

# ***Please Try This at Home***

## ***Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life***

### **Leprosy's Lessons about Depression**

Chances are that research on leprosy has not made it onto your leisure reading list. But there are some important lessons that this now obscure disease has to teach us about physical and emotional pain.

For centuries, people assumed that lepers became disfigured because leprosy actively dissolved their extremities. Dr. Paul Brand discovered several decades ago that this is not the case. Rather, leprosy kills off the nerves in the colder regions of the body so that people do not feel pain. Without the strong, insistent warnings of pain, people use their hands and feet clumsily and repetitively until they develop small fractures from repeated stress. Unattended, these stress fractures turn into breaks, and as bits of bone chip off, the bone dissolves over time. Without pain, lepers just keep on doing the same old things until they disfigure themselves.\*

As much as we complain about our aches and pains, they are some of best life-preservers we have. In a voice too loud and too persistent for non-masochists to ignore, pain says, "Something is wrong. Stop and change what you are doing before you are damaged beyond repair!"

Many of us have already discovered the usefulness of non-chronic physical pain. But we tend to think about emotional pain quite differently. When someone says, "My knee keeps hurting me," we think, "Go to the doctor and get a diagnosis or some exercises that will solve the problem." But when someone says, "I can't stop feeling anxious" or "I struggle with depression," it's far too easy to think, "There's something wrong with *you*. Why can't you buck up and get it together?" How easily we can dismiss the profound gift of being able to feel emotional pain!

#### **Depression: A Call to Greater Life**

As hard as it is to think about depression as a life-preserving warning sign, rather than something to be ashamed of, the messages it can convey to us are no less important than those our nerves deliver. Here are some common depression messages:

- You've been through some really hard things. Can you take it easy on yourself for awhile until you have a chance to regain your hope and motivation?
- You have some outstanding potential that you are not pursuing because you are concerned about what the change will mean. If staying the same starts to become more painful than changing, will you have the courage to move toward that potential?
- Your brain chemistry or your hormones have changed and you are not getting enough of the chemicals you need to have the energy to do what you need to do. Can you change your diet, exercise, or get some more of the missing hormones or chemicals so you can have more energy and joy?
- There's something you've lost that is more important than you thought at first. Can you figure out what it is and find some loving people or resources that can start giving you more of what you've been missing?

- Some of the ways that you think about the world and yourself are not realistic. Your impossible standards are keeping you from delighting in life. Can you figure out what these thoughts are and exchange them for do-able, life-giving thoughts?
- Right now, you're not relating to the important people in your life in ways that bring you joy and meet your needs. Can you change the ways you relate to them, or find healthy people to relate to so that more of your needs get met?

Even though depression has the potential to call us to rest, renewed energy, self actualization, healthy relationships, healing, and realistic thoughts, it can be so painful that we cannot pull ourselves out of the pain sufficiently to hear the life-giving messages it is sending. Often, we need others to help us detect the message under the pain and get us started on some "emotional therapy" exercises that will stop the pain and prevent it from coming back so strongly again.

If you can't identify the particular change that the depression is asking you to make, it may be helpful to ask a trusted friend, mentor, or counselor to help you clarify the factors that might be contributing to your pain. Or you may have lived in emotional pain for so long now that you've developed "emotional leprosy" and no longer notice the signs that you are in pain much of the time. Here are some, but certainly not all the signs that depression may be going on behind the scenes:

- Feelings: sadness, guilt, self-loathing, agitation, irritation, helplessness, worthlessness, can't feel pleasure;
- Thoughts: pessimistic generalizations, lack of concentration, indecisiveness;
- Behaviors: stopped pleasurable activities, increased laziness, hyper-productivity, increased substance use;
- Physical: changes in appetite, changes in sleeping patterns, fatigue.

## **The Good and the Bad News: You Are in Pain**

If you have experienced the above symptoms for an hour, a week, or as long as you can remember, that means your emotional "nerve endings" are alive and reporting important messages to you. You have evaded emotional leprosy, and by digging for the message that your depression is trying to tell you, you may be able to avoid lots of long-term damage.

Of course, few things are as excruciating as depression. So let me encourage you to start "digging" for your depression's message as soon as you are able, getting whatever help you need to start on the road away from pain and back into joy.

If you or someone you know would like some help with this process, *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email [info@jenniferdiebel.com](mailto:info@jenniferdiebel.com).*

Thanks for reading!

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\*For more about how leprosy works and the lessons that may be learned from it, see *The Gift of Pain* by Phillip Yancey and Paul Brand. (1997). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

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