

Christian Psychotherapist: How Believers Must Respond to Depression, Suicide

Last week, megachurch pastor Jarrid Wilson committed suicide. The tragic death of this popular young minister made headlines because he was an avid advocate for mental health and often opened up about his own struggles with depression. Some couldn't understand how this could happen. But sadly, depression seems to be more and more common nowadays, even among Christians.

Because this is in the news and because it is not something we talk about much in Christian circles, I reached out to a respected clinical psychotherapist, Dr. Scott Bush, to help my podcast listeners understand more about depression. Neither I nor Dr. Bush know about the details surrounding Jarrid's tragic death, so we talked only about general principles.

Dr. Bush told me it's not uncommon for pastors to struggle with severe depression. He has counseled many people who struggle with depression, anxiety and PTSD, so I invited him to share his insights on the topic on my "Strang Report" podcast.

"The challenge with pastors is that they are considered the shepherds," Dr. Bush says. "They are the ones who are so tough, strong—they have it all together. They're the spiritual leaders in the church. But they are also people, and people are fragile. A person may not know how fragile they are, but everybody's fragile. And pastors struggle with depression, anxiety and other disorders and situations just like other people."

But how does a person even know if they have depression or not? Dr. Bush says he often gives his clients a list of 21

questions that can help them discern if they struggle with depression or not. One of those factors is agitation, but depression can impact other areas of people's lives, including sleep patterns, eating habits, aggression levels and mood (such as sadness versus happiness).

"Hopelessness is probably the biggest concern because it's typically people who feel hopeless who are the ones more apt to hurt themselves," Dr. Bush says. "... Many people go through a mild mood disturbance where they can be a little bit depressed. But once someone gets severely depressed, that's when it gets to be very serious."

Oftentimes, Dr. Bush says, when people are struggling with depression, they don't need advice. They just need someone to listen. That means offering an empathetic ear to the problems they want to talk about without inserting your own views or saying, "I know what you're going through." Dr. Bush says empathetic listening is half the process of therapeutic counseling.

Although depression can sometimes have chemical or biological causes, Dr. Bush says that in his experience, depression is more often related to events in a person's life.

"People who don't have the tendency toward depression, they may be able to take a lot more disappointment in life events," he says. "So it doesn't mean that someone is stronger than the next. A lot of it is your genetics. ... So how I treat depression is I find the events that caused the person to go from the side of the mountain where there is no depression and ask, 'What put them over that tipping point to the other side of the mountain, where they have depression?' Then I treat those events that caused the person to go over the tipping point. Once you treat those events, then the person typically doesn't have depression."

Dr. Bush recalls a friend who committed suicide in 2008. That

event opened his eyes to the seriousness of the issue.

“If you know someone who’s having a struggle, it’s OK to say, ‘There were people who have had a similar struggle, and they thought about hurting themselves. Are you thinking about hurting yourself?’” Bush says. “That’s a much better question to ask than being silent and having guilt afterward that you didn’t ask that question.”

Dr. Bush has counseled around 4,500 patients and hasn’t lost a single one to suicide. If you or someone you know is struggling with severe depression, you can reach out to Bush at 407-230-4949 or *info@*. Or you can visit his website at .

Be sure to listen to my podcast with Bush to learn more about depression and suicide and how to heal.

If you are in crisis, please call 800-273-8255 or visit . You are not alone.