

Question: I have been diagnosed with major depressive disorder. I am a devout, born again Christian. Can I be a real Christian and have mental illness?

Answer: Last month I addressed this question by exposing the myth that Christians don't have mental illnesses. We looked at how common they were and I gave two examples of famous Christians, Martin Luther and Charles Spurgeon, who suffered from depression. This month I want to look at a biblical example of a person in who suffered from mental illness and how God responded.

Most of us are familiar with the prophet Elijah. In Kings 18:16-19:5b we find the famous confrontation on Mt Carmel, Elijah versus the prophets of Baal. They both built altars but only God sends fire from above. As the fire consumed the rocks and sacrifice, Elijah kills the prophets of Baal and tells Ahab to return to his palace. The result of this is Jezebel threatens to kill him. Elijah had expected revival but was threatened with execution.

In 1 Kings 19:1-18 we see Elijah's reaction, depression. My experience has been that depression is often a reaction to extreme disappointment and distress. In this story we find the classic symptoms of depression. He had a sense of hopelessness, felt worthless and he may have even been suicidal. The great saint of the Lord was in the depths of despair. Fortunately, God intervenes.

God intervened in two ways. First, He took care of Elijah's physical needs. God knew this man was exhausted. He needed sleep and food. When we are dealing with depression we need to make sure our physical needs are met. God also knew that Elijah needed to be active. This is one of the great paradoxes of depression. Normally, if you are tired and get some extra sleep you feel better. However, for the depressed person, the more he or she sleeps, the worse the depression becomes. So, God helps Elijah get moving. Part of treating depression is helping people to increase their level of activity. In fact, some recent studies have shown that there is a direct link between the increase in levels of exercise and the decrease in symptoms of depression.

The second way God intervened was by challenging Elijah's mistaken beliefs. In this passage we see Elijah expressing his hopelessness. God in turn challenges his understanding of life. Elijah had wanted the whirlwind, earthquake and fire to destroy the ungodly. What God wanted to show Elijah was that His ways were often different than man's ways. God was asking Elijah "Can you trust me?" An essential part of overcoming depression is evaluating and challenging our dysfunctional thoughts.

So how did Elijah life ended? He anointed Elisha prophet. Ahab and Jezebel are killed. Then he is taken up in a chariot of fire in 2 Kings 2:11, 12. I believe that one of the lessons we can learn from Elijah's life is that even when we struggle with depression, God still can use us and our lives can have meaning. That is the good news.