

Walking Alone in Depression

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For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish.
Jeremiah 31:25

Introduction:

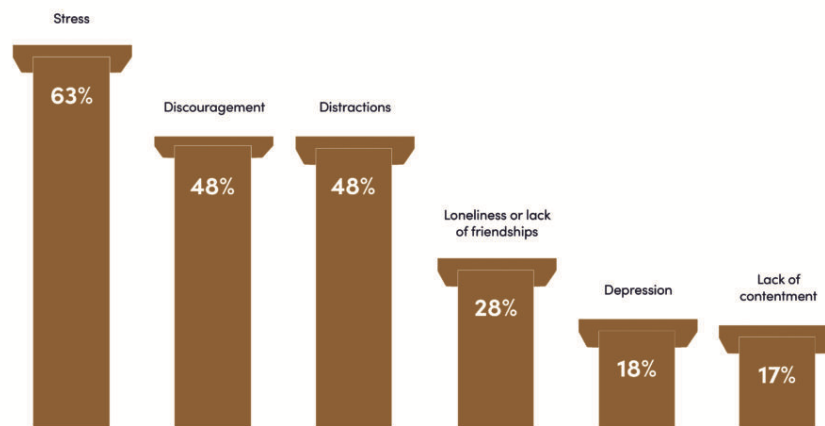
Pastors & Depression

In this study, Lifeway Research interviewed 200 U.S. Protestant pastors who identified 44 issues they face in their roles and then surveyed 1,000 additional pastors to determine the greatest needs U.S. Protestant pastors face today. The nearly four dozen needs were divided into seven categories: ministry difficulties, spiritual needs, mental challenges, personal life, self-care, people dynamics and areas of skill development.¹

The Greatest Needs of Pastors

Which mental challenges do pastors say they face in their ministry?

Among U.S. Protestant pastors

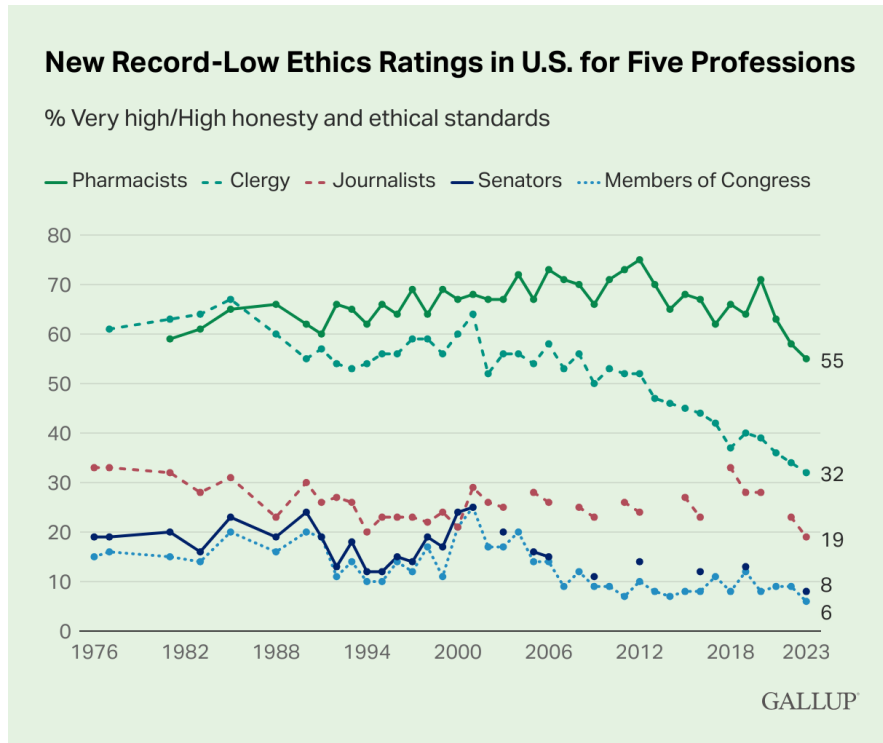


Notes: Pastors were asked: "Which of the following mental challenges do you face in your ministry as a pastor. (Select all that apply)." 14% say none of these.

Lifeway research

Source: Lifeway Research phone survey of 1,000 U.S. Protestant pastors conducted March 30-April 22, 2021

¹ <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/04/26/stress-tops-mental-challenges-pastors-face/>.



DSM-V criteria to receive the diagnosis of depression

The DSM-5 outlines the following criterion to make a diagnosis of depression. The individual must be experiencing five or more symptoms during the same 2-week period and at least one of the symptoms should be either (1) depressed mood or (2) loss of interest or pleasure.

1. Depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day.
2. Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day.
3. Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day.
4. A slowing down of thought and a reduction of physical movement (observable by others, not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down).
5. Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day.
6. Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day.
7. Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day.
8. Recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide.

To receive a diagnosis of depression, these symptoms must cause the individual clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. The symptoms must also not be a result of substance abuse or another medical condition.²

² <https://www.psychom.net/depression-definition-dsm-5-diagnostic-criteria/>

How does depression feel?

Edward T. Welch, *Depression's Odd Filter*

Someone says to you, "I love you."

You hear . . . nothing. Actually, you hear something. You hear a little voice in your brain that says, "I'm worthless. You're only saying you love me because you think you have to."

Somehow, from the mouths of other people to your ear, all words of blessing and encouragement get tumbled upside down and backward and confirm your suspicions about yourself. You are an abject failure. Unloved. Unlovable. And everyone knows it.

There are hundreds of variations.

"You look nice today."

Push it through the filter of depression and you get, "Not true. I know I am ugly."
Or, "You seem to be feeling a little better today."

This means, "Oh, you don't want to talk to me anymore."

This is your brain on depression. And we could add, it is your brain on shame.³

What does treatment look like for depression?

- Medication only- 6%
- Therapy and medication- 44%
- Therapy only- 15%
- Nothing- 35%
- *Dr. Kathryn Butler*: In a survey of 5.4 million adults in the US reporting an unmet need for mental-health services, 8.2% did not seek mental-health treatment because they did not want others to find out, 9.5% because "it might cause neighbors/community to have a negative opinion," and 9.6% due to concerns about confidentiality. Some 28% believed that they could handle the problem without treatment, and 22.8% did not know where to go to receive treatment. Such statistics reveal that the road to healing slouches uphill. Many tread it alone.⁴

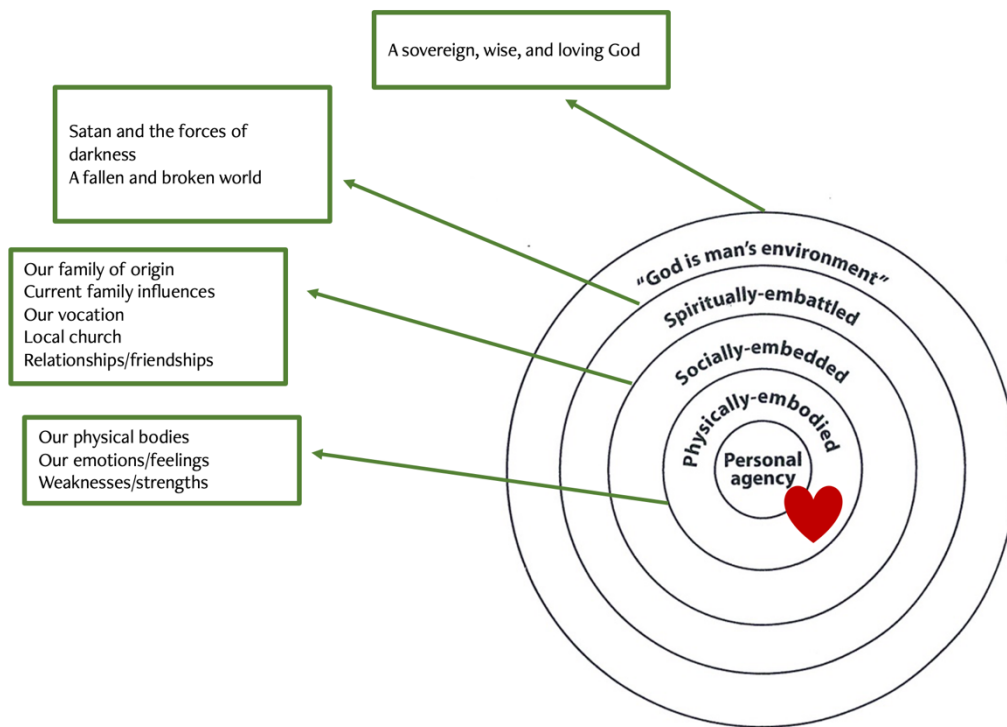
³ Edward T. Welch, "Depression's Odd Filter," January 20, 2011. <https://www.ccef.org/depression-s-odd-filter/>. Accessed 7 September 2019.

⁴ Kathryn Butler, "Scrambling for the Light: Christian Depression and the Use of Medication," May 15, 2019, *Desiring God*, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/scrambling-for-the-light>. Accessed 7 September 2019.

What are some of the ways that pastors handle depression?

What causes depression?

Depression is a form of suffering that can't be reduced to one universal cause. This means that family and friends can't rush in armed with THE answer. Instead, they must be willing to take time to know the depressed person and work together with him or her.



What does Scripture have to say about depression?

People in the Bible who struggled with depression:

Developing a biblical perspective on depression

In the time that we have let me offer a few biblical principles to help guide our thinking and posture toward those who struggle.

1. Pastors struggle and battle depression

2. Depression impacts our bodies
 - a. *Martin Luther*: I nearly gave up the ghost — and now, bathed in blood, can find no peace. What took four days to heal immediately tears open again.

 - b. For example, in a letter to Melancthon, Luther writes:
 - i. For more than a week I have been thrown back and forth in death and Hell; my whole body feels beaten, my limbs are still trembling. I almost lost Christ completely, driven about on the waves and storms of despair and blasphemy against God. But because of the intercession of the faithful, God began to take mercy on me and tore my soul from the depths of Hell.⁵

 - c. *Michael Reeves on C.H. Spurgeon*:
 - i. Then, from the age of thirty-three, physical pain became a large and constant feature of life for him. He suffered from a burning kidney inflammation called Bright's Disease, as well as gout, rheumatism, and neuritis. The pain was such that it soon kept him from preaching for one-third of the time. Added to that, overwork, stress, and guilt about the stress began to take their toll. And all this was in the public eye and was

⁵ John Piper, "Martin Luther: Lessons from his life and labor," January 30, 1996, *Desiring God*. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/martin-luther-lessons-from-his-life-and-labor>. Accessed 7 September 2019.

jumped on by his many critics, not making it easier to bear. The suffering, they argued rather predictably, was a judgment from God.⁶

3. Depression has a spiritual element to it

- a. Satan's name means *accuser* or *adversary* in Hebrew. That tells you all you need to know in some ways re: the possible role he plays in our experiences of depression.
- b. *Martin Luther*: For as soon as God's word becomes known through you, the devil will afflict you, will make a real doctor of you, and will teach you by his temptations to seek and to love God's Word. For I myself . . . owe my papists many thanks for so beating, pressing, and frightening me through the devil's raging that they have turned me into a fairly good theologian, driving me to a goal I should never have reached.⁷
- c. *Martin Luther*: If the Devil can do nothing against the teachings, he attacks the person, lying, slandering, cursing, and ranting at him. Just as the papists' Beelzebub did to me when he could not subdue my Gospel, he wrote that I was possessed by the Devil, was a changeling, my beloved mother a whore and bath attendant.⁸
- d. *Ed Welch*: Be alert to spiritual warfare. Depressed people are very vulnerable to Satan's claim that God is not good. Jesus' death on the cross proves God's love for you. It's the only weapon powerful enough to stand against Satan's lies (Romans 5:6–8; 1 John 4:9–10).⁹

4. Depression can't keep you from growing in the Lord

⁶ Michael Reeves, "Did You Know That Charles Spurgeon Struggled with Depression?", February 24, 2018, *Crossway*, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/did-you-know-that-charles-spurgeon-struggled-with-depression/>. Accessed 8 March 2024.

⁷ John Piper, "Martin Luther: Lessons from his life and labor," January 30, 1996, *Desiring God*. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/martin-luther-lessons-from-his-life-and-labor>. Accessed 7 September 2019.

⁸ John Piper, "Martin Luther: Lessons from his life and labor," January 30, 1996, *Desiring God*. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/martin-luther-lessons-from-his-life-and-labor>. Accessed 7 September 2019.

⁹ Ed Welch, "Hope for the Depressed", January 10, 2010, *CCEF.org*, <https://www.ccef.org/hope-depressed/>. Accessed 10 January 2023.

5. Your depression will not be wasted

- a. *Martin Luther*: Trials [They] teach you not only to know and understand but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's word is: it is wisdom supreme.¹⁰
- b. *Charles Spurgeon*: Hundreds of times I have been able to give a helpful grip to brethren and sisters who have come into that same condition, which grip I could never have given if I had not known their deep despondency.¹¹

Let's get practical:

Avoid simplistic solutions

J.I. Packer: Christians... live in and through bodies—bodies that from time-to-time malfunction, get sick, wear out, and finally die; and physical factors, with or without spiritual slippages, can at any stage bring on...depression in its various forms. Some in the past have gone so far as to diagnose depression in Christians as always a sign of unbelief or some other major sin, but this is not right.¹²

Talk to yourself, don't just listen to yourself

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones: In other words we must talk to ourselves instead of allowing ourselves to talk to us. We must take ourselves in hand, we must address ourselves as the Psalmist addressed himself and his soul, and ask the question, "Why are thou cast down? Why art thou disquieted within me?" You have no right to be like this. Why are you depressed and cast down? He faces himself and talks to himself, he argues with himself and brings himself back to the position of faith. He exhorts himself to have faith in God, and he is in a condition to pray to God.¹³

Identify depression's lies

It's always going to be like this.
This is just the way things are.
No one care about you.
You're a burden to others.
Don't tell anyone.

¹⁰ John Piper, "Luther, Bunyan, Bible and Pain", January 19, 1999, *Desiring God*, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/luther-bunyan-bible-and-pain>. Accessed 8 March 2024.

¹¹ Blake Boylston, "5 Biblical Encouragements for Depressed Believers," September 11, 2019, *The Gospel Coalition*. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/biblical-encouragements-depressed-believers/>. Accessed 11 September 2019.

¹² Michael S. Lundy, MD, *Depression, Anxiety, and the Christian Life: Practical Wisdom from Richard Baxter*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 13.

¹³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 23-24

You're the only one who struggles like this.
You must have done something wrong.
Something is wrong with you.
Strong, successful people don't battle depression.
My family is better off without me.

Jason Kovacs: A large component of depression is the deep entrenchment of lies that Satan tempts humans to believe. A person can hear terrible things about his worth, identity, and future. In those moments, he needs to fight to believe the things that are real and true from the mouth of God.¹⁴

Be careful to not take Scripture out of context

Find a metaphor in Scripture that speaks to you

Listen to good, gospel-filled music

Rightly prioritize feelings and emotions

Steve Bloem: The psalms treat depression more realistically than many of today's popular books on Christianity and psychology. David and other psalmists often found themselves deeply depressed for various reasons. They did not, however, apologize for what they were feeling, nor did they confess it as sin. It was a legitimate part of their relationship with God. They interacted with Him through the context of their depression.¹⁵

Explore non-medical interventions

¹⁴ Jason Kovacs, "The Gospel and Depression," August 13, 2014. <https://www.austinstonecounseling.org/the-gospel-and-depression-2/>. Accessed 7 September 2019.

¹⁵ David Murray, *Christians Get Depressed Too*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 2-3.

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Books & Resources:

[The Company We Keep: In Search of Biblical Friendship](#)

[Counsel for Couples: A Biblical and Practical Guide for Marriage Counseling](#)

[Rescue Plan: Charting a Course for Prisoners of Pornography](#)

[Rescue Skills: Essentials Skills for Restoring the Sexually Broken](#)

Dear friend,

What words can I say to you when your life is hard and you are hurting? If we were face to face, I probably wouldn't start with words at all. I would want you to talk when you are able. I want to know you, what you are going through, what it is like for you, and how you are doing. Simply being present and conveying that tears, heartache, and confusion are valid would probably be more helpful. Many wise Christians have commented that Job's counselors did well until they opened their mouths (Job 2:11-13), and I certainly don't think there is some magic word that will make everything better.

But when it comes time to say something, I might say this: Jesus is a most sympathetic friend, fellow sufferer, and Savior. He has walked a hard road. He has felt his own anguish and crushing pain (Isaiah 53). He understands. He is compassionate toward you. By the comfort of his presence and sympathy, he intends to draw you out and draw you to Himself.

I encourage you to go to him and speak to him. There is something about our ability to find words to express what we're experiencing that makes a genuine difference. A wise Christian of many centuries ago said, "To open one's heart to one's friend—it doubles our joys and cuts our griefs in half." I have found this to be true. Sharing a joy really does double the joy. And of course, sharing heartache never takes it all away — but there's something about speaking to someone who truly cares about you that soothes your wounds. You are not alone.

The psalms, which are so full of heartache and so full of faith, often start with simply giving voice to the experience of suffering. As they do, it's significant to notice that they don't simply cry out in a scream of pain. They cry out to God who hears, who cares, who draws near, who helps. We can speak to our God. May you cry out to our God. He calls you his friend. He deeply cares for you. He is your Savior. Trust Him. He has walked down this road before you. He promises to walk with you in this.

And I might say one more thing. Suffering must be walked through one step at a time. Be honest. Don't take any shortcuts. Let each day's trouble be sufficient for that day. Seek your Father. If you seek him, you will find him.

—David¹⁶

¹⁶ David Powlison, "An Open Letter to a Suffering Christian," March 21, 2018, <https://www.ccef.org/open-letter-suffering-christian/>. Accessed 9 September 2019.

Resources:

- Andrews, Laura, “[When Life Feels Disconnected from Faith](#)” [blog post]
- Ashmore, Margaret. *Depression: The Sun Always Rises*
- Berger, Daniel. *Rethinking Depression: Not a Sickness Not a Sin*
- Boylston, Blake, “[5 Biblical Encouragement for Depressed Believers](#)” [blog post]
- Collins, Sarah & Jayne Haynes, *Dealing with Depression: Trusting God through the Dark Times*
- Eswine, Zack. *Spurgeon’s Sorrows: Realistic Hope for Those Who Suffer from Depression*
- Ganschow, Julie. *Seeing Depression Through the Eyes of Grace*
- Jantz, Gregory, *Turning Your Down Into Up: A Realistic Plan for Healing from Depression*
- Lawson, Michael, *D is Depression: Spiritual, psychological and medical resources for healing depression*
- Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn. *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure*
- Maxwell, Paul C., *When Your Twenties Are Darker Than You Expected*
- Murray, David. *Christians Get Depressed Too: Hope and Help for Depressed People*
- _____, *Why Am I Feeling Like This? A Teen’s Guide to Freedom from Anxiety and Depression*
- _____, *Why Is My Teenager Feeling Like This? A Guide for Helping Teens Through Anxiety and Depression*
- Nelson, Tommy & Steve Leavitt, *Walking on Water When You Feel Like You’re Drowning: Finding Hope in Life’s Darkest Moments*
- Piper, John. *When the Darkness Will Not Lift: Doing What We Can While We Wait for God and Joy*
- Powlison, David, “[Depression and Anxiety: How Can Churches Help?](#)” [video]
- Somerville, Robert. *If I’m a Christian, Why Am I Depressed? Finding meaning and Hope in the Dark Valley, One Man’s Journey*
- Esther Smith, “[Lessons From My Teen Clients](#)” [blog post]
- Tautges, Paul, *Overcoming Depression: Help and Hope for Christians Who Struggle*
- Trahan, Carol. *Help! I’m Depressed* (minibook)
- Vernick, Leslie, *Defeating Depression: Real Hope for Life-Changing Wholeness*
- Welch, Ed. *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness*
- _____, *Hope for the Depressed: Beyond a “Cheer-Up” Theology* (minibook)
- _____, *Depression: The Up When You are Down* (minibook)
- _____, “[Enduring in the Midst of Depression](#)” [blog post]
- ERLC, “[8 Ways to Help Depressed Christians](#)”