

Spirit-Filled Psychologist Explains the Spiritual Side of Suicide

As a psychologist, I've seen suicide tear apart many lives—including my own. I got the call late at night, just after I'd arrived home from a trip. It came from Hawaii, where my father lived, but the man calling wasn't my father. My stepbrother's voice quavered so hard his words were almost indiscernible, lost between breathless repetitions of "I'm so sorry." Finally, he eked out, "He shot himself."

My father had taken his life. Instantly, I crumpled to the floor. I wanted to escape from this moment and those that followed, but there was no route out, only a way through.

Suicide touches so many of our lives. It is in the news, in our community and, often, in our family history.

Who's at Risk

If suicide has not yet impacted your life, I am sincerely heartbroken to tell you that it likely will someday. According to 2016 figures from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the 10th-leading cause of death in the U.S. across all ages. It's even higher among young people; it's the second-leading cause among ages 10-34 and third among ages 35-54.

And those numbers are only going up. Suicide rates have increased 30 percent since 1999. In fact, in 2016, 9.8 million American adults reported seriously thinking about suicide, 2.8 million reported making a plan, and 1.3 million reported attempting suicide. Sadly, because these numbers are self-reported, we know the true numbers are actually higher.

One person commits suicide every 12 minutes in the U.S. Unfortunately, most people who engage in suicidal behavior never seek mental health services, and only 54 percent of Americans who have died from suicide had a mental health diagnosis.

Most who commit or attempt suicide view it as a way to escape pain—usually the pain of a dark depression. Typically any sense of hope has been devoured by a vortex of depressive states and thoughts. Depression can blind people so they see no other options for relief from unrelenting sadness.

Sadly, depression is more common than we might think. Research tells us that one out of every six adults will experience depression in their lifetime. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that depression affects 16 million Americans every year, and the World Health Organization says depression affects 300 million people worldwide. Depression can be caused by physiology, unresolved trauma, complicated grief, unresolved and unmet childhood needs, and circumstantial factors mixed with faulty cognitive patterns. Depression can also be exacerbated spiritually by open doors to the enemy.

But if spiritual forces can worsen depression, spiritual people can help alleviate it. God's people have always been His preferred vehicle for bringing healing to the world's pain. In regard to depression and suicide, He wants to equip us to be part of the solution.

How God can use believers as part of the solution becomes quite clear when we consider suicide's risk and prevent factors. Risk factors for suicide include feelings of hopelessness, isolation from community, stigma regarding mental health conditions and treatment, family history of suicide, child maltreatment, barriers to appropriate treatment and substance abuse. On the other hand, prevent factors—factors shown to prevent suicide—include effective and supportive ongoing therapy, family and community support and

connectedness, coping skills, communication-building interventions, and cultural and religious beliefs that support hope and confidence.

The church can help the depressed and offer much of what they need. But first, we must make an important decision. Some will operate in narrow-mindedness and fear, distancing themselves from the problem by stigmatizing and judging those suffering from depression. But we must choose to move out of our comfort zones and do the work of setting the captives free (see Luke 4:16-21).

How to Help

Depression is widespread, both inside and outside the church. To effectively fight depression, we need to perceive its complexity, its causes and its treatment. Depression is often the result of an amalgamation of circumstances, genetics and psychosocial factors, and therefore requires skilled treatment. We need to be wary of recommending folks “just be more positive” and “take your thoughts captive.” Yes, being more positive and filtering our thoughts through God’s Word are important, but that’s often not enough to help those suffering with depression.

Thankfully, there are practical things we can do to truly help those dealing with suicidal or depressive thoughts.

Ask about safety. Depression has signs. Look for them. These signs can include excessive sadness; loss of motivation; irritability or restlessness; changes in sleep patterns or appetite; increased somatic complaints; difficulty with concentration; increased fatigue; amplified guilty, hopeless or worthless feelings; and mentioning suicide or self-harm. If signs of depression are present, ask, “Are you thinking about hurting yourself?” If you do not receive an emphatic no, press on with direct questions to determine:

If they are thinking about suicide.

How long they have been thinking about suicide.

If they have a plan for killing themselves.

Whether they have access to lethal agents.

If these questions indicate suicide is imminent, call 911 immediately. If the individual is having suicidal thoughts, ensure access to treatment by a skilled mental health clinician immediately. In addition, encourage the individual to tell other trusted people about the problem. The goal here is to provide a net of support and awareness around that person.

Next, provide the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline phone number (1-800-273-8255) to the hurting person and ensure that individual has adequate supervision during at-risk moments. Finally, continue to ask and check in.

Direct the hurting to psychotherapy. Sometimes, as Christians, we can feel afraid of mental health therapy, thinking “God should be enough,” or that therapy will open the recipient of therapy to receiving “ungodly counsel.” I understand these fears, but consider this instead.

As the owner of a medium-sized psychological practice, I interact with many providers. I can agree that most therapists work in the psychological realm, not the spiritual. With a client who suffers with depression and suicidality, reducing and eliminating suicidal ideation would always be the immediate and primary goal, as safety is supreme. The therapist would also skillfully work with the client to alleviate depressive symptoms and facilitate progress toward any other presenting mental or behavioral health client goals.

Moreover, most therapists honor and utilize the client’s religious belief system in the course of therapy. Christian counselors are prevalent and can provide the assurance of a similar worldview (Prov. 9:10). To choose a good therapist,

look for depth and diversity of skills, status as board-licensed psychologist or counselor, Christian or Christian-friendly worldview, positive client reviews, and how effective the therapist is at creating a relationship that feels safe and accepting.

Recommend a medication consult. There are many antidepressant medications available that can be life-changing for those struggling with depression and suicidal thoughts. Medication paired with therapy has shown tremendous effectiveness in treating depression. Recommend a medication consult with a psychiatrist.

Show generous compassion. People struggling with depression are hurting and need to feel that they are not alone in their hurt. Attentive listening coupled with compassion and understanding, free from judgment, helps bridge the gap of isolation. Just being there and saying things like, "It sounds like carrying that weight feels unbearable. It sounds really painful," can go a long way.

Share hope. As children of God, we have the privilege of knowing we are deeply and individually loved and are each placed on earth for a unique reason. God wants us to share His deep, unconditional love with those who are hurting. He also wants us to see beyond the current circumstance to the gift, calling and hope in the life before us and speak what we see.

Facilitate community and belonging. We all need connection and belonging. Those who feel isolated need us to provide a loving, accepting, safe community. In practical terms, that means reaching out and checking in frequently.

Pray the dark away. There is no darkness in light. Depression is dark; God is the light. Pray for His light to shine on those who are suffering. Pray that their eyes will be enlightened to the hope of His amazing calling.

As we take each other's hands and encircle the hurting with

God's love and protection, we can propel others into lavish healing. We can pluck many out of the grip of darkness and into wholeness and life.

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