Christianity and Depression

It was at this home that I witnessed my mother try to commit suicide. It was at this hospital that my mother was kept alive after overdosing and I watched as the heart monitor barely registered her heartbeat, not knowing if she would pull through. It was at this facility that my mother finally began to receive treatment. This narrative, on continual repeat, was my adolescence and my mom's mothering years while her children were in the home.

My mother was clinically depressed. And by God's grace she received the sort of treatment that she needed before it was too late…Not all do. She's much better now on the whole, but to this day, every member of my family, including me, struggles w/ these memories & deal w/ variations of this issue. So, I stand before you today, not as a medical professional, but truly and most sincerely as a witness to the tragic reality that is depression.

Because it is a widespread struggle and one that has numerous spiritual connections, I want to spend this lesson publicly discussing what so many, both outside and inside of the church, deal with every day. We'll begin by defining what chronic and situational depression are, how Christians do indeed struggle with depression, what the Bible says about depression, and steps we can implement to address this disorder of the mind & spirit. May God be glorified as we address all things from the pattern of His inspired Word (Ps. 119:160; 2Tim. 3:16f).

I. What Is Depression? (Please note: I am not a medical professional!)

A. According to the DSM-V:

1. Definition: *"Depression, otherwise known as major depressive disorder or clinical depression, is a common & serious mood disorder. Those who suffer from depression experience persistent feelings of sadness & hopelessness & lose interest in activities they once enjoyed. Aside from the emotional problems caused by depression, individuals can also present w/ a physical symptom such as chronic pain or digestive issues. To be diagnosed w/ depression, symptoms must be present at least 2 wks."*
2. Diagnostic Criteria: *The individual must be experiencing 5 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.*
   a. *Depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day.*
   b. *Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day.*
   c. *Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain, or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day.*
   d. *A slowing down of thought and a reduction of physical movement (observable by others, not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down).*
   e. *Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day.*
   f. *Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day.*
   g. *Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day.*
   h. *Recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideation w/o a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing it.*

B. Additional Observations:

1. There are different forms and manifestations of depression (Postpartum, major, atypical, psychotic, seasonal affective, Dysthymia, etc.).
2. Depression and anxiety are two sides to the same coin. Often, the diagnostic criteria for each overlap, but there are some differences in how it manifests itself. Some disorders contain both (e.g. Bipolar Disorder).
3. Depressed individuals present with irritability, brooding, obsessive rumination, anxiety, phobias, excessive worry over physical health, and complaints of pain often with no physiological cause. For a diagnosis, there must be clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
4. Major depressive disorder is associated with high mortality, mainly because of suicide but also because of drug use and risky behavior. Over 1mil yearly.
5. Depression affects at least 322 million people worldwide and about 16 million people every year in the United States (*Our World in Data* and *NIMH*). Based on reporting, women are more likely to be diagnosed than men.

C. While there are many who struggle with chronic disorders of the mind, I sincerely believe that each of us has experienced a degree of Situational Depression or Adjustment Disorder over the past few months. This is not the same as chronic depression, but it does help those who do not have a major depressive disorder to begin to empathize with those who do and it also provides opportunity for us all to open up with one another toward our mutual edification (2Cor. 1:3-5) so we might better serve each other by bearing one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2).

II. Christians Struggle with Depression (Ps. 143:7f)

A. Testimony:

1. With the fact that 25% of people meet the criteria for a depressive episode in their life, it stands to reason that Christians do struggle with depression.
2. From Christians who do struggle with depression (It's overwhelming!):
    1. *"Depression comes out of the blue. You see no hope, happiness, or future. You don't want to talk to anyone and if you are out in public, you make no eye contact. You are very quiet & withdrawn. You feel like you are in a deep dark well and you can't get out! You also are very tired and would like nothing better than to stay in bed all day (that makes it worse, so just get up!)"*
    2. *"I am no expert, but have dealt with depression a majority of my life. It is one of the very cunning, baffling, insidious, and powerfully evil ways that Satan uses against people to destroy them."*
    3. *"I have struggled on and off with depression over the years. Last year was really bad. No medications worked for me…"*
    4. *"When I was in college, about 2/3 of my friend group struggled with some form of anxiety, depression, suicidal tendencies, etc. I think it's more pervasive than we care to admit. Probably the worst thing someone said to me was that people who are depressed are selfish and if they weren't as self-absorbed, they'd be ok. It absolutely broke me. Because my self-harm and depression has always been triggered by feeling like I'm failing others. If I could say one thing to Christians struggling with this, it would be that*

Scripture tells us to seek wisdom. Counselling and therapy is wisdom. It makes us masters of our own minds again. And helps us be the most effective Christians we can."

5. *"I think a lot of people in the church struggle with it but its taboo to talk about. I want Christians to know that it's a medical condition. It's ok to feel this way, but it's not ok to wallow in it. We can't serve God when we can't get out of bed. If you can't get help for yourself, get help so you can in turn help others."*
6. *"I struggle with depression caused by various reasons more than I like to admit. The crazy thing about it is, it's often the catalyst to anger, guilt and shame for me. As a man it makes me feel weak and self pitying which causes the emotions of anger, guilt and shame. As a Christian it can make me feel unappreciative for what God has blessed me with which feeds a sense of failure causing me to get inside my head and pick myself apart. The challenge for me is talking about it. I struggle with expressing how I feel because throughout life I've had to learn how to turn things on and off to protect myself and others around me, resulting in a man who has trouble expressing himself in a healthy way at times. Romans 8:26-27 comforts me because as much as I like to talk, I struggle to find the words when I'm feeling low. I'm thankful for God's love, mercy and grace but I don't always feel worthy of it."*

B. Current Events Are Making This a Widespread Reality (Job 14:1f; Matt. 6:34)

1. *"Has anyone else felt like this lately? I didn't mind quarantine much at first. But lately I'm starting to feel the way people were talking about early on during lockdown. Isolated, worried, a little paranoid, lacking friends, unmotivated, the days blurring together, etc."*
2. One study done by Healthline.com during the week of June 21st with several thousand people in the study found that 48% fell outside of the standard range and 23% exhibited signs of moderate to severe depression.
3. Suicide hotlines have seen major increases:
   a. LA, CA – 75x higher
   b. Boston – 100+ more/week
   c. OR – up 41%
   d. ND – up 300%
   e. ID – up 200%
   f. National – 6,000/week, up 200%

III. What Does the Bible Say About Depression?

A. Spiritual Roots

1. In the Garden of Eden, all was perfect (Gen. 1:31; 2; 3). When mankind chose to sin, open access to perfection was cut off. Being cut off brought corruption and death, including corruption of the human mind (Ro. 8:18-25; 2Cor. 4:4; 10:5; 11:3; Eph. 6:10-18; 1Jn. 5:19).
2. This is scientifically attested to by a massive meta-analysis study where a review of 444 studies showed that a religious or spiritual intervention for depressed individuals resulted in improvement 61% of the time. Only 6% of the time did it increase depressive symptoms (*NIH*). This analysis overwhelmingly shows that depression has a spiritual root/component.

B. Continuing Spiritual Elements (Prov. 12:25)

1. Social and emotional areas that Satan attacks with include: loneliness, isolation, bullying, pride, partiality, guilt, remorse
2. Satan tempts us w/ activities offering temporary relief, but no true satisfaction (e.g. drugs, alcohol, sleeping around, theft, gambling, etc.; Heb. 11:25).

C. Biblical People Who Struggled with Depression (Situational or Otherwise)

1. Job (3:11, 26; 10:1; 30:15-26)
2. Elijah (1Kgs. 19)
3. David (2Sam. 12:15-23; 18:19-33)
4. Jonah (chapter 4)
5. Jeremiah (15:10, 18; 20:14, 18)
6. Judas (Mt. 27:3-5; Acts 1:18-20)
7. Jesus? (Is. 53:3; Mk. 14:34-36; Lk. 22:44)
8. Paul? (2Cor. 4-5; 11-12)

D. Over-Arching Biblical Principles

1. Drawing near to Jesus reduces burden (Mt. 11:28-30)
2. Hope reduces burden (Ps. 42:11; 2Co. 1:10; Col. 1:5f, 23, 27; 1Ti. 1:1)
3. God is near to his people when they struggle (Ps. 34:18; 50:15; 2Cor. 7:6a)
4. God sets lonely in families, namely His family, the church (Ps. 68:6; 1Ti. 3:15)
5. God has designed your body (Ps. 139); sin has brought corruption (Rom. 8). Even so, there are certain aspects of your body that God has designed to combat depression. These built-in protocols include an arsenal of hormones and neurotransmitters that can be naturally stimulated through nutrition, exercise, rest, love.
6. God's instruction provides a system by which accountability, camaraderie, and mutual sharing of woes and trials can mutually edify and share the load.
7. God has also given people gifts, knowledge, and talents within the church who are professionally equipped to effectively address depression, situational or chronic or otherwise (Rom. 12:4-8; 1Cor. 12:27f; 1Pet. 4:10f).

IV. How Can We Address Depression in the Church?

A. For all:

1. Don't ignore or underestimate it. Invite people to describe their experience.
2. Be vigilant to govern your speech. We all fall short here (James 1:19; 3).
3. Be compassionate, sympathetic, and empathetic (if possible)
4. Familiarize yourself with: different types of depression, what the Bible says about depression, the difference between chronic and situational depression, and what resources are available in your area for treatment

B. For those personally struggling with it:

1. Your identity is found in being a child of God, not in a diagnostic label.
2. You are not lesser or greater for having this disorder. Also, it's okay to seek out help; this does not make you less of a Christian. In fact, the humility of recognizing the need and asking for help demonstrates discipleship.
3. Familiarize yourself with treatment options. Try to find a plan that makes use of the God-given methods for treatment rather than the humanistic ones. The use of behavioral activation, cognitive behavioral therapy, interpersonal psychotherapy, and antidepressants may be required in addition to nutrition, exercise, rest, etc.
4. Be aware, but try not to be overwhelmed, with the fact that your depression does impact the people around you, especially your loved ones and spiritual brothers and sisters.
5. Always pray fervently to the Lord regarding this thorn in your mind.

6. You are not alone!

C. For the family members of those struggling with it (Rom. 12:15f):

1. You struggle as a result of your loved one's struggle. You are loved and have the support you need if you'll be receptive to accept it. Your struggle is not the same as your loved one's, but they are related.
2. Try not to take things personally, especially when your loved one lashes out from the pit. This is easier said than done, but oh so needed!
3. Persevere in being sympathetic & in encouraging proper treatment protocols.

D. For those seeking to share the gospel with someone struggling with it:

1. Your approach will have to take into consideration the person who you are trying to share the gospel with. Don't lie and misrepresent the gospel, pretending that each and every thing will magically disappear. This sets a person up for greater difficulty with their depression.
2. Yet, Christianity does offer hope and healing. It offers support people and a God who understands the complexity of the human mind because He designed it. He also understands the depth to which sin has ensnared the mind and promises resolution. As our minds are corruptible like our flesh, so too our minds can put on the incorruptible like unto our flesh.

Depression is a corruption of the human mind resulting from sin being in the world. It may degenerate further or be effectively managed depending on one's openness to seek treatment and spiritual healing. It will continue to be a very real struggle in this world as a chronic issue and as a situational issue as long as sin is in this world, which will be until God destroys this world as He has promised (2Pet. 3).

Statistically speaking, chances are that we have several in our assembly struggling with chronic depression. Chances are also that each and every one of us has struggled with at least a touch of situational depression particularly these last few months. I don't offer a medical opinion as I am not qualified; however, I do want to offer the hope of redemptive healing through Christ. I want to affirm to you the value of God's people in their understanding and the hope of spiritual regeneration. I want to encourage you to talk to a spiritually-minded person who is educated in such areas. If you don't know of one, I'll be happy to assist as I do. Do this for your benefit, do this for the benefit of your family, & do this for the benefit of your spiritual brothers & sisters.

God freely offers forgiveness from sins, one of the most taxing weights on the human mind. Let's immediately take care of this weight first and vow to address the rest in time, not because we are weak, but because we are strong in Christ.