



Develop Healthy Relationships

If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone.
Ecclesiastes 4:10,11

This month I've been talking about ways we can boost our immunity to depression. Over the past two weeks I've blogged about the importance of taking care of ourselves physically with diet, exercise and sleep as well as paying attention to our thought life.

This week I want to talk about the single most important factor in building resilience to depression. Psychologist Richard O'Connor in his book, *Undoing Depression*, says "Depression is both caused by and a cause of poorly functioning relationships."

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) indicates that the highest rates for depression for both men and women are among those who are separated and divorced. Also the condition of one's marriage is a significant factor in predicting depression, especially in women. The NIMH reports, "Lack of an intimate, confiding relationship, as well as overt marital distress has been shown to be related to depression in women. In fact, rates of depression were shown to be highest among unhappily married women."

The Bible confirms the importance of fellowship and relationship (Romans 12:10). In addition to making us physical and spiritual beings, God has made us relational beings. The two greatest commandments God gives us have to do with loving connection (Mark 12:29-31). We are to love him first and to love others deeply from the heart (1 Thessalonians 4:9, 10 and 1 Peter 1:22). God tells us that we will find meaning, purpose, and identity through our connection with him and with others.

One of the essential elements to good mental health is having loving connection with others. An old Jewish proverb wisely reminds us, "Sticks in a bundle are unbreakable. Sticks alone can be broken by a child." The consequence of disconnection and broken relationship is often depression. Our relationships provide the resilience we need to get through many of life's difficulties.

Life can be excruciatingly painful. When loss, stress, and physical afflictions ravish our spirit and/or body, a loving community surrounding us provides good insulation against depression. Psychiatrist Valerie Davis Raskin writes, "Women's vulnerability to and recovery from emotional illness naturally rests in a place of connection to others."

Today people are less connected than ever. We have replaced community with convenience. Technology and gadgets have become our constant companions. I'm always saddened to watch couples out to dinner or friends gathering together where everyone is texting someone or checking e-mail instead of interacting with one another. Every week I hear from people who are successful, busy, competent and extremely lonely, even when they have a family and attend a good church.

What's the solution? Here are three things you can do to build better and stronger relationships into your life.

1. **Be committed.** Relationships take time, energy, and hard work. Intimacy doesn't happen overnight, and what we don't maintain (in all of life) will deteriorate, including our marriage and friendships. Invest yourself in getting to know specific people, serving them, and loving them. Christ calls us to love one another as he has loved us (John 15:12). However, when we feel desperate for connection, instead of loving people, we often look for people to love us. When we try to connect this way, we end up with people-centered or self-centered relationships rather than God-centered relationships. Those kind of relationships usually fail.

Being committed doesn't mean that we have no boundaries or we should never distance ourselves from someone who repeatedly sins against us. Every healthy relationship has some conditions that must be met to facilitate trust and security. God calls us to unconditional love, not unconditional relationship. If promises are repeatedly and carelessly broken and there is no repentance and change, you may still love that person, but a loving *relationship* with that person is impossible.

2. **Understand what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like.** Healthy relationships must contain certain essential ingredients. They are mutual caring, mutual honesty, mutual respect, mutual responsibility, and mutual repentance. The operative word being **MUTUAL**. All relationships have struggles and hurts, but by being caring, honest, respectful, responsible, and repentant, they can be worked through and healed. When one or more of these five ingredients is missing, a healthy relationship is impossible. You can minister to someone when some of the five core ingredients are missing or not mutual, but never confuse ministry with healthy relationship.
3. **Learn to resolve conflict.** Every relationship has conflict. It is a normal part of two fallen people trying to get along as well as being different, with various needs, ideas, thoughts and feelings. One common dysfunctional way of handling conflict is to avoid it all together. You never talk about what's bothering you. You never honestly share your own feelings. Instead you placate or people please until you burn out with exhaustion or anger and can't do it anymore (depression often being the result).

The opposite dysfunctional way people handle conflict is to attack their opponent, by criticizing, demeaning and yelling until the other person gives in. Neither way resolves conflict, and both approaches eventually ruin the relationship.

When you need to resolve something, be honest. Define the problem using **I** words verses **you** words. For example, "I don't like the way the house looks, will you help me clean it up?" verses "You never help me around here." or "I feel disrespected by the way you spoke to me just now" verses "You're so rude all the time." Once you've

shared your feelings, listen carefully and respectfully to the other person's perspective and feelings and aim for a win/win solution verses a win/lose solution.

For more information on conflict resolution techniques, identifying healthy and destructive relationships, as well as a free test to take to see whether you are depressed or in a destructive relationship, visit my free resource page at my website at www.leslievernick.com.

I will also be offering a free webinar, February 1, at 9:00 PM ET, answering the question, Does God Want me to be Happy? Far too many people think that they have to suffer in order to live a God-ly life. They find themselves wallowing in negative feelings, dealing with feelings of overwhelm and experiencing intense sadness. I'm sharing the keys to living a happy, joyous and fulfilled life according to God's plan in a special free webinar. For more information or to register, go to <http://www.leslievernick.com/registration.html>.

www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/depwomenknows.cfm.