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## ORTHODOX PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC TREATMENT OF DEPRESSION

### **Depression – the number one cause of disability worldwide**

Recent statistics released by the World Health Organization point toward depression as the number one cause of ill health and disability worldwide. Affecting more than 300 million people of all ages, this mood disorder has a significant impact on the global burden of disease, generating tremendous social and financial costs.

The onset of depressive disorders predicts other subsequent problems such as low educational attainment, high risk of teen childbearing, marital disruption, and unstable employment. (Kessler, 2012) In addition, this mood disorder can also be accompanied by cigarette smoking (Bakhshaie, Zvolensky, & Goodwin, 2015), alcohol use (N., Rohde, Seeley, Klein, & Lewinsohn, 2014), and obesity (Pratt & Brody, 2014), all of which being risk factors that contribute to the severity of depressive disorders.

Although there are several types of depression, the DSM 5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders states that the standard feature of all depressive disorders is the presence of sad, empty, or irritable mood, accompanied by somatic and cognitive

changes that significantly affect the individual's capacity to function. What differs among them are issues of duration, timing, or presumed aetiology. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

Another relevant difference in depression and other mood-related problems occurs between sexes. (Altemus, Sarvaiya, & Epperson, 2014) However, current studies indicate that the most vulnerable groups are children and adolescents on the one hand and older individuals on the other. In the case of children and adolescents, the main problem seems to be a lack of effective treatments (Wiley Periodicals, Inc., 2016), whereas, in the case of older individuals, clinicians tend to underdiagnose and undertreat depressive disorders (Allan, Valkanova, & Ebmeier, 2014).

In a nutshell, depression is a complex phenomenon which researchers have just begun to understand. The sooner we start looking at depressive disorders from a different perspective, the sooner we can propose new and efficient approaches that might even surpass the already existing ones

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### **The need for a holistic approach to depression**

Over the last fifty years, modern science has reduced the miracle of life to nothing more than a sequence of actions and behaviours prompted by thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and emotions which are the expression of biological phenomena occurring in the brain.

It appears that in its quest for objectivity, replicability, and validity, science has left behind the spiritual dimension which plays such a vital role in every persons' day-to-day life. Today, only a handful of researchers have taken on the difficult task of highlighting the role of spirituality in the prevention and treatment of depressive disorders.

One of the most frequent and burdensome symptoms of depressive disorders is the complete loss of meaning that the patient experiences. That, in turn, triggers an entire array of unpleasant effects such as loss of motivation, loss of interest in social activities, and a general sense of alienation. However, if the sufferer has a rich spiritual life, he or she will also have a profound sense of meaning which attenuates the severity of the symptoms. (Bamonti, Lombardi, Duberstein, King, & Van Orden, 2016) Furthermore,

(re)gaining meaning in life through spirituality can help reduce the risk of suicide. (Heisel, Neufeld, & Flett, 2016)

The relatively small number of studies on the role of spirituality in mental health indicates an urgent need for a holistic approach that will encourage clinicians to treat patients physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

But regardless of the limited number of studies on the relationship between depression and spirituality, the knowledge we do have portrays an interesting picture.

For instance, a study of the relationship between depression and spirituality as a coping mechanism in medically ill elderly patients revealed that patients with two or more medical illnesses are more prone to depressive disorders, which in turn lead to a decrease in spirituality. (Singh & Kedare, 2014)

From an orthodox Christian perspective, we could argue that depression, like many other mood disorders, creates a rupture between man and God. That is where Orthodox psychotherapy comes into play, helping depression sufferers cope with their condition on both a psychological and spiritual level.

### **Suffering and the Christian life**

Suffering represents a fundamental characteristic of the man who chooses to follow God and obey His Holy Commandments; the sacrifices one makes to prove his devotion to the Christian principles that God and the Holy Saints have cultivated since the beginning of civilisation.

Unfortunately, in a godless world, suffering becomes futile act that most don't even take the time to explore and understand; an inconvenience that everyone wants to escape from as soon as possible.

Even in the context of Orthodox Christianity, there are different ways in which people can perceive the origin and meaning of suffering. In other words, one can either see suffering as divine punishment and rejection or a chance to introspect and strengthen the intimate relationship between man and God as his Creator.

To better understand why suffering is part of humankind's journey toward holiness in God's eye, we must first turn to His word and the lives of the Saints who've followed in His steps.

God, in His infinite kindness and righteousness, assured humankind that *the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us* (Romans 8:18). Furthermore, 1 Peter 5:10 teaches us that *after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.*

The promises that God has made to all who wish to follow Him represent the very foundation onto which Orthodox psychotherapy was built. In other words, this new and promising field aims to help the patient struggling with depression restore and strengthen his relationship with God thus restoring and increasing his mental health.

In the context of Orthodox Christian doctrine, suffering takes on an entirely different meaning. By knowing that an infinitely generous God will greatly reward every hardship, one can cease to interpret suffering and depression as injustice meant only to strike pain and misery.

But God doesn't just teach humankind the purpose of suffering and promise restoration to those who are willing to endure adversity in His name. If we look more closely at the life of Jesus Christ, our Savior, we notice that He endured more suffering and pain than any human can take. He was humiliated, ridiculed, insulted, tortured and eventually crucified, all for the sake of humankind. Being the Son of God meant that He could effortlessly avoid all the suffering He was put through. As Christ, Himself states, *do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?* (Matthew 26:53)

Because the hardships that He chose to endure in flesh and bone were for a greater purpose (to purify the sins of humanity), His suffering was an act of sacrifice (for the sake of the Father) which restored Him to His rightful place as the head of the church.

For Orthodox counsellors and psychotherapists who wish to specialise in treating depression, the first step should be reframing the suffering and pain that the patient experiences as a result of his/her depressive disorder.

## **Reframing and overcoming depression through Orthodox psychotherapy**

Aside from promoting a scriptural perspective on suffering and depression, another crucial part Orthodox psychotherapy is helping the patient see himself/herself as a whole – mind, body, and spirit.

There are no scientific terms that can express the degree of pain that those who suffer from depression experience. The sense of vulnerability specific to depressive disorders can make one feel sorry for himself/herself; like there is no alternative, no light to turn to, no reason to live.

The beauty and joy that were once the source of meaning and serenity no longer exist; only despair, hopelessness, shame, guilt, and sorrow. There are hundreds of questions and dilemmas that a patient struggling with depression has and it's the counsellor role to help him/her find answers that might lead to a deeper understanding of his/her condition.

Over the last decades, researchers and mental health professionals have come up with a broad range of treatment options for depressive disorders, and there's no doubt that psychotherapy has proven to be a highly effective approach. (Cuijpers, et al., 2014)

Just as other therapeutic approaches, Orthodox psychotherapy relies on a structured approach that seeks to assist the patient in the quest for meaning and solutions to his/her problems. The most significant differences between Orthodox psychotherapy and other therapeutic approaches are the emphasis placed on the spiritual dimension of life and the solid principles of Orthodox Christianity. In a sense, one could argue that Orthodox psychotherapy represents a much-needed addition to popular therapeutic approaches.

A common myth that many Christians insist on holding on to is the belief that mental health is somehow a sin. Certain sins such as substance or alcohol abuse may contribute to the onset of clinical depression, but this does not mean that the patient suffering from this condition is guilty.

When depression is interpreted as a sin, people affected by it will most likely give up on finding treatment options. They also do not realise that they need to look at the causes of their condition so that they can handle it properly. In such cases, one of the

counsellor's primary goals is to help the patient understand that even though depressive disorders might be caused by sinful behaviours, this doesn't mean depression is sinful in itself. Even if depression were a sin, we must always remember that God, through His Son's sacrifice, has already forgiven and erased all of humanity's transgressions.

Besides standard therapeutic techniques, Orthodox psychotherapy also promotes the use of self-help strategies, thus encouraging patients to take control of their lives and deepen their relationship with God through dedication and personal effort.

The most powerful weapons that Christians have against depressive disorders are prayer and biblical study. Prayer represents the channel through which we communicate with God. Not only that prayer has an alleviating effect on one's aching soul, but it also helps people accept their flawed and sinful nature. Through prayer, anyone can bring their problems and pains before God and ask for His support.

As for the biblical study, this vital practice helps patients become familiar with God's word, learn about the hardships of other devoted Christians, gain useful insights on the nature of good and evil, discover ways to practice their devotion to God, and live moral lives, thus keeping mood disorders at bay.

Both prayer and biblical study represent two essential tools that allow patients to fight against depression even after the therapeutic process has reached an end.

Last but not least, for Orthodox counsellors and psychotherapist who are striving to help patients recover their health and well-being through sound Christian values, remember what God has told us:

*The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.* (Isaiah 50:4)

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