

Lessons from Job 3 from Ryan Chriscoe – counselor, The Shepherd’s Church, Cary NC
Addressing hopelessness/depression in ourselves and our loved ones:

What can we do if we are experiencing hopelessness/depression?

- 1) Share with God and a non-judgmental person that you are feeling hopeless/depressed, and what your experience is like. It is often not until we begin to speak about our emotions that the significance of them comes into focus (e.g., what about *that experience* hurt so badly?).
- 2) Begin to name any disappointments you’ve felt. In other words, identify what you *expected* life to be like and acknowledge to God and someone else how that expectation was not met. This is how we begin to lament. Remember, around one-third of the Psalms in Scripture are laments!
- 3) Remind yourself of the character of God, as the psalmists often do in their laments. Trust *can* coexist alongside great pain and confusion, and affirming God’s nature in the midst of sorrow is in itself a statement of faith and glorifies the Lord.
- 4) Begin to surrender your expectations to the Lord through prayer. One definition of *patience* is choosing to trust in God as we release our expectations for how he should act. This helps us avoid the trap of cutting ourselves off from the One who best understands our suffering and desires to bring redemption in it.
- 5) Be gracious with yourself as you oscillate between being at rest in God’s character and being distressed because of the pain and doubts you experience.

What can we do for a loved one who is experiencing hopelessness/depression?

- 1) If someone shares with you that they are feeling hopeless/depressed, be empathetic and slow to speak into it. Don’t immediately jump into action like Job’s friends did to try to find the source or solution. Depression is often complex in its roots, and we can hurt a person further by trying to boil it down to a simple cause; for instance, by asking, “What sin aren’t you confessing?” Or, “Just get more exercise!” Assumptions and advice-giving can be “invalidating” for what is often an expression of understandable grief.
- 2) When you do speak, try asking questions to help them clarify their thoughts and emotions. This is effectively helping a person begin to “lament,” which can be helpful in their conversations with God.
- 3) When the Spirit leads you, remind your loved one of the character of God, focusing heavily on His great love for them. Depressed and hopeless people often have a hard time feeling valued, so offering encouragement challenges the lie that they lack worth with God and others.

- 4) Begin to surrender your own expectations of how quickly a person “should” be healing from depression. Deep grief can take a long time to heal, and *patience* is important in loving others in pain.
- 5) Be gracious with yourself as you oscillate between feeling hope for your loved one and feeling discouraged. They’re right there with you in that! But your willingness simply to “sit in the ashes” with them is likely preventing things from getting worse, and is sowing seeds of truth for them moment by moment.

What can we do for someone indicating or expressing suicidal thoughts?

- 1) Be aware of warning signs. Suicidal thoughts are often very distressing for the individual experiencing them, and sometimes he or she will share explicitly that they are thinking about dying. Others, sometimes because of “stigma” or other factors, will be less explicit. They may use hopeless/devalued language including phrases like, *I feel stuck/trapped, I feel like a burden, or, I don’t think I can take this pain much longer*. A majority of people experiencing suicidal thoughts *do not wish to die*, they are just in severe pain and desire a way to feel better.
- 2) If you notice warning language, it is okay to ask if your loved one is experiencing suicidal thoughts. Asking about suicidal thoughts does not increase the likelihood that someone will act on them, and it does not introduce the idea to those who are not experiencing it. It is often a relief for depressed individuals because it combats the stigma around suicidal thoughts, and it gives them an avenue to share what is hurting them and get help. Starting the conversation may sound like, “I know you’ve been feeling really down lately, and you mentioned feeling like life isn’t worth living. Have you had any thoughts about hurting yourself?”
- 3) If a person shares that they have had suicidal thoughts, it can be helpful to ask if they have ever made a plan for how they might harm themselves. Getting this information can help you assess whether this is more “passive” suicidal ideation (e.g., “I don’t want to hurt myself, I’m just tired of the pain.”), or more “active” suicidal ideation, meaning they are taking concrete steps toward acting on the thoughts.
- 4) If a person confirms they are actively suicidal, and they are making a plan to self-harm, to the degree you’re able, don’t panic! This can be a scary experience, and our tendency may be to “spring into action” and begin setting up counseling appointments or driving them to a hospital. These may be needed, but first, take a moment to empathize with the person who just shared something very vulnerable. There is often shame associated with suicidal thinking, and expressing disapproval, shock, or panic can reinforce this. Prayerfully seek to empathize with what they’ve just shared with a response like, “I’m so sorry you’ve been feeling like that for so long. That has to be so heavy for you.”
- 5) Offer to help them seek appropriate help, depending on the severity and urgency of their suicidal thoughts.