

PURPOSE IN DEPRESSION: OUR BUILT-IN ALARM SYSTEM

*Our problems are not here for us to solve them
but for them to solve us.*

—SALVADOR DE MADARIAGA, SPANISH WRITER—

A couple I counseled had just watched their new 5,000-square-foot home burn to the ground. A shrieking smoke alarm startled them awake that night. They jumped out of bed and ran into the hallway to find the entire back of the house ablaze. Fighting a choking cloud of smoke, the wife rushed to their son's bedroom, scooped him up and ran out the front door. Her husband called the fire department, grabbed what possessions he could and raced out after his family. Dazed, they watched the flames destroy their dream home.

They'd lost so much. But they were grateful that their smoke alarm had worked. It had saved their lives! They still had their son. They realized, as never before, the importance of warning signals. We may dislike the shock associated with warning signals, but they push us into action, sometimes preventing the unthinkable. This experience was a turning point for this couple. Afterwards, they reordered their priorities.

The world is filled with alarms—fire alarms, theft alarms, intruder alarms, maintenance alarms and a host of others. Our car dashboards sport an array of warning lights signaling trouble with oil pressure, water temperature or battery. We have gauges tell-

ing us when to get gas, when we're pushing the engine's rpms too high or even when a door is ajar. We can hardly take a step without some alarm system protecting our best interests. Should it surprise us that a powerful, wise God would equip our bodies in a similar way? We're wired with alarm systems that prepare us for a myriad of things that menace our well-being.

THE VALUE OF OUR INNER ALARM SYSTEM

Depression is one of these protective systems—which is what makes it so purposeful. Its amber light of discontent signals problems that have, until now, escaped our notice. If we do nothing about these problems our defenses will disintegrate. Depression alerts us to do something about the problems before they destroy our chances for meaningful living. In one way or another, these problems reflect our longing for love, significance and appreciation. Depression warns us that our emotional attachments are damaging. Depression is, in fact, one of four emotional alarm systems we have. The other three are fear, guilt and anger. These signals tell us something is amiss in our relationships with others or ourselves.

Fear is the alarm system that alerts us to physical or psychological danger, calling for immediate defense. Guilt is geared to issues of moral compromise, warning us of spiritual injury if alternative action isn't taken. Anger is a common reaction to someone who has hurt us or has created some sort of loss in our lives.

Anger is one of the most frequently triggered alarm systems and it's also the least well managed. Quite often we become angry because we are reciting internalized messages about ourselves—messages that originated with our parents or other significant childhood figures. These messages are just as mistaken now as they were then. This anger comes out of the self-hatred of those who, in the past, endured a dysfunctional family.

Anger can reveal our frustration when we don't get what we want. It can also be a secondary reaction to another signal, such as

guilt or fear. Whatever the source, anger can prompt us to reevaluate and change our communication patterns or change something in ourselves. Indeed, without periodic expressions of legitimate anger, our relationships would not likely change much. Instead, they would become stagnant and sterile, unfulfilling to everyone.

Many people wish they handled anger differently. The apostle Paul taught that, while anger *itself* isn't sinful, many things we *say or do* when we're angry are (see Eph. 4:26ff). He distinguished between anger as an emotional state and the rage, which is at the root of most destructive attitudes.

Understanding anger is important because it's an early warning system that tells us our emotional state may descend into depression if things remain unchanged. Anger tends to be immediate. Depression develops more slowly and usually manifests its warnings more persistently over time. Depression is usually triggered by chronic, unresolved issues, which may go underground because they're too threatening to deal with openly. Maybe someone hurts you, so you become angry. Then you feel guilty about your anger, so you bury the feeling (and the guilt)—and the slow inner burn turns to the self-hatred of depression. These kinds of interactions between emotions can become quite complex.

One thing is certain: Depression, like all emotional alarm systems, can create such discomfort that it *demand*s our attention. We're forced to acknowledge that a problem exists or the havoc will persist until we confront and resolve it.

Depending on our personal histories and response patterns, depression may inhibit appropriate action. In fact, it might inhibit all action. But its purpose is to point to the value of change. When it succeeds in prompting change and producing growth, we discover the reason for viewing depression *optimistically*. Depression is really meant to be our ally, not our enemy.

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This may be contrary to all you've been taught, but it's the inescapable conclusion about every emotional alarm—including this one.

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THIS...

The positive potential of depression can be seen in a recent book by Andrew Solomon in which he describes his own despair. Solomon concluded from the drama of his experience that depressive episodes can lead to better choices and beneficial change:

The long pause that a depression forces...often causes people to change their lives in useful ways, especially after a loss...There really are up sides to depression; it's just hard to see them when you're in it...I am now able to understand things that I just could not understand before; and the things I don't understand now, I will in time, if they matter...Almost every day I feel momentary flashes of hopelessness...I hate those feelings, but know that they have driven me to look deeper at life, to find and cling to reasons for living...Every day, I choose to be alive. Is that not a rare joy?¹

Mr. Solomon's experience forced him to understand his own freedom more fully, to exercise the "rare joy" of making life-changing choices. It has provided him wisdom and new meaning, as well as reasons for celebrating the challenge of adversity. We can make our choices any way we want—wisely or poorly—but no one can take away our opportunity to make them. Even when facing conditions we cannot change, the choice of attitude is ours—no one else's.

Even though depression can be beneficial, of course, nobody ever wishes for it. We're not saying anyone should. But when depression does strike, we gain more from life by learning its lessons—as when James encouraged us to welcome the testing of our faith, because such experiences can strengthen our stamina for hard times (see Jas. 1:2-8). Testing can give us wisdom to recognize the dangerous instability of "double-mindedness," by which

James meant the habit of vacillating between doubt and faith, between conviction and ambivalence or clarity and confusion. This instability allows fatalism to creep in and so depression follows.

God's ways will, at times, be difficult to discern, especially when our experience goes off course from our expectations. Responding with cynicism blinds us to seeing God's presence and purpose in our hardship. Faith, however, calls us to depend on a God who cares about His creation. Some people put God on trial for their suffering, attacking His character—a tendency that Paul confronts in Romans 9. And yet we are surrounded by evidence of God's goodness. Without a righteous God, nothing about faith or hope makes sense. Indeed, the existence of *any* goodness in the world is attributed to God's righteous presence and sovereign purpose. Evil will not prevail because God refuses to abandon us to the shipwreck of our own sinfulness.

Author Francis Schaeffer once noted that, if we argue for an impersonal universe—one without a personal God—then the very existence of human personality would be tragically, logically absurd.² It would be futile to understand why we enjoy reflecting on the human condition, why we engage in interpersonal communication or even why we love one another. These pursuits would be as meaningless as the sense of smell in an odorless environment. Our deepest longings would be reduced to illusion.

But if we attribute our universe to a personal God, then our experience becomes intelligible—and purposeful. Our desires and behaviors can fit into a sensible pattern. Life is complex. It can't always be reduced to simple, predictable terms. But God has equipped us with emotional signals to help us adapt to the world's complexity.

These signals, difficult though they may be to manage, are necessary for healthy functioning. That's why the alerting role of depression can be likened to the biological alarm system of pain. For *depression is to the psychological self as pain is to the physical self.*

Almost no one enjoys pain. (Few of us are true masochists!) Many would prefer to be completely numb to it. But that rare individual, born partially or wholly unable to feel pain, holds a different opinion. As unpleasant as it is, pain is perhaps the most valuable sensory system we have. It prevents untold damage, even fatal damage, to our bodies by alerting us to take preventative action. When we turn an ankle, the pain drives us to take weight off the injured foot, so we limp. If the pain continues, we seek medical diagnosis and care. Otherwise, we might further injure the ankle, maybe severely.

The great missionary physician, Dr. Paul Brand, has described what happens to leprosy patients who lose the sense of pain in their extremities.³ He watched in horror as an African man reached his pain-deadened hand into a fire pit to retrieve a fallen piece of meat from the red-hot coals. This failure of the pain warning system explains why leprosy often leads to disfiguring damage to hands, feet and other body parts. Pain is necessary to call attention to disease and injury—it helps guard our long-term physical health.

Depression performs a similar function, preserving our emotional well-being. Its troubling persistence bears testimony to its significance. Like pain, we can't merely will it away. It's there to tell us something. Ignoring it naturally leads to worse consequences. Heeding it leads to valuable insight, healing and prevention of further injury.

Why then, do we resist allowing depression to serve its purpose? One reason is that contributing factors often lie deep within us, involving issues we've avoided for a long time. In our efforts to survive painful past events, we insulate ourselves from their impact by denying them to awareness.

Sometimes, acknowledging the sources of our despair may seem to endanger relationships or threaten to shatter our sense of identity. What's more, our depression may come out of events that seem unrelated, but which we associate with earlier wounds.

We see this pattern in Barbara's struggle with depression. Coming from a turbulent alcoholic home, she couldn't wait to escape from her family. So, barely out of high school, she married an older man whom she thought understood and cared for her—quite unlike her father. She dismissed his history of repeated job firings and two divorces. She accepted this man's explanations about tyrannical bosses and controlling women, which portrayed him as a victim.

Within weeks of their wedding however, she found out the lies behind the explanations. He became increasingly abusive. She feared for her life. His drinking, which she hadn't known about before they married, only made things worse. She sometimes cowered before him, praying to survive his verbal attack, praying that he wouldn't hurt her...or kill her. Her desperate attempts to placate him did nothing to quell his rage. "When he starts drinking, it doesn't matter if I'm nice to him," she said. "I think he just wants to attack me. I think he gets a kick out of seeing me scared to death...and I'm afraid that one of these times, he's not gonna stop with just words. I don't know what to do."

She became anxious and depressed because she found herself in the same never-ending nightmare, this time with a reincarnation of her defiant father. Here was yet another destructive relationship with a man. She felt as trapped as she did when she was a child.

She sought help from her church but said nothing about her husband's behavior, fearing that the leaders would confront him, making things worse in the prison she called home. When the pastoral staff finally learned about the pathetic state of her marriage, they counseled submission rather than seeing abuse as the source of her depression and taking immediate action. The consequences were devastating.

Barbara accepted the labels "rebellious" and "selfish"—after all, she already believed she was worthless. She errantly assumed responsibility, resigning herself to bear her burden alone bolstered only by the tenacity of her commitment to the institution of mar-

riage. No joint counseling with her husband. No accountability for him. She was abandoned to fear of injury and despair for the future.

She needed to listen to her depression and its message.

OF LEMONS AND LEMONADE

It's often useful to draw upon the depressed person's own natural strengths—resources to which they have ready access for making a difference. Using existing abilities makes the change process feel more familiar and more doable.

I'm reminded of psychiatrist Milton Erickson's "African violet therapy." Visiting a depressed and suicidal woman who had withdrawn from everyone, he noted her interest in African

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violets. These delicate flowers are difficult to grow, but the woman had a knack for nurturing them. Erickson suggested that she use her

talent by giving violets to the principals of her church's weddings, funerals, baptisms and the like. She followed his suggestion and it changed her life. When she died years later, more than a thousand people attended her memorial—people who had been moved by her quiet, generous spirit.

She thought depression meant that her life was worthless. But her depression was, in fact, a window of discovery. She had a gift perfectly matched to the world of need. The poet Robert Frost wrote, "Something we were withholding made us weak until we found it was ourselves."⁴ Our unique gift, freely given, opens up unforeseen possibilities for ourselves and those we touch. The past may shape the present, but so also does a healthy anticipation of the future. Optimism transforms a pedestrian life into a creative, adventurous one.

Depression represents the challenges of our feelings of helplessness, our sense of shame and our burden of guilt. It forces us to rethink our perceptions of a world that seems to demand more than we can give. It pushes us to consider new insights about ourselves, changes that will help us cope more effectively with adversity. Depression can prompt us to discover how to grow, not in spite of, but *because of* our pain. If we can learn a more meaningful way to live and to *give*, our depression will have served its purpose.

The Bible describes many of God's mightiest acts as carried out through men who were prone to depression. Likewise, some of the great luminaries of Church history, such as Martin Luther, Charles Spurgeon and D. L. Moody suffered major depressive episodes. Depression is no stranger to God's people. We shouldn't pretend that it is. Far better to be honest about our struggles as believers, bringing a refreshing transparency to the Christian community before a culture who already constantly questions our credibility.

But most believers share a powerful fear of shedding their facades. We're terrified of being judged, especially by our churches. So we go on living our people-pleasing, sanitized lives, calling it Christian love and believing it pleases God.

AN INVITATION FOR ALL SEASONS

While suffering can defeat us, we can also answer it heroically. Some people find within themselves an added reserve to overcome even the greatest calamity, drawing upon something all bold responses to pain share in common. It has to do with a deeper sense of purpose that gives meaning in the face of apparent meaninglessness. Viktor Frankl revealed this as the secret of his survival through the horrors of the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz. The apostle Paul, too, alluded to it as the enigma of strength through weakness in the midst of his persecution (see 2 Cor. 12:9). He found unusual strength, not in himself, but in his dependency upon God; a dependency made necessary by the persistence of his own failures. The success of the Gospel—*despite* Paul's obvious

imperfections—made the Lord’s victorious hand more visible to the early Church.

Similarly, we tend to attribute our own success to God when it happens in spite of our weakness. In the same way, contrary to our praise of a well-delivered sermon by a great preacher, we tend to give the glory to God when an inexperienced speaker gives a testimony that spiritually moves the audience. It’s not his performance but God’s power that makes the difference. It’s neither eloquence nor sacrificial service that wins hearts and minds. Not even martyrdom provides the triumph. Rather, the love only God can supply drives home the message of hope.

God stands ready to transform our lives, but we often can’t see His hand through the veil of our pain. Sometimes our impatience with limitations frustrates our understanding of the bigger picture. In any case, rarely do we experience the kind of relationship God desires with us because we are too bogged down by memories of failed relationships that have diminished our aspirations. Yet God is patient, continuing to invite us into intimacy, a banquet of love that often seems too good to be true. Those who have experienced this true intimacy will testify to its reality, capacity for contentment and ability to nurture the soul.

A gifted client of mine had long been laboring to understand the nature of such a relationship with God. She came to liken it to the intimacy between a loving father and his child. She arrived at this conclusion as she worked through her depression:

“It is the question of God’s hand as an intervening, directive force or as something resting gently on the believer’s shoulder, infusing him with the power to see the mysteries that abound...I wonder if feeling God’s hand on my shoulder is like a father touching a child to get his attention so he can point out something the child would otherwise have missed. So it seems that the sense of loss I’ve experienced is but a part of something much bigger that is hap-

pening to me, like a window of opportunity to understand things that the mind can never know, only the heart.”

I’m convinced that God is honored when we struggle to understand Him. Faith in Him means freely admitting our ignorance and our questions—just like when the desperate father, seeking Jesus’ help for his son, cried, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief”(Mark 9:24, NIV)! God desires our acknowledgment of fallibility and doubts, which prepares us to receive the truth. Arrogant certainty never motivates us to seek God’s face, because it cannot stir the passion to look beyond the limits of our own minds.

If we persist in following God’s journey of discovery, we’ll be drawn into the accepting, redemptive heart of God Himself. There, surprisingly, we find our weakness is made strong by His love. Paul described this phenomenon as a strange and otherwise inexplicable peace that wells up within the soul (see Phil. 4:4-7). Contentment doesn’t just happen. Contentment is learned.

INSTRUMENTS OF LOVE

Notice how we keep running again and again into the concept of connection—loving and being loved—the survival kit for the human heart. Even under the most desperate conditions, intimacy’s appeal lingers in the air, luring us with its promise of healing.

Viktor Frankl described love as an important conduit of meaning—deeply loving someone is a primary reason for feeling emotionally alive.⁵ As long as German death camp prisoners could attribute meaning to their experience, even if only by treasuring an imagined liberation date, they could survive the Nazis’ worst. This triumph of the spirit was not possible however, without reaching beyond the suffering, lifting their eyes to a hope connected to the relational requirements of the heart. These formidable conditions—the common ground of pain—fostered some of the prisoners’ deepest connections with each other.

Frankl saw prisoners at Auschwitz bond with their fellow prisoners, often giving of themselves to meet one another's survival needs. One would give his ration of bread to an ailing friend. Or he might complete a chore for a weaker comrade rather than see him beaten for "dereliction of duty." These heroic deeds, in the courageous, pain-forged bonds of intimacy, momentarily removed them from their suffering. Their suffering freed them to be vulnerable and sacrificial toward one another. It brought out the best. It endowed with nobility men who were otherwise stripped of dignity.

When people reach out of their isolation to others, seeking relief from their suffering, they tend to go beyond head knowledge and appeal to the passionate side of relationships. Our deepest

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est needs are addressed not by intellectual answers, but by the experience of love. Notice that Jesus connected His message of redemption to the passion of His Father for His people. By His sacrifice

He demonstrated that God's love cannot be vanquished. Through His pain, He revealed the power of divine intimacy that's far greater than the meager offerings of the secular world.

If only in our most agonizing moments we could realize that we've already been invited into this kind of emotional and spiritual bond. Because our Lord has shared our earthly pain, we find in Him the healing opportunity to view our suffering through the window of a loving father's empathy. A relationship with Him fills the spiritual void that makes suffering so much worse, freeing us to rebuild from our losses on a new foundation.

Even with those losses, God's love inspires us to make the most of what we have left, to assemble the remaining pieces of our life into a new arrangement. Itzhak Perlman, arguably the world's finest violinist, once demonstrated this kind of triumph. His passion for music enabled him to craft a magical moment from the

shards of apparent disaster. Listen to syndicated columnist Jack Riemer's account in the *Houston Chronicle*:

On November 18, 1995, Itzhak Perlman, the violinist, came on stage to give a concert at Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York City. If you have ever been to a Perlman concert, you know that getting on stage is no small achievement for him. He was stricken with polio as a child and so he has braces on both legs and walks with the aid of two crutches. To see him walk across the stage one step at a time, painfully and slowly, is an unforgettable sight. He walks painfully, yet majestically, until he reaches his chair. Then he sits down, slowly, puts his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other foot forward. Then he bends down and picks up the violin, puts it under his chin, nods to the conductor and proceeds to play. By now, the audience is used to this ritual. They sit quietly while he makes his way across the stage to his chair. They remain reverently silent while he undoes the clasps on his legs. They wait until he is ready to play. But this time, something went wrong. Just as he finished the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap—it went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant. There was no mistaking what he had to do. People who were there that night thought to themselves: "We figured that he would have to get up, put on the clasps again, pick up the crutches and limp his way off stage—to either find another violin or else find another string for this one." But he didn't. Instead, he waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled the conductor to begin again. The orchestra began and he played from where he had left off. And he played with such passion and such power and such purity, as they had never heard before. Of course,

anyone knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that and you know that, but that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that.

You could see him modulating, changing and recomposing the piece in his head. At one point, it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get new sounds from them that they had never made before. When he finished, there was an awesome silence in the room. And then people rose and cheered. There was an extraordinary outburst of applause from every corner of the auditorium. We were all on our feet, screaming and cheering; doing everything we could to show how much we appreciated what he had done. He smiled, wiped the sweat from this brow, raised his bow to quiet us and then he said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone, “You know, sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.” What a powerful line that is. It has stayed in my mind ever since I heard it. And who knows? Perhaps that is the [way] of life—not just for artists but also for all of us. So, perhaps our task in this shaky, fast-changing, bewildering world in which we live is to make music, at first with all that we have and then, when that is no longer possible, to make music with what we have left.⁶

This is the artist’s heroic pursuit of the finest he can produce. God, the Artist of Life, is the creator of excellence in each one of us. He lovingly sets excellence before us as our goal. Even when badly wounded, we may safely enter His sanctuary, where his concerto of compassion plays in our hearts, inspiring us to new strength. Only the music He performs on the instrument of our soul can fulfill us, because it resonates with our desire to be loved. No broken heartstring need cause us to fall silent and withdraw from the stage of life. God teaches us to play our damaged instrument with a new intensity—modulating, changing and recomposing the

music of our lives. When played to the tempo of God’s grace, our song inspires praise from the hosts of heaven.

THE MUSIC OF DISCOVERY

In therapy, Barbara painfully reviewed her confining relationship patterns and began to see herself in surprisingly new ways. Her healing didn’t happen overnight. But in time she understood why she had willingly accepted abuse from her husband and from herself and how that contributed to her depression. She learned a more effective, more assertive approach to dealing with her husband. She now knows that no one has to pay for someone else’s sins in a kind of lifelong purgatory. She sees the distinction between real and false guilt and consequently, no longer carries the burden of misguided devotion. Freedom in Christ has a new ring to her. She accepts God’s love and grace and her faith now serves to nurture, not injure, her mental health. She recognizes her power to make genuine choices. During our last session she commented, “Sometimes I’m amazed how lost I had become—I didn’t think I even had a right to live, but I was also scared to die because I never felt I had done enough to get to heaven. At one point, I actually thought that God had sent my husband to punish me for what a disappointment I had been to Him. But I would never go back there in a million years. My days of being abused are over and now I know that this is what God *really* wants for my life.” In pursuing professional help, Barbara courageously waded against the strong current of dysfunctional messages. Such courage is rare, but only because more people don’t choose it.

It’s so important to understand depression as the hope-inspiring prelude to a better life. It’s a guide to help us make sense of our emotional design, leading us to self-acceptance and tapping into our hardwired longing to be loved. Without its ministry, we would not seek connections with God or people. Life would be an absurdity—an aimless drifting, cut loose from spiritual moorings, a desolate derelict on the sea of misguided reason and cruel chance.

Millions of people exist like this—directionless and without purpose. They don't have to. Nonetheless, they betray their own souls, forsaking the heart's true desire. They blame external chaos when life's randomness is often due to abandoning their own dreams. They disengage from everyone, even from that still small voice calling them to an adventure in intimacy. Only when they realize that depression is a clarion call to change do they begin mending their broken hearts. Depression may be the only way to distract us from our deadening routines long enough to consider something different.

Barbara accepted depression as an ally. It rescued her from a war between emotional exhaustion and the dictates of a legalistic faith by showing her that it's a needless war. Her depression was, in fact, a consequence of wrong thinking and misguided theology.

Returning to the music of our faith helps us live out the melody of healing. And I like to think that while God supplies the lyrics and the tune, we counselors have the rare privilege of helping to repair the instruments.

FINDING HOPE

- 1. The discomfort of your *depression* has a positive signaling purpose: To prompt you to take action on an unattended problem.**
- 2. God has given you the freedom to *make choices that change your world and address your pain.***
- 3. You are physically and psychologically *designed for a purpose.* Your *longings to be loved reflect that purpose*, a purpose that is both personal and interpersonal.**
- 4. Depression gives you the opportunity to discover something important about life: Although the past may influence the present, *the way you anticipate the future* does so as well.**
- 5. It's when you struggle that you discover *God's principle that strength can be found through weakness.***
- 6. *Depression can be the hopeful prelude to something better.* Remember, *beautiful music* can still be played on the instrument of a damaged soul.**