

the lyrics on the Power Point projector disappear. Everyone screams wildly.

Life of Christ Church is supposedly a Lutheran Christian church. They have a private high school here. I'm in the gym. I played basketball here once. Now I'm listening to crappy, Lutheran musicians sing pop knockoffs. The God these people worship must like rowdy mobs. "Where's Jesus' mosh pit?" I want to know. Eric won't even look at me.

Bible verses are read. The bongo guy talks about how God loves everyone so "Let's raise our voices in thanks!" He starts praying. Everyone else puts an arm in the air. Some people signal a touchdown. Or maybe raising both arms will act as a doubly powerful Holy Spirit lightning rod.

"Jesus," Bongo Man says, "we just wanted to thank You for Your great love for us, for giving us Your Holy Spirit on this wonderful day!" People randomly say, "Amen!"

I zone out. Thirty feet to my right in an unlit corner a big wooden cross is attached to the wall. Jesus died on a cross. That's why I'm here. Because Jesus loves me. And Jesus loves Eric, my roommate who dragged me here—twice. But Eric stopped talking to me when I refused to sing along for the second Sunday in a row.

"Eric!" I defended myself, "Medicine doesn't even help my depression, okay? My brain isn't wired like yours." But he had insisted. Give it another try. God would reveal His love for me. I'd feel better.

Eric's euphoric; he's doped up on God. He tells me, "You just need to believe."

I tell him, "I believe there will be food in the cafeteria for dinner. You don't see me skipping to the Commons like an idiot ecstasy addict, waving my arms in the air!"

Whatever. The "love" that swept over the crowd when the music started bypassed me. But Eric is the real idiot. I made a stupid, stupid mistake. I confided in him. Sometimes I think about

# The Devil's Opera

By A. B. Fouts

Millions of Americans suffer from clinical or manic depressive disorders. Despair, guilt, shame—what draws these people out of the darkness into Christ, the Light of the world? You might be surprised what *doesn't*.

Pay close attention to this narrative.

*I'm at Life of Christ Church with my friend Eric, who dragged me here for the second time. I'm watching as some bongo-playing moron on the dais gyrates to "Open the Eyes of My Heart." The praise band is well equipped: eight-piece trap set, full-size keyboard, electric and base guitars, a high tech and professionally installed sound system, and a spotlight. Most upstart bands would give eye teeth for the guitars alone. When the song ends,*

*suicide. And he had the cure. This is his solution to my problem—this "praise service."*

*The only reason I came to Life of Christ a second time was because I hoped (even though deep down I knew it wouldn't happen) that maybe this time God would let me soar too. Everything I hoped would make me feel better—none of it has worked, including this absurd church.*

*What a sham this turned out to be—this sick devil's opera.*

The young man telling the story suffers from a bipolar disorder. This chemical disorder, like all mental illnesses, manifests itself differently in different people, but its particular trademarks are soaring periods of mania, followed by crushing despair, which is the stage the narrator is suffering. People with this and related mental illnesses cannot be uplifted or cured by upbeat songs and joyous crowds. These physical diseases need a doctor's supervision. Cancer patients can't wish away tumors. People with mental disorders cannot wish away

sadness, despair, emptiness, self-loathing, fatigue, anger, fear, anxiety, and any other debilitating emotions.

A cure for mental illnesses at large is non-existent. There are effective methods for stabilizing bipolar and other disorders, but they are largely medical, not only situational (e.g., diet and exercise, being around exciting people in exciting places).

Why then, in light of the Gospel's joyous message, do some people still despair endlessly? Doesn't the Gospel promise "peace that passes all understanding"? Does Christ's sacrifice not apply to the mentally ill who often worship and commune in bleak anguish?

Christ once told a complaining St. Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you." And it is. Christians are already dead—drowned in our baptism, crucified with Christ. But we are also alive, risen with Him in that same Baptism, longing for eternity. Like Job, who lost everything—everything—Christians cry, "Though He slay me, my hope is in Him." If a mentally ill individual is told praising God will ensure feelings of love, happiness, and peace, their chemically-imbalanced bodies will likely prevent it. Praise songs become Satan's property as he uses them to spread the lie that the unhappy are the unwanted.

Suffering is part and parcel of a Christian's life, used powerfully by God for our good and His glory—as we take up our cross and follow the Suffering Servant. We don't have God's promise for happiness! Instead, our LORD promised us His peace in the midst of the earth's travail. Suffering with anything, including bi-polar disorder, is not a measure of the magnitude of our faith, nor can we expect that "sufficient faith" will exempt us from suffering.

Praise God salvation doesn't depend upon how we feel! Feeling sad doesn't change God's love for us. Salvation rests in the promise and gift of God in Jesus Christ. Through Baptism God gives hope to His people. This hope abides even in our afflictions, even in our depressions and illnesses. For hope, real hope is in God's baptismal promises. And that hope—and hope is not a constant joy and unrelenting urge to praise God—preserves us steadfast while we wait, looking heavenward—sometimes in the impatient darkness of mental illness—until Christ returns.

What then can draw these poor afflicted souls out of the darkness? The same thing that drew our Lord out of the grave's darkness. God's Word and promise. God's praise will be sung with full voice and heart by all His joyful sons. Even if we are sad now and suffer many trials, even if our faith seems insufficient, God's grace is sufficient. Tears will be wiped away, and despair destroyed. Agony sees light at the tunnel's end. The devil's opera will end.

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Dear Pastor ...

# Questions and Answers in Dealing with Depression

By Rev. Dan Krueger

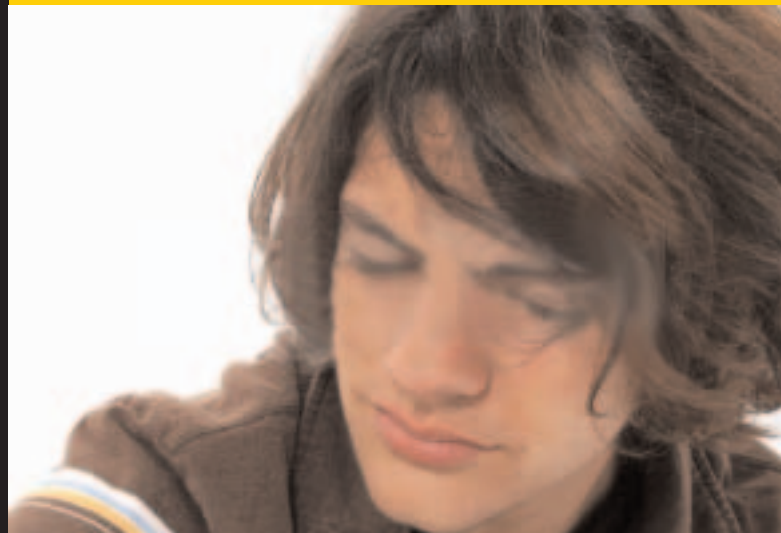
**Dear Pastor, Often when I was young I felt blue. But now as an adult those feelings seem to be a deepening depression. What's going on?**

Certain life events can cause depression. Jesus Himself wept at the grave of Lazarus. However, while Jesus experienced these feelings, He also experienced joy. His reaction was to a situation and was not a characteristic of mood.

Clinical depression is not a reaction to a situation, but a mood that intrudes into every aspect of life. Along with a general sense of depression or a negative outlook, people slipping into depression withdraw from activities they used to enjoy. If a day is full of ten positives and one negative, people who are clinically depressed might spend 90 percent of their time thinking about the one negative and 10 percent of their time thinking about the nine positives. As depression deepens, the individual might start to feel that things are hopeless and may begin to think, write or talk about death or suicide.

Along with these mood changes, there are also characteristic physical and mental changes. People with clinical depression often experience a significant

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weight gain or loss. Sleep patterns become abnormal. Depression often manifests itself in a persistent fatigue or lack of energy. People suffering from depression have difficulty concentrating or remembering things. When you see these kinds of persistent changes taking place in yourself or a friend, seek professional help.

**I told my family doctor about my depression, and a blood test revealed a thyroid condition that contributes to it. He corrected it, but years later I had other bouts of depression.**

Depression rarely has a single cause. The chemical balance of our brains is achieved through a complex interplay of body, mind, and spirit. On the physical end, estrogen levels in women alter this chemical balance, which is why many women experience monthly mood changes and post-partum depression. The amount of sleep a person gets influences this balance. Depression may have many different origins. Food and the amount of fats we consume, as well as stress have been identified as two of the many factors that may contribute to depression.



Often, depression reflects a chemical imbalance in the brain. Serotonin, dopamine, or norepinephrine are neurotransmitters in the brain that carry impulses among all the brain cells. When neurotransmitters are not in full supply, the impulses are poorly regulated and the symptoms of depression emerge. Stress, particularly mental stress, also dramatically influences the chemical signaling of our brain. Excessive and continued stress actually shrinks a vital brain structure called the hippocampus, which is involved in learning and memory.

**That time my psychiatrist put me on an antidepressant that helped, but I developed unpleasant side effects. I am hoping there other ways to get help.**

Research into depression in the last ten years has given us options. Modern antidepressants address one component of depression, but modern studies show that combined strategies for treating depression are far more successful. Improving your diet, increasing the amount of sleep you get, and getting regular exercise are often as effective in treating low to moderate depression as taking an antidepressant. Dietary factors, including the type and amount of fats we consume, as well as stress, have been identified as two of the many factors that may contribute to depression.

A particular form of talk therapy called cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) dramatically reduces the relapse rate of depression when combined with antidepressants. Cognitive therapy helps to change your emotions by changing how you think about the world and yourself. Modern brain imaging shows that cognitive therapy and antidepressants both change the physical structure of the brain but in different ways. This is why combined therapies are more effective than either one alone.

**I want to learn more about this, but some people tell me there is something wrong with my faith, and sometimes I think that must be true. Is it?**

Faith is not something we do. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God," (Ephesians 2:8 NKJV). Faith receives what God has done.

If you ask, "God, is there something wrong with me?" His answer is, "Yes!" Paul says, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells" (Romans 7:18 NKJV). Depression tends to focus on what is wrong, and therefore pulls us toward the Law side of Scripture. The Law declares that there is nothing in any of us but sin and death.

However, Jesus, who died for us, makes us clean in the waters of Baptism. The Gospel tells us that Christ removes our sins. In Christ, the answer to the question, "Is there something wrong?" is always, "No! You are perfect through Me!"

Instead of asking, "What's wrong with me?" (Law), receive Christ's promise, "I have made you right" (Gospel). Instead of asking, "What am I going to do?" (Law), Christ says to you, "I have done it all" (Gospel). Instead of asking, "Why is this happening to me?" (Law), receive God's Gospel promise that all "things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28 NKJV).

Paul says, "Yet the law is not of faith" (Galatians 3:12 NKJV). Faith doesn't ask, "What should I be doing?" or "What's wrong with me?" Rather, faith receives what God has done for me, and that is always good news.

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