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The Senior Connection - LIFE IS WORTH GIVING

UNDERSTANDING AND SURVIVING DEPRESSION IS VITAL TO LIFE

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

One of the great spiritual and mental afflictions experienced by virtually millions of people in our modern world is depression. It afflicts both those who find religion a very important aspect of their journey in life, and also those who have little or no connection with the spiritual life, and many in between those two positions. As many, including this author, can readily attest, depression can strike anyone ~~—~~ even those deeply committed to following Christ and His commandments.

Not long ago Sr. Kathryn J. Hermes, a writer and religious sister who had her own 18-year journey into the darkness of depression, decided to share her experience for the benefit of many with an encouraging approach to survive the malady. And this by simply following aspects of the Catholic/Christian tradition for needed support. These include the encouraging stories of others who have lived with depression and survived, and also the psychological, medical, spiritual and practical self-care perspectives that can lead to a cure. Also contained in the presentation are hints for the family and friends of the depressed as to how to truly and effectively help in this more than difficult experience, and to overcome the isolation and loneliness that the depressed so often experience.

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It must be understood, too, that depression is a complex illness probably best explained not by genes or circumstances alone, but by the interaction of the two. And the situation is not helped by the trite expressions such as "Snap out of it"; or, "Get a grip." These are often meaningless expressions that may do more harm than good. In these difficult circumstances, people need authentic encouragement, empathic listening, and kind understanding.

On the part of the person afflicted with depression, it is often a personal act of faith in the love of God that is at the root of a cure. No matter how difficult the struggle, people can rely on their authentic Faith to continue moving back to a more normal lifestyle.

It should also be remembered that depression brings with it darkness and chaos. But God is still present within each afflicted person as Light, Peace, and Love. The author then suggests using the following prayer: "You, Lord, are present in me as Light. Nothing can take the Light from me. You have chosen me to be your child. You hold me tight. Nothing can take me from you. The darkness and chaos will come and go as I am healed. But you, O Lord, will remain, because I am forever yours."

On a very practical level, the author suggests regular (daily) exercise such as walking, especially with others.

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The feeling of isolation that comes with depression is somewhat relieved simply by walking, gardening, an exercise program, or any other activity that brings a depressed person into contact with others.

A change of attitude towards the positive is also a great help in overcoming depression. People need to ask themselves: "What do I think God sees when he looks at me." Then a list of skills for which one is most grateful can be made, along with three things one would like to be. ^(AND) What is most important to the depress^{ed} person, and what brings excitement to life? Thinking in this positive way enables a depressed person to look forward to a time of restored health and a bright future.

The author also offers numerous strategies for raising self-esteem. Among these are: celebrating accomplishments; being content with less than perfection; accepting that it may take longer to accomplish one's goals; talking frequently with people who are a source of support; thinking of self as good and positive; and believing others who affirm one's worth.

And on the spiritual side, the author suggests that a depressed person believe in self as a child of God; pray to the Trinity within; know that mental illness is no cause for shame; determine to get more out of life; and, write down all things that are good about self spiritually.

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There is also an important suggestion that depressed people need to educate others about mood disorders and self-esteem issues. And that there is a great need for positive affirmation of all people throughout life.

Equally as important, the author also provides basic guidelines for changing irrational thoughts, often experienced by the depressed. These are to evaluate realistically each unusual thought or statement about self or the world; take off the pressure from others simply by saying "No" to requests at times; and to make a plan for life with small, realistic goals.

From the point of view of those who are in relationships with the depressed, the author suggests that maintaining a concerned friendship with someone suffering with depression requires that the friend ^(MUST) ~~must~~ face the fact that he or she can't fix the situation. But people can offer concerned support and caring to the depressed. And this is truly a great gift.

Thankfully, as this helpful book confirms, depression is no more a period of complete loss than the winter season which encompasses extended darkness and little growth. Depression can even be a creative time when suffering can be transformed from within. And in all of this, there is always the hope and promise of a return to a love-giving life.

(Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.)