

Ministry Leaders and Depression

Elijah sat down under a broom tree and prayed that he might die. He said, "I have had enough! LORD, take my life, for I'm no better than my fathers." Then he lay down and slept under the broom tree.

The LORD said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God of Hosts, but the Israelites have abandoned Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are looking for me to take my life."

1 Kings 19:4-5; 9-10 & 13-14 (HCSB)

Elijah's situation in 1 Kings 19 has always fascinated me. It came on the heels of his great triumph over the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. Why would Jezebel's threat (19:2) send Elijah into such a tailspin when the Lord had just shown Himself so strong on Elijah's behalf?

But that's the way it is with depression. It can hit when we least expect it. It often doesn't make sense, but it is undeniably there. So here is the mighty prophet Elijah – worn out, feeling worthless, the reservoirs of inner motivation completely depleted, feeling misused and alone and hopeless. Elijah was depressed.

I do not claim to be an Elijah, but I do know what depression feels like. I have battled it all of my adult life. Based on what I have learned about clinical depression, I think mine is a mild-to-moderate version. But the pain it brings is very real! The pain can be particularly acute for a ministry leader because (we tell ourselves) we're supposed to be strong, to have our act together, to be spiritual giants and over-comers and caregivers for others. Elijah was all those things and he still wound up under the broom tree.

According to Eva Lott, Director of the Oakwood Counseling Center, one of the leading Christian Psychologists in the field of clinical depression is Dr. Archibald Hart. Hart cites this range of symptoms for depression:

The mind is affected because depression lowers attention span, tolerance for frustration, and memory. Behavior is affected by lowered motivation, loss of ability to experience pleasure, and fatigue. The body is affected by headaches, stomachaches, and muscle tension. Relationships are affected by a tendency to withdraw and become isolated with loneliness. Lowered impulse control can lead to suicide or homicide. Depression can also create sleep disturbances, changes in appetite and weight, and lowered sex drive.

There is ample evidence that depression is widespread in the overall population. The most common estimates I have seen say that 14-18 million American adults suffer from depression at any given time and that one in six will deal with a serious depressive episode in their lifetime. There is also evidence that ministry leaders are not just susceptible to it, but may in fact be more prone to depression because of the nature of our work (see <http://www.christianindex.org/3126.article>).

I am not a depression expert. I am simply a ministry leader who deals with it and wants to encourage other ministry leaders who deal with it. Here is what I have learned in my own experience.

1. *Depression is not who you are; it is something you have.* Some people have high cholesterol. Some people have migraines. Some people have depression. It's a condition you have to address, but it is not the final word on who you are as a person. Most people don't get help because they are ashamed of their depression. Ever met anyone who was ashamed of their high blood pressure?

2. *Get help!* Learn about depression so that it won't confound you anymore. The book that helped me most is Undoing Depression by Richard O'Connor (available on Amazon). Talk to your doctor about the physical and biological aspects of depression. Talk to a Christian professional counselor about it. Talk to a colleague or friend who knows what it's like. When we open up about depression, its grip on us starts to loosen. We find out we're not the only ones. We start to imagine a better way. We start to believe in the possibility of happiness.

3. *Develop a wellness plan for your life.* Depressive episodes are induced by stress. Even wonderful times in your life can leave you feeling wrung out and overloaded. This is normal. For those of us with depression, it can send us into a downward spiral that is hard to reverse. Depression works against the kinds of habits that will mitigate stress and induces us to do things that will only make us more depression-prone. I have discovered that I must be proactive and have an overall wellness plan for my life if I'm going to experience less depression. We human beings were created by the Lord as integrated souls. One part of me affects the other parts. A good wellness plan has realistic, balanced goals for these aspects of our personhood:

- Spiritual (relationship with the Lord)
- Physical (exercise, eating habits, rest, leisure & recreation, health care)
- Emotional (learning to recognize and be honest about what you feel and choosing how to express it)
- Relational (connections of love and trust with other people)
- Intellectual (how you feed your mind and keep yourself sharp and challenged)
- Vocational (setting reasonable goals and expectations for yourself and others, doing well without burning out, establishing appropriate boundaries)

4. *Give yourself a break.* We depression-sufferers tend to be unreasonably hard on ourselves. We can be perfectionistic and obsessive, beating ourselves up over any inadequacy while never giving ourselves any credit for accomplishments. One of the most helpful things I ever did was learn to think differently about myself, to stop the destructive self-criticism and be glad for what God put into me when He created me. I found when I did this that I started treating other people better, too, and in turn those relationships reinforced the overall wellness in my life.

Be encouraged! A few steps in the right direction will help build momentum. The Lord is with *you* as He was with Elijah.