

Reframing Emotions

Reframing Depression: A Guide for Going Deeper

Note for Users:

Reframing Depression: A Guide for Going Deeper is the ninth week in an 11-week guide that accompanies the podcast *More to It: Reframing Emotions*.¹ Each session is designed to help you and your community know, love, and praise God for His wonderful design for our emotions, even the ones we view as “negative.” The guide features an episode summary, definitions of relevant terms, Scripture reading, discussion questions, activities, prayers, and reflection prompts.

Each section in a session (for example, prayer and discussion) features a timestamp, but the timestamp is simply a suggestion for the amount of time to spend. At times, you and your community may want to linger with the discussion questions. Or maybe you need to spend more time engaging with a concept through a small group activity. You should prioritize what produces the most flourishing in your community, even if it means bending or breaking the time “rules.”

In the podcast, one of our counselors suggests emotions—even the negative ones—are echoes of Eden. If we listen to those echoes and follow them to their source, we might just end up back in the garden, not hiding from God, but experiencing the forevermore joy found in His presence. As you use this guide with your community, we pray that a spirit of unity, curiosity, and humility will be present, creating a space in which you can be vulnerable, drawing near to God and one another.

The Austin Stone Institute, The Austin Stone Counseling Center

¹ Subscribe to the podcast here: <https://pod.link/1626545281>.

Session 9: Depression

Episode Main Point

Even when depression maps a narrative that says nothing will change and nothing will get better, we can learn to cling to Jesus, and we can hope for one another.

Episode Summary

Depression amplifies existing emotions. It constructs a narrative that says our past not only defines our future but also *is* our future. Depression tells us that whatever we perceive as bleak or sad or utterly hopeless will always be bleak and sad and hopeless.

The counselors suggest, perhaps surprisingly, that depression can be an accurate response to the sorrow we find within ourselves and the sadness we encounter in the world. Depression, though, however appropriate, needs to be processed lest it begin to rule our lives. Depression shrinks our world, leaving us with few, if any, options.

When that occurs, the counselors say we need some “wobble room” for possibility. That is, we may need a different perspective that helps us reframe what we’re feeling and what we’re going through. We can’t always summon this wobble room for ourselves; we need people who will encourage us to be faithful to what the Lord has asked of us for this day, and this day alone. Sometimes, that means faithfulness is getting out of bed or going for a walk—the ordinary, small means that anchor us to the present moment and help us live into the next. Such actions may seem small, but they are as mighty as David’s smooth stones. They can fell giants.

If we aren’t experiencing depression but know someone who is, the counselors have encouragement for us, too. They remind us we are not responsible for “fixing” the depressed person or making them feel better. Our only responsibility is to be present for them, without giving in to fatigue. This reality requires supporting the person in the context of community; on our own, we will become weary of doing good (Galatians 6:9–10).

In addition, we need gentle reminders—whether we are experiencing depression or someone else is—that God is at work. These reminders aren’t and shouldn’t be platitudes or an admonition to “feel better.” Rather, they should be a current of abiding hope, even in the midst of depression. God is here, God is with us, and He has not left us alone. He is orchestrating His good plan in His perfect time. That plan may not always look the way we wish; no one really wants to feel depressed. But God in His kindness, may use depression to accomplish a work that may not be completed by any other means.

Finally, we need to consider the cultural narratives that often shape our lives. One says we can't slow down. Another equates our value with what we do. Both narratives typically lead to burnout and depression. As Christians, we are invited to hear and believe a different story about who we are and where our value is found. We can sow to a different emotional harvest than the one burnout and depression grows by being faithful to God and His ways. We can engage in behaviors that God says are good—things like eating and sleeping and meeting with friends—even in the midst of our deep sadness and loneliness.

Definitions

- **Depression:** Depression is a complicated emotion, but it can generally be described as a prolonged sense of despondency, despair, or hopelessness. We look at the past and only see darkness. We look at the present and see the same. The past and present experiences form a narrative in our minds that convinces us the future will be equally bleak. Depression says we have no agency over our lives. We see no way through or out of the darkness. Depression, then, is a season of waiting for the darkness to lift.
- **Sadness:** Sadness is a felt sense of loss.
- **Ministry of presence:** Ministry of presence reflects Jesus, who became flesh and blood and dwelt among us (John 1:14). As Jesus sat and wept with people, so we can sit and weep with people. When we act as ministers of presence, we bear witness to and honor not only the person who grieves but also what has been lost and cannot be regained in the here and now. The ministry of presence reminds us we are not alone in this world. We have Jesus, our Immanuel, and each other.

Scripture

Hebrews 4:14–16; 1 Kings 19; Jonah; Ecclesiastes 7:1–14; Isaiah 59; John 11; Matthew 26:36–46; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 22:40–46; Genesis 3; Philippians 1:3–11; Psalm 18; Hebrews 11:1–3; Hebrews 12:1–2; Hebrews 4:14–16

Pray (5 min)

Before beginning the study, pray aloud, using either your own words or the words provided.

Heavenly Father, we often feel ashamed of our depression, which tempts us to hide from You and the people who love us. Help us to confess when we feel depressed, like Elijah and Job and David did. They didn't bottle up their depression or put on a "fine" face. They told You and their friends how they felt. Teach us to do the same. Also teach us to listen patiently, sitting with people who are depressed rather than pushing them to "feel better." We want to honor You, God. May even depression, ours or someone else's, draw us closer to You and Your people. Amen.

Read (5–10 min)

Either read the following Bible verses aloud or invite a volunteer to read.

¹ Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” ³ Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

⁴ But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” ⁵ And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, “Arise and eat.” ⁶ And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. ⁷ And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” ⁸ And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God. (1 Kings 19:1–8)

Discuss (15–20 min)

Answer the following questions.

- 1 Kings 19 depicts the events that occur after Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal. Elijah just saw God work wonders, but now he’s on the run, afraid, and despairing of life itself. How does the juxtaposition of a high and low moment resonate with your lived experience?
- How does God minister to Elijah in the wilderness? What does God *not* do or say? What does that tell you about how God feels and acts toward us when we experience depression?
- The counselors suggest small acts of faith, such as getting out of bed or having breakfast, can help us resist depression’s temptation toward immobility. Where do you see small acts of faith in Elijah’s story? What are the small acts of faith you could celebrate, either in your own life or in someone else’s?
- At the end of 1 Kings 19, Elijah receives a companion, Elisha. What does that suggest about our need for companions, perhaps especially when navigating depression? What does the gift of Elisha suggest about God and how He holistically cares for us?



Engage (10 min)

In smaller groups of 2 and 3, respond to the following questions.

- Our culture prizes utilitarianism and productivity. How do those values affect us generally? What about when we're depressed? How can we pursue and encourage one another to cherish what God values instead of what our culture values?
- We sometimes feel that we need to "fix" circumstances or a person experiencing depression. The counselors say we can't fix anything. In what ways is that a challenging statement? What about that statement is freeing or comforting?

Pray (5 min)

Either read the following liturgy, a worshipful prayer, aloud or invite a volunteer to read.

When Darkness Looms

The darkness looms again.
The sun's light unforgivingly descends.
Waves and breakers crash in,
And I am lost.

I cry out, but the void empties my voice.
Without power to breathe, to hope, stripped of this choice,
I lie stranded in a prison of despair,
Blind and mute, without communion.

Speak to me, God.

In the silence, another voice looms.
The shadow whispers failure and screams defeat,
Wrapping its lies around my head.
O, where is the Rock to keep me from sinking?

Speak truth.

I feel no rest. No rescue.
Only the weight of the waves crushing me.
Only the depleting struggle to remain afloat.
When will this dawn break?
When will the rescue come?

Speak peace.

I believe. Help my unbelief.
Even here, in the pressing, in the crushing, lead me to trust You.
I cannot see You, I cannot feel You,
Hold me to the Rock of Your grace.

Speak freedom.

In despairing, despair has not won.
Fill my lungs to speak like the Son.
Though dying, He lives. His Spirit now sent.
Into Your hands I commit my spirit.

Reflect

Complete the following reflection on your own.

In the podcast, Andrew Dealy says, “The goal [as counselors] is not to get rid of the feeling of depression. That’s not our primary goal. We hope for it. We would love for that to be the case. But oftentimes, in that felt experience of depression, God is doing work that will not be accomplished through any other means.” What stands out to you about that statement? How do Andrew Dealy’s words help you reframe depression, maybe even find and hold onto hope in the midst of it? How could his words help you be patient and present with someone experiencing a long season of depression?

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