

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

A case of the blues

Presented by David Kerr

Introduction

You may not realise it, but there's a strong chance you may have something in common with the great composer Beethoven or England's great statesman, Winston Churchill, or the actor John Cleese, best known for his role in *Fawlty Towers* and the Monty Python series. You may share the same road that these significant people took on their journey through life; Oliver Cromwell, Charles Dickens, Ernest Hemingway, T H Huxley, John Keats, Vivien Leigh, and Abraham Lincoln. The list goes on: Michelangelo, Isaac Newton, Edgar Allan Poe, Vincent Van Gogh, and Virginia Woolf. Many famous Australians may share your experience including the author Bev Aisbett, Adriana Xenides (the late Game Show star), Rachel Griffiths, and entertainer Su Cruickshank.

Is it likely you share something with these greats? If you have suffered with depression, you'll know what they've gone through, because they too have experienced that dark and debilitating condition.

Part 1

Depression has been described as a pervasive and relentless sense of despair and excessive guilt that brings about a lack of interest in life. It's often accompanied by weight loss, panic, loss of appetite, feelings of uselessness and sleep disturbance, poor concentration and feelings of suicide. Depression invades every age group. A Harvard University study recently found that in America, the rate of increase in depression among children is an astounding 23% p.a... and the fastest growing market for antidepressants is preschoolers!

Depression can be surreptitious. It can sneak up quietly and take charge of your life. Other times it can seize you in an instant and plunge you with the force of a roller coaster on a downhill run, into what seems to be a never ending black hole.

Folk who experience depression describe it as feeling continually anxious, sad or unhappy. They experience loss of energy and enthusiasm. They find it difficult to concentrate, feel worthless or hopeless, lose interest in friends and activities, may lose their appetite, have lapses in personal hygiene, and experience suicidal thoughts.

Depression is something that most people will experience at some stage in their life. Statistics from the World Health Organisation estimate that by the year 2020, depression will be the second largest killer after heart disease.

Gary McDonald, our beloved Norman Gunston, "The Little Aussie Bleeder" and the much-tormented offspring in the ABC series *Mother & Son* knows what it's like. In 1993 whilst filming the revival of the Norman Gunston Show, he found himself sliding towards a breakdown. He said, "I was morose, reclusive, everything was doom and gloom."

However, Gary McDonald sought help and fought back and continues to lighten our life with his wit.

If you're caught in the dark web of depression, there is hope. Family and friends will usually pick up on the signs and try and help, with mixed results. Often uninformed and insensitive so-called helpers will say, "Snap out of it". They don't know what it's like. That kind of remedy can make you feel worse! Others will attempt to cheer you up with humour or an outing. Yes, humour and excursions have their place, but they aren't always the answer. I've heard some Christians say that if you are depressed, there's something wrong with you spiritually ... there's a defect in your prayer life, or some hidden sin that has darkened your spirit. I don't believe that approach is all that helpful either, particularly when I remember that Jesus experienced depression, as recorded in Mark's Gospel. The key to finding a way through depression is to firstly understand its cause - and there can be many.

Depression may be linked to physiological factors that are caused by neurological problems or hormonal changes in the body. Depression may develop due to a period of severe stress. This was the case with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane before the soldiers seized him.

More frequently, depression may be linked to unresolved issues involving unfulfilled expectations, relationships, employment, child-raising, and a myriad of other possibilities. You may continually experience feelings of failure. To get up and keep going every day becomes more difficult.

There was one outstanding prophet of the Old Testament who felt like this. He'd come to the point of saying that he didn't want to keep living. I'll be back in a minute to talk about him and what can be done for those that suffer from depression.

Part 2

Today I'm talking about depression. There are many famous actors, comics, artists, and statesmen who've experienced depression throughout their life. If you have that continuing dark anxiety, you know what they have gone through.

One of the great prophets of the Bible knew what it was like. He became so depressed that he wanted to end it all. What was the problem with Elijah?

Firstly, He was tired – deadbeat – physically exhausted. He had just passed through a very traumatic experience. Elijah had won a decisive victory against the prophets of Baal who had supported Queen Jezebel. On Mount Carmel Elijah had called down fire from God in a contest between good and evil, between the Living God and Baal the false god. Elijah had won, killing all the prophets of Baal with the sword. Now Jezebel was after him.

He'd run a marathon from Carmel to Jezreel, and finally fell to the ground exhausted, and crawled under a broom tree. His mind did a somersault. He felt as though he hadn't won after all. Where had everyone gone ... all the fighting men of Israel? Where was God? Why was it so quiet? He was on the edge, nerves frayed, overcome with darkness. There seemed to be no way out. All he wanted to do was to end it all.

Secondly, he had lost his sense of the divine presence. Up to Mt Carmel, God has ordered every step of the way. Elijah had a close relationship with God. But exhausted, vulnerable, plus a death threat from Queen Jezebel and he was caught in a storm of despair. This often happens. We feel that everyone has deserted us ... even God.

Thirdly, He believed he was a failure. God called to him and Elijah responded “I am no better than my fathers. They allowed Israel to slip back into idolatry. I have not been able to bring them back. I’ve accomplished nothing.” Elijah had dreamed about seizing the warm hand of success, but felt as though he grasped the cold skeleton hand of failure.

Not only did Elijah feel as though he was a failure, but he believed that his fellow men were failures. He said to God that there was not one good man in the whole of Israel.

When you’re depressed, it seems that everyone has let you down. You lose faith in your friends. You not only lose faith in yourself but also in your fellowman. If you frown at the world, the world tends to frown at you.

In the eyes of men who lived 2000 years ago, it appeared that the death of Jesus was a huge mistake. For the disciples, it was their worst nightmare – their darkest hour. Yet in reality, as they soon learnt, it was their brightest moment.

The Lord said to Elijah, “It’s not your place to keep the books. Elijah, you can’t add up. My additions tell me that there are 7,000 men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”

How could Elijah be so blind? When we are down, we don’t see things as they really are. We distort reality. How did God help Elijah recover? Is there hope for me, you may ask?

Part 3

What can you do if you feel depressed?

It’s helpful to look back at Elijah’s story. Elijah, one of the great prophets of the Old Testament found himself in an emotional black hole after his great contest on Mt Carmel with the prophets of Baal. Jezebel was out to kill him. He ran from Carmel to Jezreel, fell down exhausted under a broom tree, and slid into a depression, believing he was a complete failure. His was so distressed; all he wanted to do was die.

The first thing God did was to allow him to sleep.

For many whose depression is the result of prolonged stress, rest is crucial. Eliminating all non-essential activities to provide physical and emotional rest is foundational to recovery. To continue, is to face burnout. So God allowed Elijah to sleep.

Secondly, God provided him with something to eat. An angel of the Lord woke Elijah, and told him to eat the bread that had been freshly baked for him and drink from the water jar also provided.

One of the symptoms of depression is a loss of appetite, yet it’s important to maintain a healthy diet. If you struggle with a poor appetite, try to select tasty nutritious food that you really enjoy.

Thirdly, God revealed himself to Elijah. God came to him, not in the wind, or the earthquake or fire, but in a gentle whisper. So often when we are at our wit’s end, believing everyone has abandoned us, including God, God comes to us, not in a loud dramatic way, but in quietness, providing hope. God reassures us that He’ll not let us go.

As God reveals Himself to us, we may have a greater understanding of what we need to do. Maybe to address the negative view we have of ourself, or put a relationship right, ask for forgiveness, or provide

forgiveness to someone we've wronged. To deal with negative feelings from the past. God's whisper is a healing force if we respond in faith.

Fourthly, God confronted Elijah. Elijah felt that he was the only one who had remained faithful to God. Elijah's distorted mind had blinded him to the 7000 men who had not bowed down to the false god Baal.

Often in a depressed state we can't see the wood for the trees and we need someone qualified and skilled to help us see the real picture.

Fifthly, God gave Elijah something to do. Elijah had been feeling rather sorry for himself, bathing himself in self-pity. So God thought it wise, after Elijah's time of rest and recreation, to send him on a special mission to the desert of Damascus.

After, R & R it's important to have some meaningful activity. Exercise is an important part of recovery. Moving the blood around our body even with a short walk every day is helpful in the healing process. Sometimes developing a new interest that helps us to re-focus, will provide us with satisfaction and fulfilment, and can assist in finding the way back to health again.

Today, depression is on the increase and touches every age group. There are various forms of depression, so there needs to be a correct diagnosis by a competent, doctor, counsellor, psychologist, or psychiatrist. Sometimes antidepressants, appropriately administered can assist in breaking the negative circuitry that dominates our thinking. If you suffer from the symptoms that I've talked about, don't give up. There is help available.

Conclusion

No matter who you are, how young, or how old, if you feel continually down, lack energy, are constantly negative and feel like giving up, it's possible that you're depressed.

However, there is hope. Have you spoken to someone who is competent in the helping professions to assess you? If not, what's stopping you? If you have, have you followed through with their recommendations?

Also, have you opened your inner life to the healing power of God? Even though you may feel God is a million miles away, as Elijah discovered, God had not forsaken him. God was there to bring restoration, healing and hope.

Prayer

Dear Lord, even though I don't understand the way I think and feel sometimes, and the darkness that surrounds me, give me the courage and faith to believe you are there. That you are willing to love and care for me. Help me to see clearly and to open myself to your healing love. Enable me to do whatever I can, small as that might be, to patiently face any leftovers from the past, and also face present challenges and future fears. Amen