

Dealing with Post-Disaster Depression

with Daniel Cherry

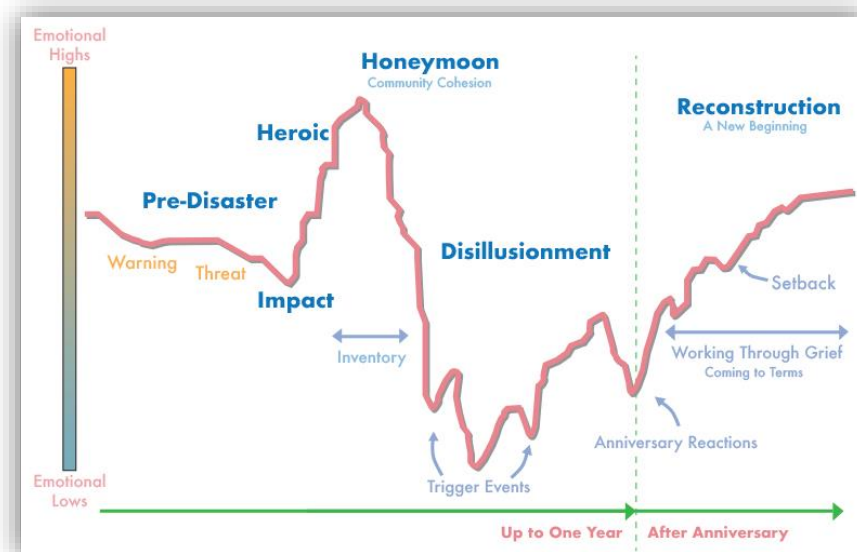
October 10, 2018, Panama City and the Florida panhandle was dealt a devastating “blow” by Hurricane Michael. One person said that Hurricane Michael should be arrested for speeding, theft, vandalism and assault with deadly shingles. While the notion is kind of silly, the effects of a hurricane are much like those of a violent crime – emotional healing takes a long time.



Months after the storm, many in our community are still feeling the emotional effects of this tragedy and wondering, “What’s wrong with me?” Either we can’t go to sleep at night, or we sleep a full night and still don’t feel rested. Our houses are still being mended and we are waiting for contractors to get to us or insurance companies to fulfill their obligations. Many are just feeling gloomy, discouraged, pessimistic, hopeless, despondent, disillusioned, exhausted, isolated, nervous and demotivated. What is this?

This is called depression. There are many causes of depression and it manifests itself in many ways. However, I’d like to address some important thoughts in this guide dealing specifically with post-disaster depression. For some, “depression” carries a certain connotation; a clinical and long-term emotional issue. However, studies have shown that communities experience a pretty predictable cycle after a hurricane. And the worst of it seems to happen between the 8 and 10-month mark. Consider the graph below produced by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

(link: <https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/recovering-disasters/phases-disaster>)



For any area hit by this type of community-wide devastation, it is important and helpful to have some tools for dealing with post-disaster depression. It is a real and natural response to tragedy. And the good news is that in Christ we have the tools we need in order to cope. We have hope. My prayer is that this brief guide will help you as you emotionally struggle through disaster recovery.

Is it Okay for Christians to Feel Depressed?

I have spoken with many Christian people who feel guilty if they are experiencing feelings of depression, as if depression is symptomatic of a weak faith. This faulty thinking must be dealt with head on.

First, depression is a feeling. **Your relationship with God is not dependent upon how you feel!** There are two factors that affect your relationship with God; (1) What you do (Mat. 7:21, 2 Cor. 5:10, Rev. 20:12-13) and (2) The blood of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:13, 1 Pet. 1:18-19). It is not a sin to feel bad. I have been watching a lot of high school wrestling lately. I am impressed by the grit of a determined wrestler who has been cradled on his back continuing to be held, but refusing to allow himself to be pinned – not giving up. Depression may put us on our back and hold us there for a time, but we can't let that feeling make us give up. Depression is a temptation to give up on God and walk away from the blood of Christ. However, no one was ever condemned for a temptation. Instead, when you feel depressed, that's when it's time to dig deep and muster the courage and strength to hold on to the blood of Jesus, to fight with everything you have and refuse to let your feelings pin you to the mat.

Second, depression is essentially a chemical issue. We feel depressed when our levels of serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine are low. These chemicals help us feel happy. One friend of mine, [Dr. Frank Merritt](#), calls them our “happy hormones.” Feelings come and go. The key is that we don't make decisions based on our feelings. Jeremiah 17:9 reminds us that our hearts are deceptive and diseased. Our emotions often lie to us. They can tell us we are in love when we are really only attracted. They can tell us we have no hope when we really do. Or, like Elijah in 1 Kings 19:10, make us feel like we are totally alone in the world. Feelings are chemically driven. Certainly, there are important steps we can take to help our bodies make those happy chemicals. But in the end our emotions cannot be the source of our decision making.

Third, scripture includes many examples of godly, faithful people feeling depressed and afraid. Elijah, as just mentioned, was afraid, lonely and depressed. King David wrote “I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart.” (Psalm 38:8) Jonah was angry enough to die (Jnh. 4:9) and Job cursed the day of birth (Job. 3:1). In 2 Cor. 5:2-4 Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that because we are in the flesh, we are going to suffer depression. He wrote, “Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.” **Groaning and feeling depressed is not a symptom of being weak or faithless, but of being human!**

And finally, God works His will in us even through depression. It is common for depressed Christians to forget that every aspect of their life belongs in God's story. Peter, speaking of our glorious salvation in Christ reminds us that “In this, you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” **(1 Peter 1:6-7 NIV)**

Grief? Trials? This all fits into God's story for you. Depressed people are tempted to release their grasp on hope, and embrace a hopeless mirage created by Satan. Temptation is not a sin or even a sign of weakness. Even Jesus Christ was tempted by Satan, but he didn't quit. Rather,

he fought with the power of God's word and ended up on top. How we respond determines how God is glorified through us. Below are some acts we can take to help us deal with depression in a way that honors our Savior.

How Can We Deal with Depression?

[Note: Some have physiological causes of depression – If your depression has lasted longer than two years, see a mental health professional who can properly diagnose a medical condition. Like someone with a broken leg needs a cast and a crutch, you may need medicine to help you cope with a mental illness. Click [Here](#) for a helpful self-test.]



Here are some important practical things you can do that will help with post-disaster depression. Remember that God doesn't build bridges over our difficult times, but walks with us *through* the valley of the shadow of death. (Psalm 23:4)

1. Acknowledge It– naming a problem is a key to healing from it. In Genesis 4:6, God tells Cain that “sin is crouching” at his door. God knew, he needed to know what this was before he could properly deal with it. Until we acknowledge we are dealing with depression we have locked our struggle in a box and refused to properly face it. Cain never acknowledged the problem – and it didn't end well.

2. Make Good Spiritual Decisions – Paul reminds us, “In your anger do not sin.” (Eph. 4:26) Like anger, depression is a normal human reaction to outward circumstances. Be cautious not to begin making excuses for bad moral decisions. This is the time to hunker down and recommit to a lifestyle that honors God.

3. Spend Focused Time in Prayer – Dig into God's word, especially the Psalms, and pray

them. Pour your heart out before God. Christians contain the often untapped resource of the indwelling Holy Spirit to help us in our weakness. (Rom. 8:26) If you'd like to dig into healing, restorative prayer, you might read [Pray Like You Breathe by Dr. Houston Heflin](#). This is an exploration into the practice of breath prayer. Prayer is a fantastic resource for Christians dealing with post-traumatic depression.



4. Get Plenty of Sleep/Rest – (7-9hrs/night) Make sure you're rested. Sleep/rest may not “solve” the problem, but without sleep, your body will have a hard time recovering. God programmed “Sabbath” into our human weekly cycle. (Gen. 2:2) This is a good time to take that seriously. Take Sabbath time to rest your mind and body.

5. Fellowship with People – When we are depressed, Satan tempts us to pull away from people and suffer on our own. **DON'T PULL AWAY FROM PEOPLE.** God designed us to work, play, celebrate, mourn and heal in community. This is part of the image of God in us. (Gen. 1:27-28) Take advantage of your relationships in the church. If you don't have a church, find one and plug in immediately. **We'd love to have you fellowship with us!**

6. Talk About It – Depression builds up over time. We need to purge it out of our mind and heart or it will likely become overwhelming. Psalm 34:17 encourages us to “cry out to God.” Express your emotions openly to God and friends. Often in post-disaster emotional recovery there is a feeling of isolation; “I'm the only one”. You are not alone. We all feel it. So find and meet with groups of friends that you can talk to and share your story and struggles.

7. Set Reasonable Goals – We have all learned that goal-setting is difficult when relying on other people to get things done (e.g. over-committed contractors). So, start by making a list of things that need to get done (the tasks that weigh on you and run through your mind when you are trying to get plenty of sleep!). Categorize the items on the list into two groups; what you can do and what you rely on someone else for. Then, tackle one thing on the list you can do. Simply taking one step forward can be one step out of the hole of depression. Jesus encourages us, “Therefore, don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Mat. 6:34) Do what you can do today and leave tomorrow's tasks on a list for tomorrow.

8. Celebrate Small Achievements! When you check something off your list, celebrate it. Go out to eat, play a game, make a glass of sweet tea and relax while you look at what you've done. Invite someone over to celebrate that little step with you (Rom. 12:15 “Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn!”) Make a bigger deal about it than it seems you ought to – we should be celebrating a lot! Read Luke 15:8-10 – The widow who lost and found one little cheap coin over-celebrated! It's good to celebrate, but in your celebration remember #2 and make good spiritual decisions. ☺



9. Find Ways to Serve Others! – Helping someone else and allowing yourself to be helped does wonders for healing you and a community. Part of the process of depression is a turning inward. However, if we succumb to this internal focus, it feeds more negativity and isolation. Jesus instructed, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35) It's true. We really are blessed more when we serve others. It's so easy to get focused on our own situation. Serving others actually produces endorphins in ourselves and interrupts our negative patterns of thinking. Help your friends with items on their list and invite them over to help you with yours. Check things off your list together and

celebrate together.

10. Take Care of Your Body – Diet/Exercise. Since depression is principally a chemical problem, making sure our bodies have the right healing and restorative chemicals helps us recover. The Apostle Paul acknowledged – “Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you...” (1 Cor. 6:16) Our souls are, at least for this life, tied to our physical bodies. If we don't take good care of them we are neglecting an important element for spiritual healing.

May God bless you through this time of hurt, brokenness and healing. And remember to “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” (1 Timothy 6:12 NIV)

Some other Helpful Resources:

[10 Simple Steps to Happiness by Dr. Frank Merritt.](#) Dr. Merritt provides research-based practical steps you can take to help you feel better.

[8 Ways to Help Depressed Christians by David Murray.](#) A helpful Christian response to depression.

[Too Depressed to Believe What We Know – Eleven Resources for the Darkness by Marshall Segal.](#) From John Piper’s ministry, Desiring God.

For Fellow Ministers and Pastoral Church Leaders

I recommend spending some time in Romans 8. Here is an outline you might find helpful for a sermon, class series or even a one-on-one Bible study.

Romans 8

- 1-4 – You don’t have to feel guilty or afraid. (esp. vs. 1-2)
- 5-13 – Don’t seek to please the flesh – make good spiritual choices. (esp. v. 5)
- 14-17 – You are valuable to God, cry out to Him. (esp. v. 14)
- 18-25 – Realize this is all temporary. (esp. v. 18)
- 26-27 – Remember God hears. (esp. v. 26)
- 28-30 – God is working for our good. (esp. v. 28)
- 31-39 – We are conquerors. (esp. v. 37-39)