Depression
A Guide to Providing Chaplain Care

Description and Background

This guide seeks to assist MChapUSA chaplains in understanding the nature and types of depression as well as how to provide basic chaplain care related to depression. The guide also provides special emphasis on ways to recognize more serious depressive disorders for referral purposes. **It should be emphasized that the scope of care provided by MChapUSA chaplains is necessarily limited to providing spiritual care and practical advice and almost always extends only to mild cases of depression.**

There are four objectives to this guide:
1. to provide a brief overview of the problem of depression in today’s society
2. to offer guidance to chaplains in their role in providing care to those experiencing depression
3. to offer guidance to chaplains on how to recognize more serious depressive disorders for the purpose of making necessary and appropriate referrals
4. to provide chaplains with resources they can use in providing this care.

I. An Overview of Depression

1. **What is Depression**

Depression is a very common illness that is complicated, difficult to define, and not easy to treat. Depression is a universal condition that affects all ages, even infants. Depression can describe an emotional heaviness that weighs down the heart. The term “depression” is not found in the Bible. However, many of the symptoms of depression - such as sadness, hopelessness, and loneliness - are found in the Bible.¹ Job, Moses, Jonah, Peter, and the entire nation of Israel felt depression.² Jesus Christ may have even expressed such feelings in Gethsemane (Matt 26:37-18). Here are a few comments about depression:

- “Depression…involves a complete absence: absence of affect, absence of feeling, absence of response, absence of interest. The deeply depressed are just the walking, waking dead.”³
- Charles Spurgeon claimed: “I could weep by the hour like a child, and yet I knew not what I wept for.”⁴
- C. S. Lewis stated: “My heart is empty. All the fountains that should run with longing, are in me dried up.”⁵
- “My bones wasted away through my groaning all day long” (Ps 32:3).
Quick facts about Depression:
• believed to be the most common problem among employees
• affects others as well - those who spend time with the depressed
• strikes 17 million Americans each year - more than cancer, AIDS, or heart disease
• women are twice as likely as men to be affected
• 15% of chronic depression cases end in suicide
• if untreated depression can result in many years of unnecessary pain
• costs approximately $43 billion a year (largely due to absenteeism from work, lost productivity, and medical costs).

2. Causes of Depression

It is not the role of the chaplain to determine the cause of depression. Depression is a complex disorder and its causes are difficult to pinpoint. The following examples are provided only as a means to understanding depression:

A. Physical Contributors
• hormonal or chemical imbalance
• medications and drugs
• chronic illnesses
• genetic vulnerability
• improper food, rest, exercise

B. Emotional Responses to Loss
Repressed anger over
• loss of a loved one
• loss of expectations
• loss of self-esteem
• loss of respect for others
• loss of control
• loss of health or abilities
• loss of possessions

From a spiritual perspective, chaplains must take special care when working with individuals in looking at the cause of depression. This is especially true in the relation in finding any connection between depression and sin.

II. Providing Care to Persons Experiencing Depression

1. Providing Care to those with Depression
Chaplains are not qualified to “treat” depression. The role of a chaplain is to listen and provide care, support, and advice when requested. If an individual asks for a chaplain’s advice, it should be provided at the appropriate time and place. This may involve meeting outside the worksite.

Chaplains should ascertain if the individual suffering from depression is involved in a church. If so, the chaplain should refer the person to his or her pastor/counselor. The chaplain should also determine if the depression is severe enough to refer to a mental-health professional. Even when chaplains refer individuals, they can still serve as a friend and supporter. Studies show
that 15% of individuals with depression commit suicide. Chaplains must take comments about suicide very seriously, and contact a chaplain supervisor immediately where there are threats.

When talking to someone who is not Christian, chaplains should offer care and suggestions in general terms without biblical references. Biblical advice can be given in secular terms that will not cause individuals to withdraw from chaplains. Chaplains should learn to speak biblical truths in secular language. (When chaplains talk to Christians, however, direct biblical references and quotes may be both appropriate and helpful.)

A. Spiritual Advice

Consider using the acrostic “CONQUER” in offering spiritual advice to those suffering from depression:

C onfront any loss in your life, allowing yourself to grieve and be healed (Eccl 3:4).
O ffer your heart to God for cleansing and confess your sins (1 John 1:8-9).
N urture thoughts that focus on God's great love for you (Jer 31:3)
Q uit negative thinking and negative self-talk (Phil 4:8).
U nderstand God's eternal purpose for allowing personal loss and heartache (Rom 8:28).
E xchange your hurt and anger for thanksgiving (1 Thess 5:18).
R emember God is sovereign and He promises hope for your future (Ps 71:5).

B. Practical Advice - 10 Suggestions for Those who May be Depressed

1. Forgive those who have caused pain.
2. Connect to a small group of Christian friends who can help through tough times.
3. Find purpose by serving others.
4. Make an appointment with a doctor for a checkup.
5. Develop regular sleeping habits.
6. Eat regular, balanced and nutritious meals.
7. Exercise three days a week. Walking releases endorphins - a natural mood elevator.
8. Spend time in the sun. Research reveals sunshine helps to alleviate depression.
9. Keep your living environment clean, bright, and cheerful.
10. Write thank-you and encouragement notes to others.
C. What to Say and What Not to Say

The following are suggestions of how a chaplain can respond to one with Depression.

Don't say: “You shouldn't feel that way.”
Say: “I care about what you are feeling.”
Ask, “Would you like to share your feelings with me?”
Say, “If ever you want to talk, I'm here for you.”

Don't say: “You just need to pray more.”
Say: “I'm praying for you, and I'm going to keep praying.” If appropriate, pray with them, and tell them you are praying for them.

Don't say: “You just need to read the Bible more!”
Say: “There are several passages in the Bible that have given me much hope, and I've written them out for you. May I share them with you?”

Don't say: “You need to get involved in a church.”
Say: “I'm involved in a church where I've been learning how meaningful life can be.”
Ask: “Do you have a church that you are attending regularly?”
Give them several names of churches in their area.

D. Offer Hope

Here is a 3-part approach in offering hope:

1. God offers real solutions for your problems. Say something like: “When you don't know how to solve a problem, you may feel helpless. However, the One who created the universe with all its intricate parts is the same one who created you, and He knows how to fix you.”

2. God loves you unconditionally and has a plan for your life. Say something like: “God loves you no matter what you do or who you are. God loves you so much that he sacrificed his only son for you.”

3. (This third step in offering hope only applies when dealing with an unbeliever who is willing for you to discuss the Gospel.) God offers the solution for all our sins. Say something like: “We learn from the Bible that sin separates us from God. There must be a payment for the sin in our lives. Jesus, who is God, came to earth in human form and chose to pay the penalty for your sins. Jesus paid for the forgiveness of all sins by dying on the cross. Today, you too can receive forgiveness and hope” – If appropriate, lead them in a prayer of salvation.

III. Recognizing More Serious Depressive Disorders for Referral

Those with mild depression will almost always come up out of their depression without professional help. However, it is essential that chaplains understand the importance of referral in severe cases of depression.
Categories of Depression

Depression varies in severity. Almost everyone suffers from “mild” or “normal” depression from time to time. This mild depression is characterized by short periods of sadness resulting from a loss or disappointment. However, some will suffer more severe depression that requires professional treatment. As the signs of depression progress, as noted in the chart below, **proper referral becomes imperative**. Through initial chaplain care to an employee, a chaplain should try to assess the severity of the symptoms and if appropriate, encourage the individual to seek help from a mental-health professional. If chaplains fail to refer when necessary, they could cause further harm to the individuals suffering from depression.

The following chart provides 4 classifications of depression, symptoms for each one, the life-threatening possibilities, and how the chaplain should respond.

**DEPRESSION CATEGORIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NORMAL Depression</th>
<th>MASKED Depression</th>
<th>NEUROTIC Depression</th>
<th>PSYCHOTIC Depression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-doubt</td>
<td>Self-inflation</td>
<td>Self-criticism</td>
<td>Self-rejection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Suppressed anger</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Acute anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>Distraction</td>
<td>Hopelessness</td>
<td>Schizophrenia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irritability</td>
<td>Judgmentalism</td>
<td>Apathy</td>
<td>Unresponsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diminished joy</td>
<td>Self-sacrifice</td>
<td>No pleasure</td>
<td>No pleasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry and or fear</td>
<td>Appearance of invincibility</td>
<td>Inability to make decisions</td>
<td>Lack of judgment or reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgetfulness</td>
<td>Disorganized thoughts</td>
<td>Hypochondria</td>
<td>Hallucinations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity pattern upset</td>
<td>Increased activity</td>
<td>Chronic fatigue</td>
<td>Catatonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of appetite</td>
<td>Weight gain</td>
<td>Weight loss</td>
<td>Weight loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep difficulty</td>
<td>Less need for sleep</td>
<td>Escape by sleeping</td>
<td>Severe insomnia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Death Threat</td>
<td>Hidden Death Threat</td>
<td>Manipulates with Death Threat</td>
<td>Severe Death Threat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chaplain provides:**
- Care (encouragement)
- Chaplain provides: Care & possible referral
- Chaplain provides: Care and referral
- Chaplain provides: Immediately refer and notify chaplain supervisor
IV. Chaplain Resources

Hope for the Heart Biblical Counseling Key

Depression - Walking from Darkness into the Dawn

RBC Booklets (can be ordered by your ATM or DD)

1. When Hope Is Lost: Dealing With Depression
2. Ruth & Hannah: Learning To Walk By Faith
3. David & Manasseh: Overcoming Failure
4. When Disappointment Deceives

Depression Links

www.hopefortheheart.org - Information, resources, links for Christian help with depression

www.christians-in-recovery.org - large amount of information, including a database

Books on Christian or Pastoral Depression

Strength for the Journey: A Biblical Perspective on Depression by Paul Carlisle.

Happiness Is A Choice: The Symptoms, Causes and Cures of Depression by Dr. Paul Meier.

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2 Job 3; Numbers 11:10-15; Jonah 4:1-3; Exodus 6:9; Matthew 26:75
5 C. S. Lewis, “The Naked Seed.”
6 Ibid.