



Mentally Calm, Spiritually Connected

The Interdependence
of Mind and Spirit

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CHAPTER 1

Mental and Spiritual Depression

As a world, COVID-19 caused a disruptive and traumatizing experience for nearly everyone. Fear of getting sick added to the anxiety of possibly losing a job or a business. Schools, businesses, and even churches were closed. We felt the isolation of social distancing combined with the distress of not being prepared if grocery stores ran out of food. We received continuous reports of the growing numbers of infections and deaths. This progression of disturbing news went on for weeks and filled us with a dread of what could happen next.

Depression, worry, and anxiety were increasing rather alarmingly long before the coronavirus made them worse. As a people in our busy, modern world, we had learned to deal with the normal challenges of earth life. But the coronavirus crisis was far from a normal demand, and its long-term effects have yet to be determined. Though most of us did enjoy some unexpected time at home with our families, the total effects of the coronavirus have not been positive. The entire population of the earth was frightened of the disease and the potential loss of jobs and income. So, how did you handle the stress? Have you suffered any long-term effects to your mental well-being?

Before you shrug and answer you are fine, how well do you know your own mind? Would you recognize a change in your thinking? I understand you live with your brain 24/7, but it doesn't mean you are well acquainted with it. You may portray yourself as an intelligent, capable individual with a bright future, but wonder internally how long you can keep this charade going. You may feel you have successfully attained your goals in life—and cannot fathom why you are so depressed that your doctor had to prescribe antidepressant medication for you. Or you may be worried about what's going on in the mind of a loved one. Watching your children struggle with the social pressures and demands of being teenagers can be heartbreaking. Watching your children continue to

battle the discordant voices in their heads into adulthood is even harder. Prayer does not always work the way we hope. This often leads to frustration and even anger at Heavenly Father, as only He can understand your child's thinking. Most of us need to be strong supports for family, employers, God, and others. Thus, we feel the continuing need to "have our heads on straight." But in a busy world beset by COVID-19, that expectation is getting harder to meet.

A theme of this book is that we must be more concerned with maintaining a healthy brain to hope to be able to maintain a healthy spirit. People will spend hours each week working out at the gym to maintain a healthy physical body. But few people spend time addressing their mental health. In the last few decades, it seems life has become so much busier and complicated that our brains are struggling to keep up. The effects of neglecting to care for our minds are revealing themselves in unexpected ways.

Before we are able to address the question of how your mental state affects your spiritual state, we need to define some terms. To assess the health of your mind and spirit, you need to know something about them. Thus, there will be a chapter on the brain, with succeeding chapters discussing your heart, consciousness, soul/spirit, and conscience. What *is* your spirit exactly, and where does it reside? Out of all the thoughts in your head, which one is actually the Holy Spirit trying to communicate with you? The definitions of such words as *heart*, *spirit*, *soul*, *consciousness*, and *conscience* are actually hundreds of years old. An update of our definitions of these parts of ourselves is needed. Hopefully, we can then discover for ourselves and for those we love how to protect our minds and spirits from the assault of a new and noisy world.

Perhaps you feel a little self-conscious about introspection of any kind. If you were preparing to run a marathon, you would certainly work out to ensure that your physical body was up to the task. In this overly busy world, your brain runs its own version of a marathon nearly every day. So you should probably check on it occasionally. To get to a place of mental calm, you must know where mental calm is. This requires you to turn your thoughts inward and find out what drives your mind to make its decisions. "Know thyself" is an encouragement to understand your own mind, to know your strengths, admit your weaknesses, recognize your moods, and understand your temptations. All these characteristics reside and interact in your brain, so it is good to become familiar with them.

Today we are witnessing unprecedented mental and spiritual depression. We will discuss some of the possibilities believed to cause these distressing trends. This book will not try to psychoanalyze the reader in any way. But this book will try to define aspects of your mental and spiritual sides that you try to keep coordinated every day. If you better understand the parts of you and how they interact, maybe it will help you to manage the whole. To do that, however, we must define and describe your heart, mind, conscious and unconscious minds, spirit, soul, and conscience. As a people, we are all struggling to deal with host of present-day challenges. To start our discussion, let's review some of the trends we are seeing in our society that reflect those struggles.

Depression

Depression is a generic term for a broad range of symptoms, only one of which is sadness. It is estimated that 350 million people are affected by depression worldwide.¹ In the United States, a 2016 survey found that 16.2 million adults had at least one depressive episode within the year.² The huge number of people who suffer from depression only adds to the frustration of trying to define it. Women are much more likely to suffer depression than men. Many people who are afflicted by depression have no idea why they are depressed. They often have beautiful homes, healthy families, and strong marriages. Why should they be depressed? There is nothing fundamentally different about the brain of someone dealing with depression and a person who is not. No brain scan, MRI, or EEG can diagnose depression. Exhibiting enough symptoms over a certain time period is the only way depression is diagnosed today. In any case, this rise in unexplained depression is a strong indicator of how critical it is to care for your own mental health.

Fortunately, medical researchers are learning more about depression every day. They have learned that depression is caused by numerous factors, everything from the organic chemistry that takes place in your neurons to how the different regions of your brain interact. Three specific brain segments appear to be most affected by depression. Three symptoms of depression—impulsivity, repetitive thoughts, and sensitivity to emotional events—originate in these three regions.³ We know something about the problems in brain chemistry suffered during depression by observing the effectiveness of different

medications. However, it is more difficult to determine what factors cause the brain to develop these malfunctions in the first place. The numerous definitions given for depression have added to the confusion of what it really is. The following quote seems to be one of the better descriptions I have read of clinical depression:

People often think that depression is just being sad all the time, but it's far more than that. In fact, people with depression do not necessarily feel sad—they often feel numb, like an emptiness where emotion should be. Hopeless and helpless. Things that used to be enjoyable aren't fun anymore: food, friends, hobbies. Energy plummets. Everything feels different, and it's hard to explain why, because it shouldn't be.³

One's susceptibility to depression is often genetically inherited. If your parents suffered from depression, you have a greater likelihood of falling into it yourself. You can't, obviously, change your genetics. Susceptibility can also be increased by environment. If you had a difficult childhood, depression is a mental response that may manifest itself years later. Again, plainly, you cannot change your past. Specific hormone imbalances can contribute to depression so the health of your body can also add to your susceptibility. In summary, it is important to recognize that you can control only a few of the causes of depression, but it is equally important to do whatever you can, starting with pharmaceutical treatments and behavioral counseling.

Whether its original cause is genetic, environmental, or hormonal, depression is manifested by faulty chemistry in the brain. There is no shame in such a chemical imbalance. But a stigma still exists for many people. A book on depression by Mayo Clinic physicians summarizes this issue: "Many people avoid seeing a doctor because they mistakenly associate a diagnosis of depression with a failure of willpower or character. Although the stigma associated with mental illness is lessening, lack of knowledge, worry as to how others will react and concerns about confidentiality still keep people from seeking help."⁴

Associating depression with spiritual weakness has roots from millennia ago. Depression, better known as melancholia at the time, is mentioned in writings from Mesopotamia in the second century.⁵ Melancholia was believed to be a spiritual malady rather than a physical condition. Worse yet, it was believed to be caused by demonic possession, so priests, rather than physicians, tried to cure it. Consequently, depression was often treated with beatings, physical

restraint, and starvation in attempts to drive the demons out. These theories and treatment continued through the Middle Ages. During the Age of Enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mental conditions came to be viewed as a weakness in temperament that could not be changed, so people with this condition were shunned or simply locked up. Since then, more advanced, though equally misguided treatments, were tried, including electrotherapy and lobotomies. Mercifully, in the 1950s, doctors noticed that a tuberculosis medication called isoniazid helped reduce depression in some people. This prompted further research into the use of drug therapies as a treatment for the condition. Pharmaceuticals and counseling became the standard therapy for depression, as it is today.

Depression is often measured by counting the number of people who suffer from a major depressive episode (MDE) in the course of a year. An MDE is defined as a period of two weeks or more of suffering symptoms of depression. The table below shows a significant increase in MDEs over seven years. From 2005 to 2011, depressive episodes were fairly constant. Then from 2011 to 2018, the numbers increased significantly for our younger generations (data from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA); 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health).⁶

MAJOR DEPRESSIVE EPISODES BY AGE

AGE	AVE. MDES 2005—2011	MDEs 2018	% Change
12–17	8.2	14.4	75.6
18–25	8.3	13.8	66.3
26–49	7.6	8	5.3
over 50	4.9	4.5	-8.2

As might be expected from this data, prescriptions for antidepressants have skyrocketed in the past several years. Why has depression drastically increased in young adults from the ages of 12 to 25 but has remained comparatively unchanged for older adults?

The Days and Times of Depression

It has been suggested that mental and spiritual depression may be due to disturbing political issues that cause people to worry about the future of their world and families. Indeed, we live in politically turbulent times. But so have countless generations of the past. Social issues could hardly be considered novel to our latest two generations. The women's suffrage movement began in the mid-1800s under the leadership of Susan B. Anthony and others. The liberation of Blacks began with the American Civil War in 1861, and efforts to remove bigotry and racial prejudice from our government and culture has been going on steadily since then. In 1951, Harry Hay formed the Mattachine Society, the first national gay rights organization. The Daughters of Bilitis, the first national lesbian organization, was founded in 1956. Attendance at anti-Vietnam War protests of the 1960s were above and beyond anything we see today.

Granted, we do have more access to breaking news than we have ever had before. When I was a child, I remember news was shown on television at 6:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. That isn't so today, of course. With cable news and our active social media outlets, breaking news is available at any hour. But, even in those olden days, you could always pick up a newspaper and read the headline news, though the stories were a couple of days old. In reality, life is no more political today than it was in any other time in the past century. With news being broadcast so widely and repeatedly, it is easy to think that we live in exceptionally turbulent times. News items are picked up and broadcasted by dozens of news outlets and are then evaluated by experts and other pundits in hundreds of television, radio, and social media outlets. Anyone can add their opinion to the mix through Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat—and millions of people do.

What major change in our society, mainly occurring in the first decade of

the 2000s, precipitated such dramatic changes in select portions of our population? This is an easily answered question, of course. Computer technology exploded at the beginning of the new millennium. Not surprisingly, these new computer science innovations have mainly affected our younger generations, without significantly changing the habits of our older population. Increased depression in our younger generations appears well correlated with the explosion of computer technology and the Information Age.

The Internet, Social Media, and All That Comes with It

The World Wide Web became publicly available in 1991. Email started being sent on America Online and other internet service providers in 1995. But, for those who remember, the start of the Information Age was dial-up internet, which was both slow and cumbersome. Broadband internet gradually replaced dial-up, and by 2007 half of all internet users had made the switch.

The Internet (and our fascination with it) grew as new capabilities were introduced. Google was incorporated in 1998. Facebook became available to customers in 2004. Twitter was founded in 2006, and Instagram was launched in 2010.

Obviously, the correlation of depression with the introduction of the internet and social media has been noticed by many researchers. Hundreds of books and blogs are dedicated to decrying the effect of the media on our children. For a long time, it was thought that sitting close to a television screen was harmful. This concern has largely been put to rest. Nonetheless, screen time has been affecting us in ways we are just starting to uncover. Every person with a cell phone and computer should think about the time spent looking at an electronic screen as opposed to the real world around us. Obviously, our electronics bring significant knowledge, news, and information into our lives. The Information Age is truly a great time to be alive! In a mere moment, you can find out about any fact, news story, Hollywood rumor, or weather report for anywhere in the world. Thousands of video games are available for your diversion. You can keep in continuous contact with friends and family through your choice of messaging. Indeed, electronic technology has made our lives much easier . . . yet much busier.

Due to our cell phones, tablets, and laptops, our brain is besieged by an onslaught of messages from all over the world. Billions of email messages and texts are sent every hour. With Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter you can read multitudes of opinions from everyone you follow—and many others you don't. We are subjecting ourselves to so many voices that it appears that our brains are being overwhelmed. We are starting to see the physical consequences of all this mental busyness. Our brains are exhausted. But we persist, thinking the energy-draining effects will only be temporary. Even if we recognize the negative effects of our media binging, we cannot seem to stop. Knowing the dangers of texting while driving, people continue to do it. Psychologists decry the effects that social media is having on our children, but is it too late for them as well? Can our youth ignore their social needs to continually text their friends? Look around you the next time you are in a public place. Teens and young adults are fixated on their phone screens whether they are walking, eating, or even talking to companions.

So, you may ask, what is wrong with socialization, following the news, or a little entertainment? Nothing would be wrong if we spent only an hour or two a day doing it. But the average teen spends more than *seven* hours a day in front of a screen⁷. Between work and home, adults average *eleven* hours a day—almost all of our waking hours.⁸ These hours of viewing, reading, texting, posting, and playing video games exact a price from your mental health. How fast can you point and click? Probably quite rapidly, so your screen probably changes rapidly and repeatedly. All that information, email, social posting, and gaming must be observed, mentally processed, and remembered somewhere. Your conscious brain is bearing the brunt of that overwhelming chore. Though it can be a lot of fun being constantly plugged into the internet universe, it may be pulling you down at the same time. How can that much time doing anything *not* affect your brain? What is the price of all that screen time? Is the content of all of that posting and communication uplifting and inspiring? Is it making you a better person?

This discussion will not be allowed to devolve into an attack on cell phones, the internet, or social media. Such an attack would be fruitless, because all three are here to stay. Given that fact, it is up to each individual to decide how much screen time is really necessary and how much becomes detrimental to your well-being.

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