

Health for Your Marriage: Think Happy Thoughts

Depression is serious business, affecting 4 to 7 percent of all people on earth at any given time. My wife, Linda, and I are currently on assignment in Alaska, where depression is an extremely common problem.

It is a major contributor to this state having the highest suicide rate in the United States—twice the national average. What do scientists recommend to help alleviate depression? And how does their advice relate to God's thoughts recorded in the Bible?

Many scientific studies have related depression to a decreased availability in the brain of 5-hydroxytryptamin, otherwise known as **serotonin**. This molecule is particularly important in improving mood (decreasing depression), increasing libido (sexual desire) and improving sleep (serotonin is converted in the brain to melatonin, which helps control the sleep cycle). Serotonin plays a very important role in keeping us healthy and happy.

What factors will boost your brain serotonin activity? This is a short question with a very long and complicated answer that scientists can only partially explain. Let's think in terms we can *all* wrap our minds around.

The activity of serotonin can be increased by 1) increasing production, 2) increasing the number of serotonin receptors, 3) making its receptors more sensitive or 4) slowing the breakdown of serotonin. It is impossible at this time to know how these four factors affect a given individual. Why don't we talk about what we *do know* that really helps?

1. Think happy thoughts. Research in 2013 showed that meditation significantly reduces both anxiety and

depression by increasing serotonin levels in the anterior cingulate cortex of the brain. A quick look the dictionary reveals that to meditate means to “think deeply or carefully about something.” What Scripture does that remind you of? It reminds us of this one:

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things ... and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:8, 9).

Through the apostle Paul 2,000 years ago, God told us to do exactly what scientists are just now discovering. God’s wisdom astounds us! Thinking about things that are noble, pure and lovely (these are happy thoughts) destroys depression, helps us to *not be anxious about anything* (Phil. 4:6) and brings us peace—partly through raising our level of serotonin.

2. Exercise. Numerous studies have shown that exercise increases both serotonin production and release. This is particularly true of aerobic activities. During times of depression it can be most difficult to make yourself get up, get out and be physically vigorous.

A good friend or loving spouse can be of great value in encouraging you to take this simple and useful step toward healing. When instructing Timothy, Paul told him that *physical training is of some value* (1 Tim. 4:8). Exercise elevated serotonin activity in the brains of early church leaders just as it does today.

3. Touch. It is clear that rhythmic, physical touch on a regular basis raises the serotonin levels of those on the receiving end. Women who were depressed after delivering babies were given massages twice a week for four months; their serotonin levels increased by 30 percent. Babies of depressed mothers received similar treatment for six weeks. Their

average serotonin measurement jumped 34 percent.

It is not surprising that this kind of platonic touch would be encouraging and helpful to anyone who is despondent. We read in the New Testament that sexual touch is also of great importance in marriage. "Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time" (1 Cor. 7:5). Our Father truly knows what is best for every one of His children.

Being a physician couple, we value the studies of science that help us understand bits and pieces of these magnificent bodies God gave us. It is amazing what it takes to make the smallest of new discoveries in medicine.

But what astonishes us is the knowledge of our creative Father who comprehends every molecule, every cell—indeed, every aspect of life. Through the Bible, He teaches us simple ways to solve the complex issues of our lives.

Our God is the greatest of all physicians. You have problems? You've got questions? He has *all* the answers.

Drs. Dan and Linda Wilson are marriage missionaries who encourage Spirit-led intimacy in marriages around the world through conferences, teaching, writing, and personal counseling.