



LESSON TWO: BEING CARED FOR

The story of Elijah

This week we are looking at one of the most common mental health diagnoses - depression.

We'll learn how God cares for and restores those he loves from the story of Elijah. And we'll also talk about the causes of mental health problems.

Read 1 Kings 19:3-15

- How would you describe how Elijah is feeling in verses 3-5?
- Have you ever felt similarly?
- What does God do in v.5-9? What does He not do?
- What does God do in v.10-15? What does He not do?
- Are there any principles we can learn from God's approach to Elijah?

Question: When you think about depression, do any characters from TV, film or books come to mind?

How would you describe them?

Depression can affect anybody, including Christians. Medical skill, an active faith and a supportive community can make a real difference.

What is depression?

The word depressed is a common everyday word. People might say "I'm depressed" when in fact they mean "I'm fed up because I've had an argument, or failed an exam, or lost my job", etc. These ups and downs of life are common and normal. Most people recover quite quickly.

True depression means having a low mood and other symptoms each day for at least two weeks. Symptoms can become severe enough to interfere with normal day-to-day activities. There will be low mood, loss of enjoyment and low energy. It's difficult to think positively about the future. It can affect sleep as well as weight and appetite.

Depression isn't just 'feeling a bit low'.

What causes depression? It can be triggered by a one-off event or by long-term unhelpful thought patterns. It could have its roots in a physical illness. Occasionally, depression may have a spiritual cause, such as struggling to accept forgiveness. Many people may never know what caused it. If two people have depression, it's unlikely the cause is the same.

Depression doesn't go away by just 'pulling yourself together', but requires a combination of approaches.

Talking treatments can help change negative thought patterns.

Antidepressants can help balance the chemicals in the brain which allow us to feel good.

Christian community can help with isolation and loneliness. What about faith?

Even though the word 'depression' is not found in the Bible, God has always helped people whose mood was low.

We can stand alongside those who are suffering and hold out Jesus as the source of hope. Matthew 5:5 says: 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.'

Depression can cause negative thoughts, including feeling guilty, helpless or hopeless. God offers alternatives: forgiveness, love and

hope. But remember, depression can make it hard to believe this. If others blame past sin or a weak faith for the depression, this can make things much worse and lead to a negative spiral. Being part of a community like a church is very helpful. It can be hard to attend regularly or meet people, but in church everyone should feel valued, no matter what. Phone calls and simple support mean a lot. You don't need to be an expert to help.

Sometimes God does cure people of their illnesses, but often He brings healing in other ways. It's important to understand that if someone isn't cured from depression, it's never the fault of the individual for not having 'enough faith'. God uses many different ways to heal, including miracles, counselling and antidepressants.

What causes mental health problems? What do you think?

Notes: There are many factors which influence our mental health and wellbeing – from genetic and biological to social and cultural, economic and political, and even spiritual. Some churches would say that mental illness is often caused by spiritual activity, particularly the influence of demonic forces. Historically, all kinds of health problems were thought to be the result of demonic powers. This led to many negative repercussions, especially against disabled people and those with chronic conditions.

In physical health, that assumption has been overcome: we now believe that medical science reveals cause and remedy for physical health issues. But the idea has lingered in the area of mental health – some still assume the causes of mental illness are spiritual and treat medical science with scepticism.

Read Matthew 8:28-34

How can this passage be used to fit the incorrect stereotype of schizophrenic illness. As a result, some people have made the false assumption that negative emotional symptoms are simply the result of demonic activity. This belief can be extremely distressing for Christians who are suffering from mental health issues: A problem with their brain chemistry suddenly becomes a problem with their precious faith.

Whatever your conviction in terms of the spiritual origins of ill health, Jesus afforded dignity and humanity to every person he encountered.

How can we make sure we do the same?