

DON'T FORGET TO LOOK UP – Mark Acker – FCCH – May 10, 2026

Our friend John Pavlovitz recently wrote: “Depression is a real jerk. If it’s ever visited you, you understand. Such a clever and persuasive liar, it doesn’t require facts to rob you of your hope. You can have all the evidence in the world in front of you that life is good and that you’re doing ok and that there is good reason to be grateful, and it can convince you otherwise.

Depression can mount a case for your despair so seemingly iron-clad, so apparently reasonable, that you find yourself unable to see accurately anymore: your abilities, relationships, the good things in your life, and the simple joys found in an ordinary day all become invisible.

People who don’t live with a mental illness, he writes, don’t understand that you are not necessarily a person who is wallowing in sadness and contemplating ending your life as much as you are an exhausted person who is so drained of hope that you now believe the lie that your mind tells you that things will never be better. You think that the way you feel in this moment is the way that you will always feel, and that feels unbearable.”

Our bouts of depression and sadness are exacerbated by the times in which we live. John writes: “Right now, even the most intellectually-sound, emotionally-grounded, spiritually steadied and mentally-stable of human beings are looking around asking ‘What in the heck is happening here, how much worse can it get, and how am I going to survive?’”

And on this mother's day, I also know that there are some of us feeling the pain of infertility issues, or the death of our mothers or the pain of our children not wanting us in their lives. Knowing all this, I'm sure that there are more than a few of us who are feeling depressed or sad right now, or we know someone who is.

Depression ranges from clinical depression, which needs medical care, to dysthymia, a milder and yet chronic form of depression, to postpartum depression to seasonal affective disorder that is related to changes in the seasons, and many other forms.

Depression is exacerbated by grief, feeling overwhelmed, loneliness, isolation, and most often by the traumas of our lives, which are the internal wounds that we carry from difficult life experiences. The aging process can be traumatic and those who are a part of the LGBTQ community often have a unique set of traumas as well.

Michael Phelps, is the most decorated Olympic swimmer of all time, knows a lot about depression. After winning six gold and two bronze medals at the Olympics, Michael experienced his first major bout of depression. He wrote: "You work so hard for years to get to the top of the mountain, and you get there and you're like 'what the heck am I supposed to do now? Where am I supposed to go? Who am I?'"

His push to self-reflection and self-awareness didn't occur, however, until 2014 when he received his second DUI. After being in the depth of depression for several weeks, Michael checked himself into an in-patient treatment center, where he spent 45 days. "After awhile. I finally started feeling like a person," he wrote. "I found that I could like who I saw in the mirror, and I could

see myself as a human, not just a swimmer. Through therapy I was able to unpack all the extra crap that I had inside of me.”

While Michael to this day leans on therapy, medication, exercise and self-care measures like journaling to cope, he accepts that working on his mental health, like his physical health, is a daily assignment.

Since mental health is such a part of being human, what can help us to care for it? There is no single answer, because we are complex beings. But I'd like to offer seven resources available to us.

1. Professional Support. Therapists, psychiatrists and medical professionals are excellent resources. Talk therapy and having someone with whom we can be open and honest can be a gift to the treatment and healing of our depression.
2. Medication. There are a multitude of good medications and combinations of medication available. There is zero shame if we need medication for depression any more than if we need it for high blood pressure or other conditions.
3. Community. Many of us, particularly those of us who are introverts, tend to isolate when we are sad. Almost without fail, however, our best option when we're sad is to seek community. It took me a long time to realize that because of my tendency towards dysthymia, and because I live by myself, I need to be around other people, which is why I live in the tiny house community. Our church also offers ways for us to connect with others, from worship to Monday morning coffee, to small groups of all kinds, to coffee hour and to singing in the choir. And there are lots of other groups in Hendersonville in which we can meet good people, including

12-step groups in which we can find acceptance and support.

4. Exercise. When we're feeling low, we need to see the sun, and if possible, to go for a walk or run. Exercise is proven to be one of the most effective forms of treatment for our mental health.
5. Sleep and rest. Lack of sleep impacts our depression and mood level. Do what you can to get good sleep and rest.
6. Spiritual practices. There are five practices that I'd like to highlight today. The first is meditation. I have found that regular meditation can have a huge impact on my mental health. I put together a meditation for when you and are feeling low, and copies are available on the table in the Holy Hallway. We also have a meditation group that meets on Tuesdays at 4. Another spiritual practice is to keep a pocket hug with you to remind you that you are loved. Romella made a basket full, and these are also on the table in the Holy Hallway. Please feel free to take one for yourself or for someone you know. If you're listening to the streaming today and would like a pocket hug, please call or email the church office. The third is journaling. Michael Phelps, the swimmer, journals every day, and has written about how journaling, particularly including three things for which he is grateful, helps him stay on top of his feelings. Number four is service to others. Doing a good deed, calling to check on someone else, or being involved in a service organization almost always helps us to feel better. Number five is take a break from the news. Enough said.
7. Access awe. To live with awe to is remember to look up. It means: look away from our phones, computers and TV's.

Dacher Keltner, in his book “Awe—the new science of everyday wonder,” says that awe is all about mystery and wonder. Awe is not necessarily religious, but it is spiritual and holy. We know we are experiencing awe when we get goose-bumps or tear up or have a sense of being in the midst of a special experience.

In his book, Dr. Keltner says that 95% of awe is found through experiencing what he calls the eight wonders of life, which include: 1. The strength, courage and the kindness of others, 2. Physical movement in actions like sports and dance, 3. Music, 4. Art and architecture, like Gothic cathedrals, 5. Experiences of birth and death, 6. Discussing big ideas or insights, 7. Mystical and spiritual experiences, 8. Nature.

All of these ring true for me, but number 8, nature, is probably the strongest. When my mom was living, I would take her to a park almost every week, particularly a park up the mountain from Mills River. And even on days in which she was in a funk, invariably she would look up at one of the magnificent trees and ask me the same questions every time: Mark, how tall do you think that tree is, and How old do you think that tree is? And her mood would change in a minute when she look up at the trees. Our scripture for today, Psalm 121, says it this way: “I will lift up my eyes to the mountains, from whence comes my help.”

Perhaps, when it’s all said and done, the most important thing I can offer today for those of us dealing with sadness or loneliness or depression are the words “You are not alone.” You are God’s beloved child, created, the Bible says, in God’s own image. The 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic Julian of Norwich, in fact, said that we are not

just made by God, but we are made of God. We are not only fashioned through a scientific miracle, she said, but we are born from the very womb of the Divine. This is why Julian loves to refer to God as Mother as well as Father.

Being made of God means that the wisdom of God is deep within us and that the creativity of God is deep within us, a creativity that gives us the capacity to bring forth beauty in a way that no one else can do.

The surgeon Dr. Richard Selzer tells of his experience with the holy, writing: "I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, almost clownish. Unfortunately, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the tiny nerve that controls the muscles of her mouth.

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamp light, isolated from me. Who are they, I ask myself, this young man and his bride with the disfigured mouth I have made, who gaze at each other so generously? The young woman speaks 'Will my mouth always be like this' she asks. 'Yes,' I say, 'It will. It is because the nerve was cut.' She nods and is silent.

But the young husband smiles. 'I like it,' he says, 'it's kind of cute.' All at once I know who he is. I understand and I lower my gaze. I know I must be humble in this encounter with the holy. Unmindful of my presence, he bends down to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close I can see how he patiently twists his own lips to accommodate hers, to show her that their kiss still works, as strong and as intimate as ever."

Friends, the older I get, the more I believe that this might be how the love of God works. That no matter how we are struggling, no matter how depressed or sad or unworthy we may feel, God is patiently twisting God's lips to meet ours to remind us that we are each deeply loved by God.

Friends, depression can be complicated. If you're feeling depressed, particularly if you are clinically depressed, or have thoughts of suicide, please seek professional treatment. You don't have to live like this. For those of us who are dealing with a lower level of sadness, or a depression that is periodic or situational, please consider if any of the suggestions I've offered today might be helpful. But no matter where you are on the spectrum, please remember that you are not alone, and don't forget to look up. Amen.