christian ministry educators, pastoral counselors, chaplaincy training programs, and support group facilitators. It is designed to allow teachers/group leaders to systematically walk their students/group members through key topics, themes, and ideas related to the material found in primary text in a more intentional and interactive way.

The curriculum is set up as a thirteen-week lesson series. The material is structured to be easy to follow and user-friendly, especially for those busy teachers/facilitators who have limited extra time for study and preparation, and who need some practical material that is ready-to-go. Each chapter provides biblically based teaching content, discussion group questions, and group exercises/activities to invite the active participation of your students or small group members.

I sincerely appreciate your courage, compassion, and commitment to tackle the challenging topic of depression, as many believers struggle daily with this debilitating mental health issue and are in desperate need of genuine understanding, biblical encouragement, practical tips for self-help strategies, and – most of all – spiritual hope!

~ Ryan Noel Fraser, PhD

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Lesson #1: Intro. & The Beginning

(From Book Intro. and Chapter One)

Welcome to this special 13-session curriculum based on *Overcoming the Blues* by Dr. Ryan Fraser! This unique study is going to be a challenging, yet uplifting, journey. You are to be commended for signing up for this group/class, as it takes a lot of self-awareness, courage, and humility to face the reality of you or your loved one's mental health struggles and seek guidance and help. The truth of the matter is that most families these days are either directly or indirectly impacted by mental health difficulties of some kind or another, particularly depression and anxiety. It can be very discouraging and disorienting to say the least.

Nobody is immune from mental health issues like depression, not even the most dedicated and faithful Christians. Finding the inner strength to cope with ongoing mental health problems in one's life may seem like an insurmountable personal challenge for many followers of Jesus. At times you may feel like you're useless, unworthy of joy, and a complete spiritual failure. But hope is on the way!

This curriculum offers hope in three Christ-centered ways: (1) to **recognize** God's abiding presence, (2) to **reach out** to others, and (3) to **respect** your limitations. It's about personal transformation. It's about rising above your own pain and emotional suffering to meet a spiritual challenge.

Purpose Statement

The main purpose of the study is to *motivate, mentor, and mobilize* sufferers of depression to become compassionate servants to those around them. Serving is so much more than merely a short-lived distraction from your own suffering. It can be a powerful and restorative antidote—a transformative way of life that produces psychological and spiritual healing. So, let's waste no more time and dive into our study together!

Discussion question: What is the most difficult aspect for you and/or your loved one in dealing with depression or the blues?

Recent Stats on Depression

Depression is on the rise! Nearly 18.8 million American adults experience depression each year. Women are approximately twice as likely as men to develop major depression.¹ Major depressive disorder can develop at any age; however, the average age at onset is 32.²

Depression is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. for ages 15-44.³ Furthermore, anti-depressants have become the second highest volume drug in the U.S., second only to

¹ <https://www.webmd.com/depression/guide/is-it-depression-or-the-blues>. **Also see:** Kessler, R. C., Berglund, P., Demler, O., Jin, R., Koretz, D., Merikangas, K. R., Rush, A. J., Walters, E. E., & Wang, P. S. The epidemiology of major depressive disorder: Results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCS-R). *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 2003; June 18; 289(23): 3095-105.

² Kessler, R. C., Berglund, P. A., Demler, O., Jin, R., & Walters, E. E. Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCS-R). *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 2005, June, 62(6): 593-602.

³ The World Health Organization. *The global burden of disease: 2004 update*, Table A2: Burden of disease in DALYs by cause, sex and income group in WHO regions, estimates for 2004. Geneva, Switzerland: WHO, 2008.

cholesterol meds. It's definitely mindboggling to grasp that the number of people diagnosed with depression is increasing by 30% every year. And, it is important to recognize that depressive disorders often co-occur with anxiety disorders and substance abuse.⁴ On a global scale, reportedly more than 350 million people of all ages worldwide suffer with depression.⁵

Countless individuals battle this issue on a daily basis often in silence, secrecy, and shame. They generally struggle with a tremendous sense of personal stigma. The sad reality is that depression is more often than not at the root of many, if not most, suicide attempts and deaths by suicide. Regrettably, the majority of us have been touched either directly or indirectly by the suicide of a loved one.

We can confidently say, people **everywhere** are hurting and in desperate need of real help. But not just any help—help that addresses mind, body, and soul—help that provides hope and comfort for the faithful Christian.

So here's a thought to ponder: What if the depressed person might offer help to another person and, in that process, help him or herself at the same time? Wouldn't that constitute a double blessing? The avenue of compassionate caring and serving is a relatively untapped strategy or antidote for depressed persons to facilitate their own healing and growth.

Focus of the Study Series

⁴ See footnote #4. Kessler, R. C., Berglund, P. A., Demler, O., Jin, R., & Walters, E. E. Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCS-R). *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 2005, June, 62(6): 593-602.

⁵ World Health Organization (WHO), Fact sheet N°369, October 2012. ©WHO 2014.
<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs369/en/>

This study will teach you how to become a more effective, Christ-centered, joy-filled compassion giver. It will help you find a way to come out of yourself and discover hope and purpose. It will also deepen your faith, increase your compassion, and strengthen your care. Not *in spite of* depression, but precisely *because of* it.

Group Exercise/Activity:

Write the word “Depression” vertically on a whiteboard and/or distribute worksheet #1 (that has the word featured in a vertical format). Now, ask students/group members to create an acrostic with each letter representing a symptom or aspect of depression. Discuss it together as a group.

Depression Acrostic (Worksheet #1)

D

E

P

R

E

S

S

I

O

N

Discussion Question: How has depression (whether of mild, moderate or severe intensity) directly impacted you or a loved one's life?

(Note: Leader, please allow enough time for anyone who is comfortable doing so to respond. Also, remember that transparency and self-disclosure on your part will encourage your students or group members to share personal experiences from their own lives.)

Discussion Question: How may battling with the blues present the sufferer with a unique opportunity to grow as an individual?

Potential Answer: It can teach you to love more sincerely, to reach out with the compassion of Christ, and to possess His heart and be His hands in this world in a more potent and meaningful way than ever before in your life. Depression is a doorway to greater depth and discovery.

Key Scripture

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 (ESV), the apostle Paul says, *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too."*

Discussion Question: What does this verse mean to you personally as a believer?

Potential Answer: Suffering produces an increased sensitivity to the needs of others, deeper compassion, and a greater capacity for spiritual care and comfort. When we experience something emotionally difficult in our lives and receive comfort and help from the Lord, we are thankful for his mercy and faithfulness to us, and it strengthens our faith and heightens our sense of indebtedness to Christ. We want to pass God's great love and amazing grace forward to others. Serving is more than merely a short-lived distraction from your own suffering; it is a powerful and restorative antidote.

The God of All Comfort

Christ-centered hope is facilitated for the depressed in three distinct ways:

(1) **Recognize** that despite the emotional pain and distress produced by depression, God's abiding presence remains and he is going to take care of you no matter what happens. Spiritual peace is fostered through a trusting relationship with God. Although depression often sabotages your ability to respond to God's loving overtures, he is in relentless pursuit of you. The source of your strength is God's unfailing love in your life. God's inspired Word holds the power to supply new life and spiritual sustenance.

(2) **Reach out** to your loved ones and foster deeper levels of intimacy with your friends, as well as to help others who may be discouraged.

Discussion Question: What are some practical, hands-on ways to reach out to others?

Potential Answers: Send a card in the mail, make a phone call, invite a friend out to lunch who is going through a difficult time, etc.

(3) Respect your own limitations. Since there are restraints to your physical and emotional energy resources, it is important to maintain healthy personal and interpersonal boundaries. This requires appropriate self-love and self-care.

Jesus said to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). Jesus often took time during his earthly ministry for time alone to rest and recover from the demands of his busy schedule (e.g., Jesus fell fast asleep in stern of the boat on a cushion in Mark 4:35-40), to connect with special friends (e.g., at Mary and Martha’s house in Luke 10:38-42), and to spend meaningful time in prayer with his heavenly father (e.g., Jesus went up on a mountain to pray all night in Matthew 14:22-23).

Discussion Question: What are some practical examples of appropriate self-love and self-care? (List some strategies you’ve found helpful to do this effectively.)

Potential Answers: Proper preventative medical care (including regular check-ups and taking prescribed meds) and professional counseling; knowing your boundaries and respecting your limitations; established a well-balanced diet of healthy food; regular exercise; sufficient rest and sleep; engaging in enjoyable recreational activities and hobbies.

Jeremiah’s Story: A Vivid Analogy

Read Jeremiah 38. The weeping prophet, Jeremiah, was thrown into a waterless cistern and sank into the mire. There was no way for him to get out. He needed external help to escape the deathtrap in which he found himself. Jeremiah was extremely weak, hadn’t eaten anything in

days, and couldn't feel his legs. God sent Ebed-Melech (the eunuch) along with 30 men to pull him out with a cloth chord.

Discussion Question: What connections do you make between your personal experience (or other's experiences) in struggling with "the blues" with Jeremiah's story of pain and deliverance?

The Importance of Self-Care

Jesus taught his followers to love their neighbor as themselves (see: Mark 12:31 says, "Love your neighbor as yourself."). By implication, this divine command assumes self-love as being foundational to good physical/emotional health and wholeness. When it comes to coping with depression, appropriate self-care is critically important. Self-care takes many forms: physical, emotional, intellectual, relational, and spiritual. It involves caring for your body, your heart, your mind, and your soul and spirit.

Class Activity/Exercise: On a white-board write "Self-Care Strategies" on the top. Next, make five columns with the following words at the top: (1) Physical; (2) Emotional; (3) Intellectual; (4) Relational; and (5) Spiritual. Ask your class/group members to brainstorm and come up with practical self-care strategies for each of these categories and write them on the board. [**Note:** If your class is large, you may form smaller groups of 4-5 people to facilitate this activity more effectively.]

Conclusion:

Before you can really reach out to others with Christ's love and compassion, you must first learn to extend that same type of love and compassion to yourself.

Prayer

Dear God,

Thank you for this opportunity to gather together in a supportive environment to share and to grow in knowledge and hope. Be with each person in this group/class as we discover Christ-centered ways to cope more effectively with depression. Give us the wisdom, courage, and energy we need for this difficult journey. Thank you for your abiding presence and the divine comfort you provide through your Holy Word and the Holy Spirit. Please help us to be honest with ourselves and with one another. We humbly ask that you fill us with your perfect peace that surpasses understanding.

In Jesus' name, Amen!

Lesson #2: The Positives of Depression

(From Chapter Two)

The presence of depression in your life isn't indicative of God's judgment or disapproval. As a loving and compassionate father, God cares deeply about you and hurts for you in the midst of your struggle. Depression doesn't need to define your entire life. It's just one facet of the overall picture and not the sum of who you are. It doesn't need to hinder your walk with God either. In fact, the dark shadow of depression can push you to a deeper walk.

But let's be frank, it may be extremely difficult to see anything good ever coming from depression. The very thought of it likely seems ludicrous and nearly impossible. However, in Mark 10:27b, Jesus says, "For all things are possible with God" (ESV).

You see, for every negative, there is generally also a positive. There's an old saying that says, "Every cloud has a silver lining." Depression comes with some hidden, less obvious opportunities that are usually overlooked. God is always at work in our lives to bless us and produce good fruit as he carries out his perfect plan and purpose for us. Romans 8:28 (ESV) says, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

Lesson Aim/Purpose

In this session, we are going to try and think outside the box and dare to consider some unimaginably potent ways in which depression may actually serve to positively affect our lives. This endeavor will require us to lay aside many of our preconceived notions about the obviously negative aspects of depression, so we can view it through a totally different set of lenses.

Discussion Question: If you can set all the negatives of depression aside for a moment, what are some potential positives that may come from experiencing depression in one's life?

Potential Answers:

- Depression offers us the chance to grow as a person in our understanding of God, self, and others.
- Depression can heighten your awareness of not only your own suffering, but also of the struggles of those around you.
- Suffering produces an increased sensitivity to the needs of others, deeper compassion, and a greater capacity for spiritual care and comfort.
- It intensifies your ability to sympathize and empathize with other individuals who are also going through difficult times in their lives (giving you “insider” knowledge).
- Several ways depression can make you stronger include the following: (1) You can become a better problem-solver; (2) You can become better at coping with life in general; (3) You can cultivate better relationships by learning to prioritize what's most important; (4) You can become more caring and compassionate; and (5) You can become more realistic about matters of control.

More than Conquerors in Christ

God certainly possesses the sovereign prerogative to place his almighty healing hand upon you and totally eradicate depression from your life. But what if he chooses not to? What if that's not part of his plan for you? What if, like in the apostle Paul's case, God decides not to

remove your thorn in the flesh but instead asserts, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9)?

A faithful response to depression does not necessarily entail the eradication of it, as much as it means learning to live with it without abandoning hope in the Lord. The big challenge is learning to develop greater trust and reliance on God in light of your struggle, trusting in His goodness, grace and unlimited power. There are extremely valuable lessons we learn through suffering that can't be learned any other way. God is actively at work to provide you with the necessary resources to overcome and be more than a conqueror through Christ. The devil wants us to live with a victim mentality, but Christ intends for us to live victoriously.

Romans 8:37-39 (ESV) states: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Growing through Service

One of the most effective strategies for coping with depression is to shift your perspective by taking your eyes off self and turning your attention and care toward others. Investing our time, energy, skills, and resources in kingdom work is an effectual way for depressed individuals to dwell on positive and worthwhile things. We can discover a clearer sense of spiritual purpose and find great fulfillment through ministering to others.

As a believer in Christ, you can rest assured that nothing—not even the deepest depression—will ever be able to exclude you from God's love. You will never be out of his reach. No matter the circumstances, Jesus will be right there by your side helping you and strengthening your soul.

Discussion Question: What are some examples of unhealthy perspectives you have internalized regarding the beleaguered condition of your faith?

Discussion Question: Name a few detrimental and unhelpful perceptions you tend to hold regarding God's view of and feelings toward you? How do these distorted ideas impact you emotionally and spiritually?

The Bible clearly demonstrates to us time and again how much God loves us and wants the best for our lives. Romans 5:7-8 (ESV) says, "For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Discussion Question: What does the Cross of Jesus Christ tell us about how God sees us?

Conclusion:

As a believer in Christ, you can rest assured that nothing—not even the deepest depression—will ever be able to exclude you from God's love. You will never be out of his reach. No matter the circumstances, Jesus will be right there by your side helping you and strengthening your soul.

Prayer

Dear God,

As difficult and impossible as it may seem to us, please help us to search for and discover the positives of depression. Open the eyes of our hearts so we can more clearly see what you are trying to show us about who you are and what you desire for us. Refine us like pure gold and help us to grow as caring, faithful servants because of our struggle. Empower us to become more than conquerors through Christ's love in our lives. Each day, show us glimpses of your abiding and sustaining presence. May your limitless power, righteousness, and strength be perfected in our weaknesses as we learn to trust in you more fully each day.

In Jesus' name, Amen!

Lesson #3: A Community of Care

(From Chapter Three)

Our modern society's notion of "community" has changed dramatically from what it once was. On the rugged western frontier of North America, life was treacherous. Small groups of brave souls stuck closely together in tightknit communities out of pure necessity. It was a matter of life and death. Everybody knew everyone else's business. Not because they were nosey, but because people needed each other's help and mutual protection as they trekked westward to stake their claim.

We were created for community. As humans, we are inherently relational beings who need to feel like we belong. The church is called to be a meaningful, close-knit community of faith – the body of Christ. We are supposed to function interdependently, especially when it comes to giving and receiving care.

Discussion Question: How do you define the concept of "community"? What does it mean to you personally?

Shared Struggling

As human beings, we all have something in common with one another: namely, *suffering*. God wants us to understand that we're not alone in our painful circumstances. Other faithful believers endure similar difficulties. We're subject to the same trials, temptations and tribulations as unbelievers—perhaps even more so. That's why we need each other so much!

Jesus fostered meaningful relationships and spiritual connectivity wherever he went. By making himself available, the Lord made the grace of God accessible to all people, even those living on the fringes of society. But oftentimes, the depressed struggle with a deep sense of loneliness and isolation from others. It may feel like few, if any, other people can truly relate to what it's like to endure this intense type of emotional and spiritual pain.

Metaphor: The Church as a Living Organism

The church is portrayed in Scripture as a living organism that is intended to function as a healthy and whole interconnected body, as each of her members fulfills their respective roles (1 Cor. 12:12-31). To be a member of something far bigger than ourselves is comforting. There is strength in numbers as well as the existence of *synergy* (i.e., The whole is greater than the sum of the parts). Together we can accomplish what we can't individually. The church is not building made of wood, bricks, and mortar. She is supposed to be a living, breathing, vibrant, and adaptive community (or body) of unified caring members.

The Two-Horse Rule

The concepts of synergy and teamwork can be illustrated by "the two-horse rule." If one horse is able to pull 700 pounds and another horse 800 pounds, how much weight can they pull when harnessed together? Logically, the answer would be 1,500 pounds. But the actual answer is surprising. A two-horse team is able to pull its own weight plus the weight of their interaction. Therefore, harnessed together, the horses can pull 3,000 pounds.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (NIV) affirms,

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him

up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

According to the concept of synergy, something new and exciting is created in the process of working together so that the result is greater than the sum of each individual's efforts. When we work together in solidarity, the reward will always be much more satisfying.

But it is not only the reward of our work that is under consideration by Solomon; he argues that it is better for us to have a partner in difficult times. As inferred in Ecclesiastes 4:12b (NIV), which says, “*A cord of three strands is not quickly broken,*” the third strand of any strong relationship lies in a connection with our heavenly Father. This kind of spiritually bonded relationship will not dissolve easily. It will be able to withstand formidable external threats and significant pressure. To know that Christian friends “have our backs” gives us a tremendous sense of security, especially in tough times.

Group Exercise: Write the word, “COMMUNITY,” on white board or large paper tablet. Use the word as an acrostic for group members to think of different qualities that accurately define/capture this concept beginning with each letter beginning the respective word.

COMMUNITY Acrostic (Worksheet #2)

C

O

M

M

U

N

I

T

Y

“One Another” Scriptures

The New Testament is full of “one another” passages that clearly illustrate the above concept for us. These scriptures teach us how we ought to love one another and look out for the well-being of each other within the household of God.⁶ The emotional and spiritual strength we draw from community is difficult to quantify.

Jesus recognized how important it would be for his followers to remain in solidarity and mutual loving care. The church was his divine solution to our problem of loneliness, as well as our human need for ongoing accountability in our faith.

Jesus taught his disciples to be about the business of serving one another and taking care of each other. At the Last Supper, Jesus demonstrated to the twelve, through washing their feet (John 13:1-17), how they were to humbly serve others in the kingdom of heaven. The early church, under the direction of the apostles, was united in heart and soul. They pooled all their resources together and shared their possessions with those in need, showed hospitality in their homes, and served together in humility and love (Acts 2:44-47).

As Christ's body, we must care because Jesus cared, we must share because he shared, and at times, we must place the needs of the body of Christ ahead of our own needs. There are countless ways by which we can go about strengthening our sense of community and committed service to one another and the world around us. But even within the body of Christ, we sometimes—due to depression—experience a sense of loneliness and isolation.

⁶ See: John 15:12, 17; Rom. 12:5, 10, 16; 13:8; 14:13; 15:5-7, 14; 16:16; 1 Cor. 12:25-26; 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:11-12; Gal. 5:13; 6:2; Eph. 4:2, 25, 32; 5:19, 21; Col. 3:13, 16; 1 Thess. 3:12; 4:9, 18; 5:11, 15; 2 Thess. 1:3; Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25; James 5:16; 1 Pet. 1:22; 4:8-10; 5:5, 14; 1 John 1:7; 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11-12; 2 John 1:5).

Discussion Question: How can we combat the major problem of emotional isolation and loneliness in our lives?

Here are a couple of important steps to consider:

Step One: Start with yourself. In other words, become your own friend. We all have an “inner child” that speaks to us throughout our lives. It can declare either words of life and encouragement or words of discouragement. We call this “self talk.” Therefore, make the conscious decision that this voice will be uplifting and positive, one that conveys to you the truth that you’re special, precious to God, and worthy to be loved.

Step Two: Pray that God will lead you to persons with whom you can develop encouraging and healthy friendships. But, proceed cautiously and prayerfully. Attend worship services and other church activities that will put you in direct contact with others. Seek out a trusted friend whom you are accountable to and commit to speak with them openly at least three times per week.

More Strategies to Foster Connection and Offset Loneliness

Another idea is to sign up to volunteer alongside a group of workers either at church or for a local charity or civic organization. Serving with others facilitates communication and fosters camaraderie that comes about naturally because of the shared purpose/mission.

Within our families, friendship, churches, communities, and the larger world there are countless opportunities to follow in Jesus’ footsteps of humble servitude. We can discover a clearer sense of spiritual purpose and find personal life fulfillment in service to others.

James 1:27 (ESV) says, “*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is*

this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

Because of God's heart for the poor, he expects the Body of Christ to take appropriate measures in its responsiveness. Unique situations occasionally arise in which the church is called upon to supply various material needs (i.e., food, clothing, shelter, transportation, medical expenses, utility bills, etc.). The body of Christ is supposed to be a compassionate community of care and concern.

Jesus proclaimed, *“It is more blessed to give than to receive”* (Acts 20:35, ESV). The principles taught in the New Testament regarding how charity should be performed include the following: (1) anonymity so as to bring glory to God rather than ourselves (Matt. 6:2-4); (2) humility (Luke 14:12-14); (3) faithful sincerity (James 2:15-17); and (4) sacrificial love (1 Cor. 13).

Prayer

Dear God,

Please help us to seek and find a true sense of community and connectedness in our lives. Give us the strength and sensitivity to be proactive in building stronger relationships with others. Help us to work together in this group, in our homes, and church to provide a safe place for sharing with and caring for one another in a Christ-like way.

In Jesus' name, Amen!

Lesson #4: The Ministry of Presence; Drowning in Depression

(From Chapters Four & Five)

True friends are often hard to come by. Jesus modeled for his disciples how to be a true friend to others. For Christ, companionship was always a means to an end, never an end in and of itself. He had an eternal spiritual purpose for it. His incarnational ministry was a ministry of presence. He was fully there for people in a transformative way.

To listen well is to show that we care, that we're fully present. People crave to be heard, understood, and empathized with by another human being. It means that they matter at least to one other person in this world. People also need to be approached in a manner that touches the deeper level of their existence, namely their eternal souls. That is precisely why the nature, manner, and focus of our conversations with others is so very important and crucial to our Christian testimony to the world.

Discussion Question: As Christians, what should be some of the defining characteristics of our conversations with others?

All around us, individuals are hurting. We see evidence of suffering. Within our own families, churches, schools, workplaces, and communities people need our loving care.

Scripture reveals many instances in which Jesus interacted directly with suffering people. Those individuals came from diverse backgrounds and struggled with physical, emotional,

relational, and spiritual ailments. Their stories remain relevant to us at the most basic human level and highlight our personal responsibility to lovingly serve others.

In *Overcoming the Blues*, Dr. Fraser suggests the following initial ways to be present to others, even if not physically being in the same proximity:

- (1) Write a card to a shut-in, new mother, someone recovering from surgery, or an individual who has lost a loved one or a beloved pet.
- (2) Make encouraging phone calls to those you are aware of who are struggling in their lives.
- (3) Develop a prayer list, which includes the names of specific individuals whom you want to lift up to God on a regular basis.

Discussion Question: What are some additional ideas of ways we can engage in a ministry of presence to those around us who are hurting?

The Greatest Conversationalist: Jesus Christ

So what made Jesus such an amazingly effective conversationalist? How did he model spiritual care through his distinctive style of interpersonal communication?

First of all, he was clearly a skilled reflective listener. He intuitively knew how to draw people out of themselves by his extraordinary listening ability. Even as a twelve-year-old, Jesus demonstrated the uncanny ability to listen and relate well to others, even those far older than himself (Luke 2:41-47). Jesus knew precisely what types of questions to ask to evoke the theological imagination of others, and he knew how to respond to questions wisely, with words *seasoned with spiritual salt and grace* (Col. 4:6).

Discussion Question: What are some ways that our conversations should be more seasoned with salt and grace?

Small Acts of Kindness

Performing small acts of kindness by reaching out to others with God's love reminds us of our own God-imaged nature and identity, including our inherent worth. It also serves as a good distraction—even if only a momentary escape—from our personal pain and suffering. When we selflessly serve others we receive something back in return, a sense of genuine purpose and Christ-centered hope and spiritual joy.

Matthew 20:28 (ESV) reveals something rather profound and potent to us, namely that “the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” There is life-changing meaning and a transformative sense of purpose, eternal hope, and unparalleled joy in service. Jesus once said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35, ESV). The true blessing in being a generous and humble servant ultimately belongs to us, because we will reap what we sow.

Discussion Question: What are some practical and tangible ways that you might challenge yourself to step out of your comfort zone to make a positive difference in the life of others?

Prayer

Dear God,

Please help us to learn from Jesus' example on how to offer the beautiful gift of true friendship and companionship to others. Teach us how to be more emotionally present and

spiritually helpful to those who are suffering. Surround us by caring and loyal friends and also help us to become better friends and companions.

In Jesus' Name, Amen!

Lesson #5: Until You Walk a Mile in My Shoes

(From Chapter Six)

Unfair Criticism

Many times, due to personal ignorance, inexperience, and misguided attitudes regarding depression, non-sufferers may be unsympathetic and insensitive—even cruelly judgmental—to the emotional turmoil and suffering of the depressed. Therefore, those who suffer with depression often don't receive the kind of consistent, compassionate, nonjudgmental support they desperately need from their loved ones. This can lead to feelings of abandonment due to being misunderstood and harshly treated.

Discussion Question: How can we be mindful of others who have been unfairly criticized and misunderstood? (Note: Among this group of “misfits” are recovering addicts, divorcees, single-parents, unemployed or underemployed persons, those on welfare, and victims of partner-violence and/or domestic violence. Furthermore, there are those with learning, physical, or emotional disabilities.)

Misguided Theology

Popular health-and-wealth theologies teach that if you truly believe in God's power to protect and provide, you will be insulated from hardships. Therefore, they reject the basic notion that a faithful Christian can suffer with depression. It doesn't fit into that perspective. Misguided

doctrine fosters the false belief that if people simply set their minds on being grateful for their blessings, they will never struggle with depression.

Discussion Question: Sometimes the use of Scripture can feel oppressive to depressed persons—as if it is being used as a weapon against them. How so?

Discussion Question: How should Scripture be employed so that it fulfills its Spirit-filled, life-giving purpose in people's lives?

There's More to You than Depression

There's far more to someone than just depression. Sometimes, that's an easy point to miss. Our identity and value far exceeds any one facet of our lives, either good or bad. So before you judge yourself or your loved one too harshly, remind yourself that depression is a real disease.

In Psalm 139:11-14 (ESV), David writes the following thoughts that reveal God's goodness as well as the psalmist's self-validation as being someone of immeasurable inherent worth and inestimable value in God's eyes:

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.

¹³ For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.

Just like most other chronic illnesses, you will have both good (or, at least, *better*) days and worse or bad days. Unfortunately, that's a rather predictable and normal, though unpleasant, dimension of the untamable terrain of depression. Do what you can on the good days, and give yourself or your loved one some compassion and grace on the bad days. Be kind! And never underestimate you or your loved one's priceless value and inherent worth to God.

Exercise:

Go to author's website, RyanNoelFraser.com, and watch the five-minute video titled, "There's much more to you than depression." After watching the video, write down a list of ten things on Worksheet #3, other than depression, that positively define you and make you the special person that you are. Then, if you're comfortable doing so, share your list with the group/class.

There's Much More to You than Depression (Worksheet #3)

Instructions: Write down a list of ten things other than depression that positively define you and make you who you are – someone who is special, unique, and worthy of love and respect. If you're comfortable doing so, share your list with the group/class.

Here are some unique and positive qualities/strengths that define me as a person:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Prayer

Dear God,

Make us more attuned to the struggles of others so that we can respond with Christ-like compassion. Help us to show kindness and heartfelt empathy to the suffering. Also help us to accept ourselves as we are and comprehend our own great value and significance in your eyes. Empower us to use our gifts, abilities, and opportunities for your glory.

In Jesus' Name, Amen!

Lesson #6: The Shades of Blue

(From Chapter Seven)

Depression is a medical condition (a disease or mood disorder) resulting from an altered brain structure and chemical imbalance. Brain chemicals known as neurotransmitters cease to function properly and thus affect mood. Depression or melancholia comes in many different forms and types, or *shades of blue* if you will. It manifests itself differently for different people. That is why it's so important to avoid stereotyping yourself or others who may be struggling with depression in their lives. Each person's symptoms and presence or degree of the various types of depression is unique. One size certainly doesn't fit all.

There are multiple types or categories of depression. The various levels of depression are dynamic and fluid and, therefore, you can move from any level of intensity to another level. Dr. Fraser simplifies these levels by suggesting four different colors to represent various shades of the blues. With each color-coded level, there is a related scripture that seems to capture the quality and intensity of the emotion that is represented.

Color Code: Shades of Blue

- **Level One = Sunshine Yellow**

A day that is sunshine yellow is an easy day to be alive. You feel like you can keep up with your daily responsibilities and still have room to smile. You may even take on a creative task. You're grateful to God to see things more clearly today and feel lighter inside.

Psalms 118:24 (ESV) asserts, *"This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and*

be glad in it.”

- **Level Two = Sky Blue**

A day that is sky blue is a manageable day. Though you sense the shadow of depression lurking nearby, you can still see the sunshine peeking through the clouds. You're grateful that you can still function as needed for your family and friends and take care of your daily chores.

In Nehemiah 8:10 (NIV), “Nehemiah said, “*Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.*”

- **Level Three = Violet Blue**

A day that is violet blue is a hard day. Everything is getting darker. You have trouble doing what needs to be done for yourself and others. You're sad, but don't know why. Sometimes it's hard to breathe or get moving. Your body aches and you struggle to accomplish the day's tasks.

Isaiah 41:10 (ESV) says, “*Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*”

- **Level Four = Dark Indigo**

A day that is dark indigo is difficult to talk about. You struggle to move at all. Life is extremely difficult and painful for you. Everything hurts: your body, your mind, and your relationships. Simple tasks seem insurmountable. You're overwhelmed with sadness and hopelessness. This is the darkest shade of blue before everything goes black.

Psalms 34:18 (ESV) says, “*The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.*”

Discussion Question: Can you name any other symptoms that, from your experience and/or observation, seem to fit the various levels or shades of blue?

Dr. Fraser identifies several different types or categories of depression, which different people seem to fit in, though not always neatly, thus making accurate diagnosis a challenging endeavor. The ten types mentioned include: (1) dysthymia (mild, yet persistent depressive symptoms), (2) major depressive disorder, (3) post-partum depression, (4) grief-related depression, (5) guilt or shame-related depression, (6) situational or trauma-related depression, (7) physiologically and/or neuro-chemically related depression, (8) bipolar I & II, (9) seasonal affective disorder (aka: SAD), and (10) Anfechtungen (i.e., spiritual depression).

Discussion question: Which of the above categories do you or your loved one relate to the most and why?

The Big Seven

In yours or a loved one's battle with depression, it is important to take a holistic and well-balanced approach to treating the condition. There are seven essential areas that need to be carefully attended to including the following:

- (1) Medical-medicinal dimension (i.e., following doctor's orders)
- (2) Regular physical exercise
- (3) Well-balanced dietary plan
- (4) Re-creational strategy (i.e., things they do to rest, relax, and rejuvenate)

(5) Meaningful spirituality

(6) Healthy relationships

(7) Existential concerns (such as contemplating the theological problem of suffering, etc.)

Discussion question: Which of the above areas do you struggle with the most and in what way do they present a challenge to you?

Discussion question: What practical strategies have you or your loved one found to be most beneficial to you thus far in coping with the blues?

Group Exercise:

Go to the author's website, RyanNoelFraser.com, and watch the short video titled, "The Many Shades of Blue." Share with the group/class what you learned from the video and also any part(s) you related to the most.

Prayer

Dear God,

Help us to remain faithful to you and trusting of your promises no matter what shade of blue we find ourselves experiencing. Give us the spiritual strength to withstand the temptation to give up on the particularly difficult violet blue and dark indigo days. Help us find comfort and encouragement in your Holy Word and empower us to be responsible and proactive in our own self-care. Please also give us opportunities to become a healing resource to others around us who

may be suffering, so that we may be your ambassadors of hope. Guide us toward new and effective strategies to better cope with troubling emotions and physical pain and discomfort.

In Jesus' name, Amen!

Lesson #7: Knocked Down, but Not Defeated

(From Chapter Eight)

In 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 (NIV), the apostle Paul writes, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” Sometimes it may feel like depression has gotten the better of you for the moment. But that’s not the end of the story! There’s new life and hope beyond depression.

Depression may have you on the ropes or knocked down on the mat, but you’re not defeated. Keep on getting back up. Keep on fighting for your life. However, if you’re going to successfully fight against depression, you need to know the opposing forces you’re up against. It doesn’t matter how spiritually minded or religiously faithful someone is, depression is no respecter of persons and impacts individuals at all levels of spiritual maturity. No one is exempt.

To get down on oneself for feeling depressed, or to criticize those who struggle with it, is like blaming victims for a disease over which they have little to no control. It’s imperative that you extend grace to yourself and others. We can’t afford to give depression the upper hand, though we do need to remain vigilant and be keenly aware of the telltale symptoms.

Classic Symptoms of Depression

- Trouble concentrating, making decisions, remembering details
- Fatigue and experiencing a decrease in energy
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and/or helplessness
- Hopelessness or pessimism

- Insomnia, including waking up too early
- Sleeping too much
- Irritability or restlessness
- Loss of interest in various activities or hobbies you once enjoyed
- Lacking sexual desire or overactive sexual desire
- Overeating or undergoing a loss of appetite
- Persistent aches and pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that don't respond to treatment
- Perpetual sadness, anxiety, or feelings of emptiness
- Fantasizing about or making plans to kill yourself
- Attempting suicide

The above are serious symptoms that require your attention and warrant further assessment and treatment with qualified mental health and/or medical professionals.

Psychological Pain and Hopelessness

Depression manifests itself in diverse ways in people's lives, creating a broad spectrum of problems and difficulties. But before I go further, I want to emphasize one important thing: The presence of depression in someone's life isn't indicative of God's judgment or disapproval. Romans 8:1 (ESV) states, "There is . . . now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

As your loving and compassionate parent, God cares deeply about you and hurts for you in the midst of your distress. Please never forget that truth!

Perhaps you've already tried therapy, read self-help books, taken prescribed psychotropic meds (antidepressants), or self-medicated. Maybe you've been hospitalized. You're frustrated,

and understandably so. Depression ambushes your emotions, drains your physical energy, intrudes upon your spirituality, and generally encumbers your life.

Discussion questions: If you were to personify depression as an intruder or unwelcome visitor, how would it look, sound, and behave? What types of things would it say and do to intimidate you and keep you in a weakened state? And what would depression con you into believing about yourself and your future? What types of unhealthy behaviors would it recruit you into doing?

Proverbs 17:22 (ESV) declares, “A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.” Your personal sense of wellbeing and determination disintegrates into dust. You may feel if only you possessed enough faith you wouldn’t have those emotional struggles. The shame can be unbearable at times.

Oftentimes, a flawed idea invades your thoughts that “God is mad at me for some reason and is punishing me.” But you don’t have to see depression as a symptom of faithlessness or a guilty conscience. Rather, it’s a debilitating medical disorder, caused by a neural chemical imbalance that may be passed down genetically, and, therefore, it ought to be treated as such with compassion.

Group exercise: Name some well-known biblical characters that seemed to struggle with depression at points in their life. If possible, provide scripture references to shed light on your perspective. What symptoms were these men and women manifesting?

The inspired writer of Psalm 42:3-5 acknowledges his melancholic condition. He's definitely troubled by it but not completely dismayed or dejected. He remains committed to trust in his Creator for deliverance. He exclaims, "Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me. By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life" (verses 7-8).

Depression is only one facet of your life. It doesn't need to hinder your walk with God either, but it can push you into a deeper walk. The devil desires to make you a victim, and God doesn't want you to live in the victim mentality. He intends for you to live victoriously. First John 5:4 (ESV) says, "For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith."

Discussion question: What does it mean to you that our faith is the victory that overcomes the world?

Romans 8:37-39 (NIV) states: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

To be *more than a conqueror* implies winning big in the end. The source of your strength is God's unfailing love in your life through Christ. But sometimes, one's constant struggle with depression might feel like a losing battle.

It's not uncommon for depressed Christians to entertain various distressing thoughts in their heads, though they may seldom say them out loud.

Discussion question: What types of unhealthy (and inaccurate) things might depressed Christians tell themselves about their faith and their walk with the Lord?

Just like in the remarkable story of Job, the devil is out to prove to God that your faithful obedience is contingent on his kind generosity and protection from trouble in your life. Satan, the great accuser of Christians (Rev. 12:10), seeks to assassinate your character by insinuating that the moment God's protective shield is lowered, and you experience pain, you'll cease loving and serving him. Your challenge is to prove the devil wrong, exposing him to be the liar he is.

God has the prerogative to place his divine hand of healing upon someone and vanquish depression altogether from a person's life. But what if that's not part of his plan for your life? What if, as in the apostle Paul's case, God doesn't remove your struggle but instead says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9)?

God can teach you to live with your depression faithfully and courageously. It's possible to bring glory to him in your life despite your struggle with melancholia.

Discussion question: How might God be calling you to glorify him through your intense struggle with depression?

As a believer, you can rest assured that nothing—not even depression—will ever be able to separate you from God's love. You may feel estranged but that doesn't make it so. No matter your circumstances, Jesus won't desert you (Hebrews 13:5).

There will be times that you don't feel God's presence, but that doesn't mean he's not there sustaining you. Being a parent who struggles with depression may also throw you for a loop and constantly cause you to second guess yourself and your value to your family.

Discussion question: What types of unique struggles may depressed parents of dependent children be faced with?

Discussion question: What reminders ought depressed parents to regularly give themselves to combat negative self-talk?

Prayer

Dear God,

Thank you for your trustworthy promises. We are grateful for the knowledge that our faith has the power to overcome the world. Please help us to believe that truth even more and live into it more and more day by day. Give us more confidence in our faith in Christ. Fill our spiritual tanks with joy and positive meaning through serving others, including our children and families. Reassure us of your presence and provision. Help us to forgive others for insensitivity and ourselves for our personal failings, as you have forgiven us.

In Jesus' name, Amen!

Lesson #8: Keeping it Simple: When Love Reaches Out; From Despair to

Hope and Healing

(From Chapter Nine & Ten)

Sometimes we make the concept of serving others far more complicated than it really needs to be. We worry about messing up and possibly even making matters worse through our incompetence, inexperience, or unintended offensiveness. Our fear of failure can incapacitate us if we're not careful to keep our negative self-talk in check.

However, the truth is that when someone is suffering, even if we don't have the *right* words to say, and we feel inept, awkward, and uncomfortable, just being there is usually enough. We don't have to be professionally trained, eloquent of speech, overly articulate or persuasive in our choice of words. Attentive silence is perfectly okay. In fact, sometimes it's actually preferable. The ministry of presence is most important ... always!

The right thing to do may be simply to hug the individual, quietly holding them in our loving arms. In this way we can communicate compassion and genuine care without saying a single word. At other times, we may just need to sit beside them, holding their hand or gently putting ours on their shoulder. In certain situations, we may need to remain a short distance away in silence, demonstrating genuine empathy and loving concern by our gentle presence and prayerfulness. They will know we're there for them to lend emotional support.

The key is to show up—in person, to be there for them. Dr. Fraser makes three simple suggestions:

First, *go to them*. In this way, be like Jesus who met people where they were.

Second, *listen to them*. Give sufferers the sacred space to speak and be heard nonjudgmentally.

Third, *serve them*. Figure out practical and meaningful ways of how you may be of hands-on service). Then follow through and do whatever needs to be done.

Small acts of kindness can brighten the day of someone who is feeling overwhelmed by life's troubles and ignored or forgotten by others. Never underestimate the power of a thoughtful deed, no matter how seemingly small or insignificant it may appear to be. It can breathe new life into a person's suffocating spirit and revive their careworn soul.

Group exercise: Ask group members to tell about a time in their life that someone served them in a meaningful way when they were going through a tough ordeal and the difference it made for them. If they like, they may choose to journal about this positive memory.

Group exercise: Have a brainstorming session together to compile a list of practical ways that group members may serve those in their sphere of influence as the opportunity arises to show God's love.

Steps in the Healing Process

Moving from a sense of despair to experiencing hope and psychological and spiritual healing is generally a gradual process with a number of smaller steps along the way.

Discussion question: What may be some helpful sequential steps for someone to follow in order to overcome despair and discover healing and spiritual hope?

Prayer

Dear God,

Help us to move past our self-consciousness and crippling feelings of inadequacy so that we can reach out to others around us with the love of Christ. Give us the fortitude to go to them, listen to them, and serve them to the very best of our abilities. Let us be instruments of your peace and joy. As we move from a place of emotional pain and despair to the higher ground of hope and healing, please hold us closely and show us how to bring suffering souls into a redeemed and renewed relationship with you. Equip us and empower us as imperfect and broken vessels to be useful in your kingdom as humble and selfless servants who make a positive difference in this world.

In Jesus' name, Amen!

Lesson #9: How to Handle Worry and Anxiety

(From Chapter Eleven)

Worry and faith are opposing forces that constantly vie for the upper hand in our life. Depression and anxiety form a potentially devastating duo as diabolical twins that wreak havoc in people's lives. Sometimes anxiety disorders co-exist with depression, fueling each other in a downward spiral. Irrational fear can incapacitate us if we're not careful.

We either feed anxiety or starve it out. Left unattended, neurotic worry will completely take over a person's life and swallow them in debilitating despair and dread. Once anxiety gets its far-reaching tentacles into an individual's life, it is difficult to pull it loose so as to disable its harmful effects and reestablish mental and emotional stability.

George Mueller has asserted, "The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety." However, if we're honest with ourselves, we must all admit that we struggle with worry and anxiety at times, though perhaps to differing degrees, as Jesus recognized (Matt. 6:25-34).

One of the biggest challenges we face is how to handle anxiety effectively. Those individuals who struggle with full-blown anxiety and various nervous disorders understand this rather devastating scenario better than anyone else. For some depressives, life seems generally scary and uncertain. It's sometimes difficult to determine what's worse: the depression or the anxiety that it often evokes.

Discussion question: What types of things do people generally and you in particular seem to worry about the most?

Potential answer: We worry about all types of things—relationships, education, career, our children, health issues, economics and finances, politics, international affairs, deadlines, spiritual matters, war, and personal safety. Most of the time, these concerns amount to nothing at all in the end.

The Broad Spectrum of Anxiety

There are normal, everyday types of worry on the broader spectrum versus those severe levels of anxiety that fall in the clinical realm, and everything in-between. This reality needs to be fully recognized and acknowledged. Some individuals can't help it that they're chronically anxious due to having a nervous disorder and, therefore, shouldn't be judged as faithless in light of their anxiety problems.

Sometimes as believers we may worry over the fact *that we're worrying*, and feel exceedingly guilty and ashamed because of it. This too is a vicious cycle that is rather unproductive to our quest for greater wholeness. Learning to fully trust in the Lord and discover spiritual contentment and self-acceptance despite our hardwired tendency toward anxiety and daily concerns is evidence of personal growth. God wants us to depend on him for our every need, believing in his goodness and power.

The Bible contains many examples of faithful persons who dealt with issues of anxiety and worry. They struggled just as we struggle with these human frailties in light of unpredictable and precarious circumstances.

- Abraham and Sarah ached over the absence of a future biological male heir.
- Moses fretted about the Hebrews' future as they wandered in the wilderness.
- Ten of the twelve spies produced widespread panic among the Israelites concerning the “giants” and fortified cities in the Promised Land that stood in the way of securing their inheritance.
- David feared for his life at the hands of the deranged King Saul.
- Queen Esther was distressed over the future of the Jewish people while living in captivity.
- Elijah was depressed and anxious about the spiritual condition of Israel, a hostile king and queen, and his own lack of a protégé to continue his prophetic ministry.
- John the Baptist grew antsy over whether or not Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah.
- Paul was stressed and concerned about the spiritual condition of many of his converts on the mission field.
- Timothy, the young evangelist, apparently struggled with an encumbering case of timidity and personal discouragement.

The experience of anxiety (in its myriad of forms and degrees) seems to be something of a normal part of the human condition. We need to be more realistic in our expectations of self and others regarding it.

The One-Hundred Year Rule says, “Don’t give any real importance to something that won’t matter one-hundred years from now.” If we evaluate our concern and determine that it won’t amount to anything after we’re dead and gone, what’s the point in worrying about it or even giving it the time of day?

In Matthew 6:25-30, 34 (ESV), the Jesus says:

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ... ³⁴ “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Jesus’ teaching reminds us of God’s tender care for all creation. If God takes care of the sparrow, surely he will see after our needs too! Jesus tells us that worrying about things beyond our control is pointless and certainly won’t extend our lives. Since our Heavenly Father personally attends to the survival and seasonal flowering of the lilies and grass of the field, surely He will more so clothe us in warmth and splendor.

It’s comforting to realize that God already knows what we need before we ever speak a word (see Matthew 6:8, 32). Worrying only further complicates our situation and makes things worse. We must strive to trust God to take care of us in every conceivable way. We should only focus on those things that are within our control, but avoid worrying about those things that fall outside the parameters of our meager might. Psalm 103:14 (ESV) states, “For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.”

God's Word supplies us with much-needed advice and comfort regarding anxiety. In Philip 4:6-7 (ESV), Paul writes: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Anxiety may thus be counteracted through a prayerful and grateful spirit. Prayer is a powerful tool (Hebrews 4:16).

Staying Present-Focused rather than Future-Focused

It's important to live one day at a time. When we get out too far ahead of ourselves, we're borrowing trouble from tomorrow. We often tend to build up imaginary and hypothetical scenarios in our minds of what might happen to us and those we love. All the "what ifs" we constantly worry about can preoccupy practically every minute of the day if we allow them to get a foothold in our minds and erode our sense of well-being, security, and confidence.

Anxiety subsides, however, when we refocus our minds on something else, such as serving or helping others. Philippians 4:8 (ESV) says, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Train your mind to meditate on those things that are uplifting.

Group Exercise: Watch and discuss the free video resource located on RyanNoelFraser.com called the "Thought Stopping Technique."

Another pitfall to avoid is dwelling upon yesterday's mistakes, failures and disappointments. Fixating on the past keeps us from living fully in the present. It throws us off track and bogs us down.

In Philippians 3:13b-14 (ESV), Paul writes, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Paul didn't allow his past mistakes and regrets to distract him from his present ministry. When anxiety takes over, we forget God's promises, underestimate his power, and are blinded to his presence.

In writing to a persecuted church, the apostle Peter states in 1 Peter 5:6-7 (ESV), "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you."

Discussion question: In Matthew 14, when Peter began walking to Jesus on the water, what caused him to start sinking and drowning?

Potential answer: Peter got distracted, took his eyes off Jesus, and started paying attention to the winds and the waves around him so his initial trust and confidence disappeared. He began to sink. Jesus had to reach out his hand to rescue Peter from drowning in the brink.

Discussion question: How do you relate to Peter's sudden loss of focus, faith, and confidence in himself and the Lord?

It is comforting to know that no matter how big our problems or perceived threats to our security may seem to us, our Almighty God is far bigger and stronger. He is the omnipotent Creator of heaven and earth who made us in his own image, who knows us intimately, and loves us beyond our comprehension. Our strength comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth (Psalm 121:1-3).

Prayer

Dear God,

We often struggle with worry, irrational fear, and chronic anxiety. Many times we take our eyes off of you and try to lean on our own meager strength. This causes us many emotional and spiritual problems. Please help us to keep our hearts and minds firmly grounded in your love as we hold on to your eternal promises. Help us to live one day at a time and avoid the tendency to become preoccupied with the unknowns and with all those things that are out of our control. Give us the wisdom to meditate day and night on praiseworthy things.

In Jesus' name, Amen!

Lesson #10: Good Company & The Power of Laughter

(From Chapters Twelve & Thirteen)

Feeling all alone and emotionally isolated is a painful experience. That's what makes friendship such an important element of our lives. Everybody needs and relies upon good friends for support and encouragement. "A friend in need is a friend indeed!" This well-known adage is one that most of us are familiar with. When the going gets rough and times are tough, we typically find out who our real friends are. A faithful and loyal companion is one who can be counted on when the chips are down. We can trust them no matter what and know that they will be there for us in thick and thin. They always have our best interests at heart.

Proverbs 27:10 (ESV) states, *"Do not forsake your friend and your father's friend, and do not go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity. Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away."*

Discussion question: How do you define the word, "friend"?

Discussion question: What makes meaningful friendship such a necessary and important part of our life?

Winnie the Pooh once said to his dear friend, Christopher Robin, "If you live to be a hundred, I want to live to be a hundred minus one day, so I never have to live without you." We can all work on becoming better friends. The fellowship and companionship provided by close

friendship is a priceless commodity. Albert Camus (1913-1960), the French author, journalist, and philosopher, once wrote, "Don't walk behind me; I may not lead. Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend."

As Christians we need to work hard at becoming reliable and trustworthy friends to others. Galatians 6:2 (ESV) says, "*Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*" Jesus modeled for his disciples (and us) how to be a true friend. In Matthew 11:19 (ESV), Jesus said, "*The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.*" For Christ, companionship was always a means to an end, never an end in and of itself. He had a deeper, eternal spiritual purpose for it, in that it served as a vehicle whereby he built connections to individuals in order to draw them into a closer relationship with God.

Discussion question: What made David's relationship with his best friend, Jonathan, so very special to both of them (see 1 Samuel 20)?

Building new friendships along with maintaining and strengthening our current friendships requires conscious effort and significant time. Men and women alike need close same-sex friends who can serve as a valuable support network and ongoing source of encouragement, help, and accountability. A godly companion is someone who is willing to tell you the truth about yourself. They will do it not to hurt you but to help you become a better person.

Proverbs 27:5-6 (ESV) says, "*Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.*"

Paul confronted Peter with the truth about his hypocrisy when it came to avoiding table fellowship with Gentiles whenever his Jewish friends were in town (Gal. 2:11-21; 6:1-2). Nathan confronted David with the ugly truth regarding the secret sin of his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and his murderous plot against her innocent husband, Uriah (2 Sam. 12:1-13). When it comes to friendship, honesty is the best policy.

Unconditional and Sacrificial Love

A true friend is a person who knows your faults and flaws but loves you all the same. Romans 5:8 (NIV) states, *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

A true friend is also an individual who puts your needs ahead of his or her own. Jesus was and is a true friend. He knew from the beginning that he was going to have to lay down his own life for the world. Jesus said, *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends”* (John 15:12-13, ESV).

Our Lord developed a different kind of relationship with his disciples than that of the dynamic between a master and his servants. Jesus called them his “friends” (verse 15).

We can use the word “FRIEND” as an acrostic, employing each of the letters to stand for various important qualities of true friendship. True friends are . . .

Forever (Prov. 17:17)

Real (Eph. 4:15)

Interested in us (Rom. 12:15)

Empathetic

Near (Prov. 27:10)

Dedicated

The wise man once wrote, *“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother”* (Prov. 18:24). Jesus is that kind of friend. He has proven his love and commitment to us time and time again. If you want to have good friends, the first rule of thumb is to be a good friend to others.

Having a Good Laugh Together

Related to friendship is also the concept of shared laughter and enjoyment. Laughter is good medicine. Proverbs 15:13 (ESV) says, *“A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed.”* Then Proverbs 17:22 (ESV) asserts, *“A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.”*

Discussion question: Do you think that God has a good sense of humor? Why or why not?

Of all the people in the world, Christians ought to exhibit the most unbridled joy and laughter. After all, we have so many blessings to be thankful for.

There are several benefits to developing a healthy sense of humor and learning to laugh more often. Shared laughter draws people closer together and increases their collective and individual sense of well-being. Humor and laughter can bolster your immune system, boost your energy, reduce pain (through releasing endorphins), and buffer you from the negative effects of stress. It even protects the heart by improving the function of blood vessels and increasing blood

flow.

Besides the many physical health benefits, laughter also has a number of mental health benefits. Humor enables you to remain positive and maintain an optimistic outlook when confronted with tough situations, disappointment, and loss. It fuels your courage and sense of hope.

The social benefits of laughter include strengthening relationships through humor and playful communication, attracting others to us to forge positive bonds, enhancing teamwork, soothing conflict, and promoting group closeness.

Discussion question: What are some good avenues you've found for laughter and light-hearted enjoyment?

Group exercise: Ask if anyone in the group has a funny story or a good, clean joke they'd be willing to share with the group.

Prayer

Dear God,

Thanks for the gift of friendship and of laughter. Help us to establish loyal and lasting friendships with people who have our best interests at heart. However, also help us to be good friends in the way in which we treat our companions and bless their lives. Just as Jesus reached out in a spirit of love and friendship to people around him, help us also to be welcoming and accepting of others who might need a true friend. And give us the courage to be honest with our

friends, while also receiving their constructive criticism with a teachable spirit and humble attitude.

In Jesus' name, Amen!

Lesson #11: Stepping Out By Faith

(From Chapter Fourteen)

While the end-of-the-year holidays, such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's, are supposed to be a time of happiness, many people struggle with feeling down and depressed. Sadly, the holidays may represent a painful reminder of personal heartaches and losses. That's why it is important to be mindful of those in our church families and communities who have recently lost loved ones, struggled with debilitating illnesses, dealt with job loss and financial strain, had painful relationship break-ups, been forced to make difficult decisions such as placing their aging parents in nursing homes, or dealt with painful disappointments over the recent weeks or months.

Hope for the Holidays

This time of the year presents a unique opportunity for Christians to compassionately serve, comfort, and encourage those around us who need some extra support and hope. Be on the lookout for opportunities to reach out to others with your kind smile, listening ear, warm handshake or hug, a thoughtful card or gift, or even an invitation to attend a holiday meal with you and your family.

There are several practical things you can do to make a positive difference in others' lives, and—in turn—your own life. A simple idea is to begin by asking God to show you who he'd like you to become more aware of within your sphere of influence, so that you may begin praying for them by name. This is a great place to start. But from there you can become much

more hands-on in your approach.

Group exercise: Brainstorm as a group (and write down on a board so everyone can see) as many practical ideas of ways we can serve others who are struggling during the holidays.

Dr. Fraser offers twenty practical suggestions for serving. These include the following ideas:

- (1) Send cards to shut-ins, new mothers, those recovering from recent surgery, or the bereaved.
- (2) Make encouraging phone calls or send a text message to those you are aware of who are struggling in their lives.
- (3) Make a prayer list which includes the names of specific individuals whom you want to lift up to God on a regular basis.
- (4) Volunteer to provide transportation to take a friend or new church member to a book club meeting.
- (5) Do something thoughtful for your minister's family.
- (6) Invite a young college student or single adult out for a free meal at a restaurant after church.
- (7) Make a beautiful flower arrangement for the church.
- (8) Take your nephew or niece fishing for the day, bowling for the evening, roller skating, or to the movies.
- (9) Volunteer to take dogs at the Animal Human Shelter for walks.
- (10) Take donuts to work for your coworkers just because.

- (11) Purchase a small gift and “thank you” card for the janitor in your workplace to express your gratitude to them for all their hard work.
- (12) Plant some pretty flowers for an elderly, immobile person and keep them watered.
- (13) Prepare your spouse or children’s favorite meal.
- (14) Invite a few shy and less socially active individuals over to your place for a game night along with cheese-dip or chocolate fondue and snacks.
- (15) Volunteer your services for an evening at a children’s (orphan’s) home, women’s shelter, or soup kitchen.
- (16) Volunteer to read children’s stories to kids at the public library.
- (17) Visit at a children’s hospital and take a craft to make with the young patients.
- (18) Put together a care package to send to military personnel or missionaries who are stationed/ministering abroad.
- (19) Pick up trash along a road near where you live.
- (20) Rake leaves and/or clean debris out of the gutters for an elderly neighbor that needs some assistance.

Group exercise: It may be a fun and uplifting experience for everyone in the class/small group to come up with a group service project in which everyone can play a direct role. Doing so could really be a great catalyst for creating unity as well as an impetus for learning and growth.

Prayer

Dear God,

During the holidays, many of us know from first-hand experience just how difficult things can be for people. Therefore, please make us keenly aware of those within our sphere of influence to whom we may be able to reach out in a kind and meaningful way so as to lighten their load. Help us bring a little joy into somebody's life that may especially need it during the course of this season of giving. We thank you for your countless, rich and wonderful blessings. Please may our focus be on seizing opportunities to make a positive difference in the lives of other. We pray that by doing so, our own hearts and minds will find respite and healing from pain and sadness.

In Jesus' name, Amen!

Lesson #12: Owning Your Limitations

(From Chapter Fifteen)

The late Dr. Charles Siburt often used to say, “Reality is your friend!” Without accepting reality as it is, we’re unable to respond in an appropriate and healthy fashion to life’s circumstances. Unrealistic thinking, myopic vision, and naïveté are rather unhelpful approaches to life.

It is unwise and unhealthy for an individual suffering with depression to live in a state of denial about some of the harsh realities of their struggle. We can fool others and ourselves into thinking we can operate like everyone else when we can’t. Realistically there are definite limitations to our physical and emotional energy resources that require proper attention. It is, therefore, vitally important for us to establish and maintain healthy personal boundaries and take appropriate precautions and measures to manage depression responsibly.

Discussion question: What would be some wise precautions to take and personal boundaries to establish in order to more effectively manage depression?

Knowing our limitations and when to say “No” is a positive indicator of self-awareness and personal wisdom. As much as we always want to say “Yes” to other people’s (including our family’s) requests of us that will require our time and emotional/physical energy, it will be detrimental in the long-run to do so. Being a *people-pleaser* is not a virtue! Your physical and emotional life is extremely precious to God. If listening to others’ sad stories brings you down, it

is OK to recommend they speak to someone more qualified than yourself. If you know (from prior experience) that engaging in a particular activity or committing to assuming a certain responsibility is going to dangerously deplete your energy reservoir and eviscerate your psyche, don't put yourself in that emotionally compromising position. It is unwise!

Remember that there is only so much of you to go around and that pride is essentially the stubborn refusal to acknowledge your own finitude (i.e., human limitations). During his earthly ministry, not even Jesus was available 24/7. In his fleshly form, he needed time alone to rest, rejuvenate, and reconnect with his Father. Jesus thus modeled appropriate physical and spiritual self-care for us as believers. Also, you will notice in the gospels that Jesus did not heal every sick person in Palestine. As a human being, he had time and energy constraints like the rest of us.

Luke 5:15-16 (ESV) says, ¹⁵ But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. ¹⁶ But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

Matthew 14:23 (ESV) says, ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ...”

Luke 6:12 (ESV) says, ¹² In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.”

Mark 4:37-38 (ESV) says, “³⁷ And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion.

And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Mark 6:46 (ESV) says, “⁴⁶ And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray.”

Discussion question: Since Jesus took time to take care of his own physical, emotional, and spiritual needs, what may we infer regarding balance in our own daily responsibilities, tasks, and schedules?

About Taking Medications

Many believers have mixed feelings about taking psychotropic medications to help them alleviate issues like depression and anxiety. However, it is important to take a balanced approach and consider both the pros and cons of using antidepressant and anti-anxiety meds.

Discussion question: From your perspective and personal experience, what are some of the potential pros and cons of using prescription drugs (such as antidepressants) to treat depression?

Dr. Fraser views prescription drugs as one important strategy (often much needed) among many for the effective treatment of depressive disorders. However, there are many additional helpful things a person can do to alleviate some of his or her own difficulties with mood disorders. However, that being said, many individuals ultimately do still need some medical

assistance to reach a satisfactory level of mental health functioning. God provided us with the gift of the raw natural materials and elements from which the medical scientific community creates medications.

Nonetheless, it can be challenging and a bit frustrating finding the right medication that works best for you. The most common category of antidepressants are called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, or simply, SSRIs. As a whole, they're considered to be relatively safe and preferable, since they have fewer side effects than other kinds of antidepressant meds.

The FDA has approved the following SSRIs to treat depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders: Citalopram (Celexa), Escitalopram (Lexapro), Fluoxetine (Prozac), Fluvoxamine (Luvox, Luvox CR), Paroxetine (Paxil, Paxil CR), and Sertraline (Zoloft).

Possible Side Effects

While the majority of people who use SSRI antidepressants don't suffer any significant side effects, it must still be understood that any kind of medical treatment carries at least some level of risk, even if it's relatively small. With that in mind, potential side effects of SSRI antidepressants include the following:

- Agitation or nervousness
- Blurred vision
- Dizziness
- Drowsiness
- Dry mouth
- Gastrointestinal problems including upset stomach or diarrhea
- Headaches
- Insomnia

- Joint or muscle pain
- Nausea
- Problems with erection or ejaculation
- Rash
- Reduced libido (or sexual desire)
- Suicidal thoughts

Remember, that SSRIs can sometimes have negative interactions with other medicines as well as herbs and supplements. So, it is important to notify your doctor of everything you're taking, and then proceed with caution. Some individuals, especially children and young adults, may be more prone to experience suicidal thoughts when taking SSRIs. If you entertain serious thoughts of hurting yourself while taking an SSRI, please seek professional help immediately.

It's important to remain in open and honest communication with your doctor to find a medication that works best for you. Though everyone responds a bit differently with regards to enjoying mental improvements due to taking SSRIs, most people start seeing noticeable changes after approximately four to six weeks of treatment.

Although SSRIs aren't habit-forming drugs, it can still be dangerous to stop taking them all-of-a-sudden or to miss several doses in a row. You should not stop taking an SSRI simply because you are feeling better. You need to be under the care of a doctor to change or stop your medication. The process of finding the right med(s) may often involve a significant amount of trial and error under doctor supervision. However, prescribed medications and professional psychotherapy might play an important role in one's recovery.

Prayer

Dear God,

Please grant us wisdom when it comes to knowing and owning our physical and emotional limitations. Give us the self-awareness and strength to say “No” when we need to say “No,” and the courage to say “Yes” when we will benefit by responding affirmatively to various opportunities to lead and/or serve in various capacities. For those of us who might need medical and medicinal help, we ask that you will guide the medical caregivers who provide professional assistance. We ask that the medicines will help to do what they are designed to do by way of improving mood and motivation. Please protect us from negative side effects. Also help us to be proactive in taking responsibility for those things that we need to handle independently. Please bless and encourage our family members along this journey too.

In Jesus' name, Amen!

Lesson #13: Counselee Becoming a Counselor & The Blue Servant

(From Chapters Sixteen & Seventeen)

Godly mentors and counselors are needed now, more than ever, to lend a trustworthy and confidential listening ear and to offer sage guidance to the suffering. The work of Christian counselors ought to be a role and responsibility shared within the congregation among its lay leaders and members. Remember the descriptors of the interdependent community of care and body of Christ imagery/metaphor for the church from Lesson #3? This lesson brings us full circle as we tie up some loose ends.

Jesus understood the fallen nature and vulnerability of the human condition and, therefore, directly addressed the specific issues that people were dealing with in their lives during his earthly ministry. Our caring service is to primarily be a spiritual work and labor of love that occurs only by the power of God and through the wisdom and grace of the living and active Word of God.

The work of consolation appears to always be closely linked with the proclamation or sharing of “good news” (i.e. gospel). In light of your firsthand experience of depression, you are especially attuned to the emotional needs of others. You have insider knowledge and a built-in radar sensor to pick up on subtle signals or symptoms of suffering and duress in others. Who better to become a capable, godly counselor and/or support group facilitator than you? As much as possible, the body of Christ needs to view itself as a community of care in which numerous capable counselors are willing and able to lend a hand or listening ear whenever it is necessary.

The reality is that trained professionals in clinical settings don't usually perform the most commonly occurring counseling that happens week in and week out. Instead, it happens most often in the context of impromptu situations that take place at the beauty salon or barbershop, in the dugout at the ball field or in the stands, by the concession stand or water fountain. It transpires in the hallway of the school building, in the lunchroom or by the vending machine at the workplace, or out in the parking lot. And it is performed by compassionate laypersons that simply take the time to listen and empathize with those who are struggling in their lives.

Psalm 1:1-2 (ESV) states, "*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.*" Plenty of ungodly, unspiritual, and potentially destructive advice is readily available by nonbelievers in the secular world. Faithful Christians are, therefore, desperately needed. We need to pray for the spiritual wisdom that God promises to those who ask in faith (James 1:5), so that we as believers may effectively respond to the emotional and behavioral needs of other sufferers.

The Wonderful Counselor

Proverbs 11:14 (ESV) exclaims, "*Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in the abundance of counselors there is safety.*" A web of wisdom provides a safety net of support. Jesus Christ was and remains the "Wonderful Counselor" (Isaiah 9:6), who perfectly modeled through his earthly ministry how we too can become effective Christian caregivers and counselors. Our Lord took time to listen and kindly respond to those who needed his help and spiritual guidance.

For example, in Luke 12:13 we read of how a man pled with Jesus, *“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me”* (ESV). This individual was clearly upset about the family squabble he was having with his sibling. Jesus’ prudent response in verse 14 (ESV) was, *“Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?”* The Lord knew that it was unwise to meddle in somebody else’s personal family affairs. He also, however, seized on this opportunity for a teaching moment. Jesus told those present, including the man, *“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions”* (verse 15, ESV). This statement was followed by a parable regarding a rich man who was greatly blessed and became greedy and self-reliant, wanting to hoard his grain and build bigger barns.

The fact that the man was wealthy was not the real issue as much as his worldly attitude regarding his riches. This self-satisfied character in the parable said to his soul, *“Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry”* (Luke 12:19b, ESV). But God had other plans. The man’s life was about to end and then his earthly treasures would become somebody else’s, because he was not rich towards God (verses 20-21). Jesus, then, went on to address the issue of anxiety regarding material things and how his disciples ought to trust in God who would provide for their every single material need, including food, drink, and clothing (verses 22-31).

Life can be exceedingly difficult. People struggle daily with a variety of depressing difficulties and perplexing problems. Most people in churches who are hurting and reaching out for help recognize that there is a spiritual dimension to their problems. Their faith informs them that God’s intervention is needed in finding a true and lasting solution.

Seven Essentials to Christian Counseling

It seems there are at least seven essentials to a successful approach toward Christian counseling:

First of all, lean on the Lord Jesus Christ. It is arrogant on our part to think we are able to fix somebody else's problems by relying on our own power. Only God possesses the power to bind up the brokenhearted and mend people's broken hearts and beleaguered souls. The best we can hope for is to humbly participate in the work that God is already doing in people's lives to the best of our abilities. There is only one Savior, and I am not He!

Counselors-in-training must very early on in their education come to grips with the very real limitations of their own finitude as flawed, mortal human beings. It is crucial that we recognize our complete reliance upon God's help to be able to effectively help others. Just as Jesus frequently went off alone to commune with his Father in prayer in order to receive strength, wisdom, and guidance, so must we (See Matt. 14:23; 26:36-44; Mark 6:46; 14:32-39; Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28-29; 11:1; 22:39-45). Prior to, during, and after counseling sessions, tap into God's unlimited power and pray for wisdom.

Second, honor and uphold appropriate legal and ethical boundaries or legal limits related to confidentiality. We must always be careful to keep personal information shared by someone with us in strict confidence whenever possible. However, we can only ensure confidentiality within the limitations placed upon me by the law. If somebody is intending to hurt him or herself or is actively planning to harm someone else, or if child abuse or elder abuse is brought up, we need to report it to family and/or the proper authorities. Safety always takes precedence!

Third, listen nonjudgmentally and reflectively. When someone is sharing their deepest concerns with us, they need our undivided attention. They also need to be assured that no matter what they share with us, we will continue to respect them as a person and care about them.

While we, like Jesus, must hate the sin, we must also never stop loving the sinner.

When we are listening, it is important to pay close attention to both their verbal statements and nonverbal cues. We must ask thoughtful and respectful questions to gain understanding and clarification, and we need to regularly reflect back to the careseeker what we are understanding them to say along with the feelings/emotions underlying their statements. We can thereby help the counselee grow in self-awareness as we serve as a sounding board and a mirror to them.

Fourth, uncover personal strengths they already possess and look for hidden, positive exceptions that are imbedded within the problem-saturated stories they are sharing with us. In other words, when listening to another's problems, it is helpful for us to highlight the special traits, abilities, and competencies you observe in them. These strengths may be helpful resources they can put to work in resolving their problems. By "exceptions," I am referring to finding out more about specific times in which the person has, in the past managed to effectively cope with their difficulties more effectively.

Paul states in 1 Corinthians 10:13, *"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."* The point here is to recognize that God is already at work in their lives to aid them in finding a viable solution to their difficulties. You may ask the counselee about small glimpses of light or signs of

God's providence and help they have already been noticing with regards to overcoming their problem.

Fifth, recognize your own counseling deficiencies and limit your advice giving. Resist the temptation to offer quick and easy solutions or to make hasty recommendations. Doing so will likely foster an overly dependent relationship with you rather than empowering the counselee to find their own solutions within their own personal frame of reference and social and family context. It is likely that others have already offered them plenty of well-meaning advice—some good and the rest not helpful. Therefore, avoid giving any advice prematurely. Recognizing our limitations and knowing when we are getting in over our heads is important. Know when to refer!

Sixth, draw out spiritual and theological themes that are woven within the tapestry of the counselee's story. When someone is sharing their story with you, they may overlook significant spiritual or religious pieces to the puzzle that might be essential in finding adequate answers and viable solutions. Think theologically about the matter they are presenting as well as about the psychological and emotional components that may be involved. Do your best to link the individual's lived experiences and story to the grand themes and hope-filled narratives of God's Word. Doing so might help the person gain spiritual insight into his or her own trials and tribulations.

Seventh, learn from the counselee. We must be humble and open to them teaching us something of value that could make a positive difference in our own life. Strive to build a collaborative relationship where there is mutual respect and their human dignity is preserved. When an individual is in a "one-down" position it could make them feel inferior, embarrassed, and weak and may erode their self-esteem. Therefore, it is important for them to recognize that

we view them as someone who can contribute something worthwhile to others and to us through their knowledge, experience, and unique abilities. We must take the humble stance as someone who may stand to learn some helpful lessons and gain valuable insights from them just as they can from us. This way there will be a reciprocal blessing by which both parties may benefit and grow. Proverbs 27:17 (NIV) says, *“As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”*

Seven Key Christian Counseling Concepts

For simplicity-sake, the following seven key counseling concepts for lay Christian counselors all begin with the letter “C.”

1. Compassion

Empathy and sympathy both play an important role in Christian counseling. Empathy has to do with understanding the counselee’s perspective and struggle. It also includes a non-judgmental attitude. Sympathy has to do with feeling genuine concern for their well-being, just as Jesus demonstrated in Matt. 9:36 (ESV), “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

2. Connection (Contact)

Basic nonverbals that demonstrate you are paying attention to the person are important (including good eye contact, head nods, and minimal encouragers such as “uh-huhs,” “okay,” “Mmm,” and “wow”). Good listening skills are critically important: invitational skills/door openers: “How can I help you?” “Tell me more about that?” “What else?” Also basic attending skills like paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, reflecting meaning, using clarifying questions, and summarizing what the individual is communicating can be extremely valuable to them. Often,

for careseekers just feeling like a caring brother or sister in Christ is actually listening and concerned is of immense value and comfort.

3. Christ-centered

Second Corinthians 1:3-4 (ESV) says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

Emphasize Christ’s interest in the sufferer and deep love for them. Introduce relevant teachings and actions by Jesus and explore his example for us as it relates to various difficult situations. Introduce biblical themes and faith-based spiritual tools such as worship, prayer, fasting, and meditation on Scripture.

4. Confidentiality

It is important that the person feels he or she can trust you with their private, personal information and secrets. It gives them a sense of safety in sharing. But there are limits to confidentiality and exceptions to it including the following: child abuse, elderly abuse, suicidal ideation, or intent to injure someone else.

5. Competency-based

Focus on the counselee’s strengths, abilities, knowledge, and lived experience. Be solution-oriented and capitalize on the counselee’s ability to think for themselves, be creative, and make wise decisions. Help them realize that they are competent and that they possess the requisite skills (or can develop them) to achieve satisfactory resolution to their presenting problems.

6. Collaborative Stance

Demonstrate a respectful attitude that afford the counselee appropriate human dignity. Develop a caring relationship that emphasizes the value of Christian fellowship and shared responsibility. Work together to develop appropriately concrete and realistic goals for counseling, along with a strategy to reach these goals. Develop a sense of teamwork.

7. Cognitive-Behavioral

This model of counseling revolves around Thinking, Feeling, and Doing. Explore how the counselee's thoughts (Cognitions – especially irrational or illogical ones) are impacting their emotions (Feelings), and in turn affecting their behavior (Doing). Challenge fallacious and irrational thoughts about others, self, and God. Help the individual find alternative, healthier interpretations of what is happening and why it's happening.

Using God's Word in Counseling

Biblically based counseling should include taking God's Word seriously and using it appropriately to help provide direction to the counselee. It is important to be well prepared to employ Scripture in counseling in an appropriate and beneficial way. That implies being a good student of God's Word yourself, one who is well-versed in Scripture.

But, first things first. It is essential from the start that we determine if the careseeker is comfortable with our use of the Bible in counseling. If they are, we must then use Scripture *scripturally*. In other words, we must be sure that we are employing the Bible in the right manner and within its proper context. Avoid proof-texting to support your point of view.

Also, we must be careful to use Scripture *psychologically*. By this statement I mean that we ought to employ it in such a way that it attends to the individual's psychological and emotional needs, not just their intellectual understanding. Hebrews 4:12 (ESV) states, "*For the*

word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Thus the Bible possesses the inherent power to cut us to the quick and challenge us to grow.

Discussion question: What are some potential concerns you might have when it comes to incorporating Scripture into counseling? Why?

Discussion question: What would be some of the most important considerations to you regarding the use of Scripture in the counseling process?

Some Key Considerations Regarding the Use of Scripture in Counseling

The Bible ought to be used and applied in a positive and appropriate psychological way. Simply quoting or reading a scripture doesn't necessarily make for effective biblical counseling. So how is one to go about appropriately using Scripture in a counseling situation? It will help to ask the following questions of oneself:

- (1) Who is the person sitting in front of me and what is important to them?
- (2) What has their experience with the Bible been thus far in their lives?
- (3) Do they view the Bible as a source of comfort or does it conjure up painful memories for them?
- (4) What is the counselee's specific context in which they live, namely their cultural and family traditions, present lifestyle and problems, as well as their past history?

(5) What biblical passages might speak more effectively to this particular person given their unique cultural environment and background?

(6) What word from God does this person most need to hear presently in their life?

(7) Does the message connect with them where they are or does it only tell them where we think they ought to be?

(8) Why do I want to share this particular biblical passage with them? (i.e., What is my agenda or hidden motivation?)

(9) What do I hope to accomplish by sharing this scripture (to provoke, challenge, teach, or comfort)?

(10) What would be the best manner in which to deliver or communicate this message to them?

(11) What barriers could hinder the counselee from grasping the intended meaning of the inspired biblical passage?

(12) How might they possibly misconstrue my intentions in sharing this scripture?⁷

Our Fundamental Task

Our task in Christian counseling is to help careseekers reconstruct the perceptions they hold of their problems by creating new possibilities for abundant life beyond the problem that binds and constricts. Charles Kollar states, "Helping counselees to get unstuck and back on track is a way in which God's Spirit begins to heal."⁸ Our task is not to see this work of God all the

⁷ Pate, "Scripture in Counseling."

⁸ Kollar, *Solution-Focused Pastoral Counseling*, 118.

way through to completion but only to participate with God in removing the veils from people's eyes so they too can discern God's presence.

We are to always look through a theological lens to inform the healing, guiding, sustaining, reconciling, nurturing, and liberating we endeavor to bring about. As caregivers, our primary frame of reference must be the Word of God that resides in the community of faith. This Word is not only that which is visibly fleshed out in our doing but also that which is also grappled with in our listening and voiced in our speaking. James 1:22 (NIV) states, "*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*" Christian counseling is a call both to actively listen to the Word and a call to positive action—to live out the kingdom life portrayed within the Bible by our deeds.

Scripture has the powerful potential to inform and transform the thinking, understanding, and attitudes of those individuals who are facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles in their lives. It can either build up or tear down depending on the needs of the present circumstances. When we promote a greater interest in the Bible within those whom we are trying to help, more individuals will be referred to the Wonderful Counselor who is able to teach, heal, and comfort the sufferer as no one else can.

As a result of your own journey toward greater emotional and spiritual healing from depression, you may have developed a significant interest in seeking more formal training in becoming a certified and/or licensed Christian counselor.

The Blue Servant

Feeling blue? God still has a plan for you! He has foreordained a special purpose for your life—an important work he's prepared in advance for you to tackle, a meaningful mission for you to accomplish. Ephesians 2:10 (ESV) says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ

Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Isn’t that encouraging to know?

The blue servant is one who is sensitive to the needs of others, keenly aware of one’s own very real limitations on time, energy and expertise, humble in one’s own self-appraisal, but one who is nonetheless willing to be available and receptive to God’s leading and call. The blue servant recognizes his or her own weaknesses, while grasping onto God’s almighty hand (see 2 Corinthians 12:9-10). The blue servant also comprehends and embraces the length, width, height and depth of God’s unwavering love (see Ephesians 3:16-19).

To be blue is to be beloved. To be blue is to be bold and beautiful. To be blue is to remain useful to God. To be blue is to be set apart for a special holy purpose for God’s glory. So fear not! Step out by faith and become a faithful blue servant and make a positive difference in this world!

Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV) promises: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Group exercise: Supply paper and markers to class/group members and ask them to draw a picture depicting themselves as “blue servants” who are making a positive difference in the lives of others. They may add descriptive words to their masterpieces if they like. Once the drawings are complete, have volunteers share their picture with the rest of the class/group and speak about it.

Final Discussion Question: Name two or three pieces of learning or personal growth experiences from participating in this study series on depression that have been most helpful or meaningful to you.

Prayer

Dear God,

Please help us to learn from the Wonderful Counselor, your precious Son. Supply us with the knowledge and resources we need to provide godly counsel and help to those who are in desperate need of support, understanding, and guidance. Allow us to listen attentively and nonjudgmentally to fellow sufferers. Also give us the necessary wisdom to know when we're in over our heads. We humbly ask that we may find hope, joy, meaning, and fulfillment as blue servants who make a positive difference for good in the lives of others.

In Jesus' name, Amen!

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