

Christian Psychologist: 5 Practical Ways to Help Your Deeply Depressed Loved Ones

If you are in crisis, please call 800-273-8255 or visit [. You are not alone.](#)

Another pastor suicided.

This heartbreaking news trails two similar tragedies. Within 13 months, three prominent pastors' premature deaths made headlines. Who knows how many other clergy and laity succumbed to suicide in the same time span? What's clear is one person dies from suicide every 40 seconds. In the U.S., suicide marks the 10th leading cause of death, and rates have been on the rise.

The suicide epidemic compels me, a clinical psychologist, to sound the alarm for the body of Christ. I commend the many mental health professionals who champion the cause of the emotionally unwell, but we need more helpers. There are way too many undetected souls on the brink of suicide.

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Are you willing to answer the call of Proverbs 24:11 and restrain those stumbling toward self-imposed slaughter?

If reservations are stopping you from enlisting, relax. Your yes doesn't automatically commit you to graduate school. Accepting this plea will simply net you a few practical steps to help transition a depressed daughter, bipolar brother, shame-ridden spouse or neglected elderly neighbor away from the idea of suicide. (Mental illness, such as depression and bipolar disorder, is the leading cause of suicide.)

Here are several tips to help you navigate the choppy waters

of emotional pain.

1. Activate awareness.

Souls who grapple with suicide may not reveal such intimate details to you. However, their behavior can serve as a detector. Withdrawal, feelings of depression or self-admission of being a burden can be suicide warning signs. Inquire regarding changes in behavior you've seen. The most effective way of helping someone scrap their desire for suicide is to be a friend. Be persistent, yet nonintrusive: Express your availability to listen. Visit. Reschedule your day or go out of your way if necessary.

2. Embrace their experience.

David W. Augsburger asserted, "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable." How can we listen like this? Start with accepting someone else's assessment of their world without doubting. Dismissing their future to be as bleak as they claimed is charging them as incompetent to read their own reality accurately. Telling them to pull it together is minimizing the depth of their suffering—as though they would've overcome their woe with a stronger willpower. Decide to side with your loved ones.

3. Defer your differences.

Just because you know they're wrong doesn't mean you need to straighten them out. People don't feel heard, much less loved, when we argue with them. Criticism never creates safety. You can sort things out, explain your heart and clear up past misunderstandings after the crisis is over. Devote today to facilitating healing—not criticizing.

4. Share Scripture sensitively.

Share Scripture when the listener can digest it. One way to

facilitate their readiness is by listening to their suffering and affirming their heartbreak. Curb the impulse to answer their profession of pain with advice, an armload of verses or uplifting quotes. Rather than parroting positive clichés (“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”) or Christianese (“God never gives us more than we can handle”), respond to their suffering by listening.

5. Partner with a professional.

Proverbs 11:30 states that it takes wisdom to win souls. In our case, it’s a win if people who are battling mental illness, trauma or substance addiction agree to seek professional help. Set strategic steps toward this goal:

- Suggest that there are many Christian professionals trained in psychology and theology.

- Share an encouraging experience you’ve had in counseling. Hearing someone else’s success story can propel the reluctant soul to take the leap. If they approve, offer to set the appointment for them, or drive them to the first session.

- Solicit their rationale for shunning professional help. Demystify terms (“What is therapy anyway?”), debunk myths (“Therapy isn’t for the crazies”) and dispel fears (“You won’t see a counselor forever”).

- Surrender them to the *“Wonderful Counselor”* (Isa. 9:6). Continue interceding for them, and trust the Lord for the next step in their healing journey.

Listening to your neighbor’s pain without caring for yourself is like a firefighter who rushes into a burning house wearing street clothes—barefoot. As you embark on this journey, shoring up your spirituality deserves top priority. For one thing, sharp accusations and similar questions birthed out of pain—the likes of “How can a good God allow suffering?”—can put a wedge between your heart and its lover, God. That’s why

bulking up on time in the Word and prayer is paramount.

Maintaining your own mental wellness is equally crucial. Caregivers can expect to expend excessive emotional energy to help those teetering with thoughts of suicide. Your well needs replenishing. Start by examining your attitude toward mental health. How do you view counseling? How about those who see a therapist, including fellow believers? If there's hurt hiding in the corner of your heart, would you call a Christian therapist for help?

According to Philippians 2:4, we are to look out for the interests of others in addition to our own. As we do, let's be those who place a high premium on spiritual and mental health. Together, we can stop suicide from stealing precious lives—because we do need more helpers. {eoa}

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