

Discussion Questions

Lesson One: The Hidden Epidemic

1. Rob says that when he asks at gatherings whether someone has or has been touched by mental illness, every hand goes up. How does this statement match or not match your personal experience?
2. To what degree are you aware of the epidemic of mental illness? What are your thoughts on its effect on our culture?
3. What are your thoughts on how mental illness is treated in our practice of faith? Are you becoming aware of new issues or are there actions you wish to take?

Lesson Two: Experiencing Depression

1. If you have experienced depression, what does it feel like to you? If not, what do you imagine it feels like for others?
2. Elaborate on Rob's metaphor of the barbed wire cross within the tree. How does that metaphor resonate with you? Where do you see God in it?
3. To what extent in your faith life do you see God through metaphor? How does it affect your daily life of faith?

Lesson Three: Aggression and Mindfulness

1. Have you ever experienced the kind of aggression Rob refers to, either as the aggressor or the recipient? How did that experience make you feel?
2. Have you ever felt the weight of not having the will to move something? Have you experienced it in those you love? If so, what techniques have promoted healing for you or your loved one?
3. How does mindfulness contribute to healing in your life, whether it's healing of mental illness or greater spiritual health?

Lesson Four: Prayer and Self-Care

1. Do you ever feel unworthy? Where in your life are those voices telling you are unworthy coming from? How do they affect your daily life?
2. Do you have a daily prayer practice? If so, what does it consist of? If not, what type of practice do you think would work well for you?
3. Does your congregation have a ministry addressing mental health? How important do you think it would be for your church to have one?

Lesson Five: Seeking Help

1. Rob mentions that he believes God himself has experienced depression, despair, as he takes on our human condition. How does this statement strike you? In what way do you think God suffers with us in our depression and mental illness?
2. What is your personal experience with or view of therapy? How valuable do you find it to be? In what ways? If you or someone you love has not tried it, how do you imagine it might be helpful?
3. In your view, how important is it to recognize and address the epidemic of suicide? What role do you think the Church can play in doing so?

The Takeaway

Lesson One: The Hidden Epidemic

Stigmatizing mental illness is an unfortunate part of our culture. We consider people with depression and other conditions as unstable, sick or distorted. But this doesn't really make sense in our faith lives. In our Baptismal vows, we promise to respect the dignity of each and every human being. Doing so means we look at others with compassion and don't dismiss their struggles. It's important to treat ourselves and others with mental illness with the dignity of God. Being able to speak our truths about mental illness gives us a sense of relief and unburdening, letting us know we are not alone. In Rob's experience, every household in our country and certainly every household in our congregations is touched, directly or indirectly, by mental illness. Being able to talk about our experiences lightens the load and allows us to share them with our church communities.

Lesson Two: Experiencing Depression

Taking time to be with God can help alleviate depression. God speaks to us in metaphor, just as Jesus does in the Parables. Finding metaphors to describe the state of our mental health can open doors to understanding it. In this lesson, Rob helps us to understand what it's like to experience depression firsthand, how it can live inside of us, and how we can make sense of it in our daily lives and in our church communities. He compares depression to a barbed wire cross buried inside of a tree that has grown through it. He points out how the poet John Donne praised God for being a metaphorical God and how this metaphor of the barbed wire in the tree can lead to healing. Like the Parables, which put unlike things together to tell a story, this fence and tree are an odd pairing, but they resemble a human one that reflects the exhaustion, heavy weight and weepiness depression causes.

Lesson Three: Aggression and Mindfulness

Do you ever find yourself or your loved ones feeling especially aggressive? Did you know that it can be a sign of depression? Aggression matched with depression can be a distorted attempt to alleviate the uncomfortable feelings that go along with mental illness. In this lesson, Rob teaches us about some of the signs of depression, the feelings that go along with them and how to find God's grace in them. The symptoms and feelings include irritability, hostility, lashing out and shame. He also discusses how mindfulness is a particular strategy to help cope with the difficult feelings that accompany mental illness, how simply moving one item can break through the heaviness and connect us with ourselves and God.

The Takeaway, cont'd

Lesson Four: Prayer and Self-Care

As we have learned in this course so far, depression and mental illness can take a serious toll on our spirits and well-being. Prayer and self-care are critically important elements in learning to live with and cope with mental illness. Some types of prayer practice include praying the Psalms and using Jesus' "I Am" statements from the Gospel of John. Having a prayer practice supports a healthy lifestyle, whatever situation in life you find yourself in. It is essential for those suffering with mental illness to ground in community, prayer and self-care. In this lesson, Rob talks about the divisive voice and elements in ourselves and society that threaten our self-worth and what we can do to counter them. In this way we avoid the division and feelings of unworthiness within ourselves that the "devil" of mental illness can cause.

Lesson Five: Seeking Help

Dealing with depression requires support. It can cause trauma in public situations, cause suffering and even suicide. Medication and therapy are tools that everyone in need should take advantage of. In this lesson, Rob talks about the dangers of suffering alone and the benefits of taking advantage of the best our health care system has to offer in the form of counseling and medication. Combined with a prayer practice and self-care, these tools can save lives. Each year in our country we lose more than 40,000 people to suicide, which is an epidemic itself. Reaching out to for help is a critically important ingredient in easing the strain of mental illness.

Resources

Books:

[With Sighs Too Deep for Words: Grace and Depression](#) (2020) by A. Robert Hirschfeld

[Without Shame or Fear: From Adam to Christ](#) (2017) by A. Robert Hirschfeld

[Jesus Wept: When Faith and Depression Meet](#) (2009) by Barbara Cawthorne Crafton

ChurchNext classes:

[Living a Spiritual Life with Mary Gray-Reeves](#)

[A Spring in the Desert with Frank and Victoria Logue](#)

[Developing a Rule of Life with Hillary Raining](#)

Grace and Depression

With Rob Hirschfeld

Participant's Guide

Welcome!

In this course, Rob Hirschfeld, bishop of the Episcopal Church in New Hampshire, author and workshop leader, discusses his own struggles with depression and encourages others to take mental illness seriously and as a part of our faith.

Rob's video lectures include:

- The Hidden Epidemic
- Experiencing Depression
- Aggression and Mindfulness
- Prayer and Self-Care
- Seeking Help

This course is ideal for those looking to learn more about depression and mental illness and how to include them in a life of faith.

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