

Strategies for Coping with Depression:

Developing a Spiritual Path

Researchers have found that people who have a religious faith or practice tend to have lower rates of depression than those who don't. The reason for this relationship is unclear. Perhaps nondepressed people are simply more attracted to religious faith than the depressed, though this goes against the idea that people find religion in difficult times. Although no one has been able to conduct an experimental study on the subject (randomly assigning people to have a religion or not), there is a strong suspicion that the direction of causality flows the other way: that religious faith and/or practice contribute, overall, to better psychological functioning.

It doesn't appear to matter which faith a person chooses, so reduced vulnerability to depression doesn't seem to be a special benefit from above for those who have made the "right" choice. Nor does religious extremism or fundamentalism appear to be essential. Indeed, there are aspects of all stripes of religious extremism that can be antisocial: attempts to force belief on others, inducing fears of after-death consequences, divisiveness between "the chosen" and the rest of society, a decline in the ability to appreciate the humanity of nonbelievers, attempts to legislate the sect's own vision of human behavior, and, in the most extreme forms, religious intolerance, war, and terrorism.

Two aspects of spirituality have been found to be particularly helpful in depression. The first is privately-held religious belief and practice – a personal spirituality and belief system that may or may not be shared with others. There is some evidence that private devotional behavior such as prayer is associated with higher levels of depression, but this is likely due to people turning to prayer during periods of distress. On the whole, having a spiritual belief system appears to be beneficial – and a worthy quest for people with mood difficulties.

The second aspect of spirituality is involvement in a spiritual community – a church, synagogue, mosque, sangha, or other group or organization focused on spiritual practice. As a part of such a group you can get social support and a greater depth of communication than you often get with acquaintances. It's unclear whether the benefits have more to do with the spiritual practice or the opportunity for human contact.

A search for a spiritual community, or development of a spiritual path, may be particularly helpful for you if: 1) you have found meaning and strength in faith before, 2) you know of a supportive community where you feel at home, or 3) your depression seems to have been triggered by a spiritual crisis of some kind.

The “dark night of the soul”, a time during which the strength and sense of meaning from faith may feel utterly absent, is a standard symptom of depression but may also be a *trigger* for depression in some people. Sometimes it signals the end of a particular spiritual path (though not the end of the human need for spirituality). Sometimes it represents a time of transition toward a new and deeper exploration of one’s spiritual path or faith. Indeed, various forms of Buddhism view the experience of emptiness and meaninglessness as an essential – and central – part of spiritual growth.

Here are a few suggestions for developing your own spiritual path. They are far from complete, however, so you’ll want to look beyond the confines of this book for advice.

- **Don’t restrict the search.** Perhaps you have lost the faith of your childhood (or never had it to begin with) and cannot imagine going back to it. Cast the net a bit wider and consider other faiths or practices that may have more to say to you.
- **Sample communities.** If you are looking for a spiritual community, don’t base your choice solely on book reading or the Yellow Pages. Attend a few different groups, churches, or temples for a while, and don’t pressure yourself to make a final choice in a big hurry. Even if you’re pretty clear about the tradition you want to be a part of (e.g., Roman Catholicism), you still need to find a community with which you feel comfortable.
- **Consider alternatives.** Perhaps membership or involvement in a religious or faith-based organization is not for you. Fine. Many people develop a powerful sense of meaning and spirituality by interacting with the natural world (a quiet, solitary walk through old-growth forest is as inspiring as a cathedral for many people).
- **Spirituality is not a prerequisite.** Research generally supports spiritual practice as a source of strength for some people in overcoming depression. Developing a spiritual path is not a mandatory step for recovery, however. If you feel more drawn to other strategies, fine.

Like every strategy, there can be pitfalls in making spiritual growth a part of your depression management program. Here are a few of them:

- If your path involves meditation or prayer, be prepared for depression to be a disruptive influence. You may be more distractible, you may have difficulty concentrating, and you may get less from the practice than usual. Adopt a gentle, forgiving attitude toward yourself. If your mind wanders, this doesn’t mean you are a “bad meditator” or less than pious.
- Don’t allow prayer to become your only coping strategy. The helpless feeling depression often brings can be a powerful temptation to pray for God to save you – and to ignore your own role. If prayer is a part of your practice, consider praying for strength. Then use your strength to help yourself.

- Religious leaders, like anyone else, may have limited understanding of depression, its source, or its treatment. Accept what they have to offer, but avoid relying on them as an exclusive source of information or guidance. Try to adopt a forgiving attitude toward any lapses in empathy or understanding that may occur, just as you would with your family members.

Has spiritual practice or participation been a source of strength to you in the past? How so?

Are there steps you could take now to reconnect with your spiritual side while you are working on your mood problem? What are they?
