

## LIGHTING UP DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

Most parents are concerned at some point that their teenager will become tangled up in drugs or alcohol and cause life-long damage. According to the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health published by the US Department of Health and Human Services, serious depression is on the rise. Suicide is now the second leading cause of death for adolescents aged 15 to 19, rising above homicide and coming in second to motor vehicle fatalities. The long-term risks associated with depression and anxiety can no longer be pushed aside.

### Risk-taking Behavior Declining

Alcohol and illicit drug use are on the decline with 24 percent fewer high school seniors consuming alcohol than in 1991. However, from 2007 to 2017, the total number of teenagers who recently experienced a depressive episode rose 59 percent. While both boys and girls experience depression, girls are almost 3 times more likely to struggle with depression than their male peers. For perspective, in a 40-person youth group, at least 5 teenagers have experienced a major depressive episode in the last school year. Researchers are working to determine what's behind the increase. In a study done by the Pew Research Center last fall, 61 percent of teenagers age 13-17 said "they personally felt a lot of pressure to get good grades" and roughly 30 percent said they felt "a lot of pressure to look good and fit in socially" (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/12/a-growing-number-of-american-teenagers-particularly-girls-are-facing-depression/>).

### What Does God Say?

As Christians, we believe "nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38a), including suicide. As United Methodists, our Social Principles state: "We believe that suicide is not the way a human life should end. Often suicide is the result of untreated depression, or untreated pain and suffering." The Bible speaks to how we handle pain and suffering—from the way we name our experiences, to the hope we encounter in Christ, and ultimately to the coping skills we need to overcome a seemingly overwhelming obstacle.



### TIP FOR THIS ISSUE

Because adolescence is characterized by puberty, many depression symptoms might be brushed off as general teenage moodiness. In the past, the church's mantra of "pray more, worry less" has left behind a narrative that depression is cured by having a stronger faith. Both of these assumptions endanger the mental health of young adults. While it's common to feel down or rejected, depressive symptoms lasting longer than two weeks should be brought to the attention of a caregiver. Research and compile a contact list of licensed clinical therapists in your area who work with teenagers and keep on hand for teens and parents in your ministry.

# TEACHER BIBLE PREP



## A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

**Question of the Day:** Who do you talk to when you are feeling down?

**Purpose:** To give teens a theological framework for processing depression and anxiety in their lives and in others' lives.

**Cultural Connection:** Rise of Depression in Teenagers

**Topic:** Navigating Depression and Anxiety

### OUT OF THE PIT

#### Psalm 40

*I put all my hope in the LORD. He leaned down to me; he listened to my cry for help. He lifted me out of the pit of death, out of the mud and filth, and set my feet on solid rock. He steadied my legs. —Psalm 40:1-2*

#### Commentary:

There are fewer words in the Bible better at describing depression than those found in Psalm 40. In the NIV version, “the pit of death” is translated as “the slimy pit.” The image of depression being a clingy, inescapable thing is so powerful because depression and anxiety themselves feel inescapable. The imagery reveals something that requires wrestling; a pit is deep, dark, and terrifying. The psalm continues with a plea for salvation from the never-ending torment the psalmist is experiencing. These are words that can be offered as a prayer in the throes of emptiness, loneliness, and despair. In psalms of lament such as this one, God’s faithfulness is always mentioned. It’s as if the author is reminding God of God’s promises while also reminding himself of what God is capable of doing. This psalm ends without a resolution and with a cry for help.

#### Questions to think about:

- ▶ Have you ever found yourself in the slimy pit?
- ▶ What phrases describing depression and anxiety do you see in this psalm?
- ▶ Are you comfortable with how this psalm ends? Why or why not?

### HOPE IS BUILT

#### Hebrews 11

*Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don’t see. The elders in the past were approved because they showed faith. —Hebrews 11:1-2*

#### Commentary:

The adolescent brain comes preconfigured with blinders, making it difficult for teens to see past immediate circumstances. Christians are a people of hope, and Hebrews 11 tells the story of hope that we come from. Finding a way to relate with those that have gone before, along with the trouble they faced and their willingness to go on, our blinders are slowly removed. The ancestors of our faith put one foot in front of the other because they believed in what God had told them. The evidence is spelled out in the rest of the chapter. Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Jacob, Joseph, Rahab, and more all longed “for a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (verse 16). Each one had this desire coursing through his or her body as if it were blood itself, and through them, God created and reconciled.

#### Questions to think about:

- ▶ If faith is the reality of what we hope for, what do we hope for?
- ▶ What fears or uncertainties hold you back?
- ▶ Where has God been faithful in your life so far?

### HOW TO COPE

#### Genesis 9:8-11, 18-23

*Noah, a farmer, made a new start and planted a vineyard. He drank some of the wine, became drunk, and took off his clothes in his tent. —Genesis 9:20-21*

## Commentary:

While drug and alcohol abuse are declining in teens, numbing tactics are still tempting for teens who face minor or major depressive episodes. In Genesis, Noah watched everyone he knew die in front of him as the waters rose. The things he must have heard and seen in his dreams are unsettling to even imagine. But he survived and had to deal with the psychological consequences on the other side of the Flood. Noah developed an unhealthy coping mechanism and found himself in an even worse position.

Some of our teens and their friends have witnessed horrors we can't even fathom and professional counseling must be recommended. While not all students may be exposed to the underbelly of human nature, there are a supply of pressures in all teenagers' lives that can feel oppressive and inescapable. Learning healthy coping skills can help teens experiencing mild or major depressive episodes to feel more in control. Also, discussing therapy and medication in a faith-based setting removes the religious stigma that often surrounds seeking professional help for mental health issues.

## Questions to think about:

- ▶ How do you handle a bad day?
- ▶ Why is it important to learn how to process negative emotions?
- ▶ What coping skills do you carry in your back pocket?



## DEVOTION: HOPE IN THE FUTURE

Depression and anxiety aren't problems reserved only for young people. Many adults carry invisible scars from their life-long battles. Before beginning the lesson, conduct a body inventory, starting from your head and working down to your feet. Tighten then release any tense muscles, unclench fists or jaws, and relax your body from top to bottom. Set a timer for 5 minutes and close your eyes. Focus on your breathing until the timer goes off.

*Spend some time reading Hebrews 11:1-31.*

The individuals in the Hall of Faith trusted God to uphold God's promises, putting their hope in a future they never fully experienced. Still, they persevered.



Noah survived and had to deal with the psychological consequences on the other side of the Flood.

- ☉ On a separate sheet of paper, list the obstacles you have already overcome. Beside each one, note where God was present. Pray over your list and give thanks to God.
- ☉ Next, list everything you believe God will do. Can you see where your hope resides? Pray over this list and thank God for being a God of hope.

**NEXT WEEK:** Usain Bolt is one of the most electric runners ever seen, setting and breaking records left and right in his career. Next week in LINC we'll talk about his example of overcoming obstacles as inspiration for doing the same in our faith.

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Writer: Audrua Welch Malvaez

Editor: Kevin Alton

Production Editor: Pam Shepherd

Template Designer: Micah Kandros



LINC  
LIVING IN CHRIST

**Getting Ready:** You will need copies of Youth Page 6, pens or pencils, Bibles, paper, a rope with the mid-point marked, painters tape, music, flashlight, candles, matches or lighter, and a device for showing a YouTube video.

**Before the Session:** Use painters tape to mark a dividing line on the floor for tug o' war in the opening activity. Lay the rope perpendicular to the tape with the middle marker in the center of the taped line.

## OPEN

### Musical Chairs Tug O' War (10 minutes)

Ask students to stand in a circle around the rope on the floor. Explain that instead of dividing into two teams to play tug o' war, the taped line on the ground will determine who pulls which side of the rope. Tell students to walk in a circle around the rope while the music plays. When the music stops, players will run to the rope on their side of the line and begin pulling. After a team wins the tug o' war, resume the music for a second round. Play at least three rounds.

Regroup and ask students how they felt about the chaos of the game. After some response, ask teens to raise their hand if they thought the teams were fairly balanced.

Then say: "God created us and our brains as good and beautiful. As teenagers, your brains are growing very quickly, creating new connections and new emotions. Occasionally, there's an imbalance of power in the brain that can leave us feeling overwhelmingly sad or tightly wound. In certain instances, this imbalance is beyond our control and requires outside help. But often, we can regain balance to our brain with our own efforts. It's important to know what's going on, what we can do, what God can do, when we need help, and how to find help."

## EXPLORE

### Talk Topic 1: The Pit of Death (20 minutes)

#### Middle School Option

Begin by asking students to share a favorite song lyric. After some response, say: "Song lyrics are poetry set to music. They help us put language to our emotions and organize them. The Bible has a whole book of lyrics that we can use to talk about our feelings and relationships."

Invite students to close their eyes. Read aloud Psalm 40 twice, pausing for silence between readings. Hand out copies of Youth Page 6. Re-read Psalm 40 and invite students to write words that stand out to them in the space provided on Youth Page 6. Ask for volunteers to call out words, then ask:

- ▶ What does it mean to be depressed?
- ▶ What phrases does this psalm use to describe depression?
- ▶ What does the psalmist believe about God?

#### High School Option

Ask students what they know about and how they would describe depression and anxiety. After several responses, read aloud Psalm 40 while students follow along in their Bibles. Say: "The psalms give us language to pray when we can't find the words. Sometimes finding the right words can give us a sense of control over a situation."

- ▶ How does the psalmist approach God in this passage?
- ▶ What do we learn about God? the psalmist?
- ▶ How do you think the story ends? Why?

Hand out copies of Youth Page 6 and pens or pencils. Invite students to write a personal psalm using the prompts provided. Play soft background music while students work. When finished, call on volunteers to read aloud their psalms.

### Talk Topic 2: Light of Hope (20 minutes)

#### Middle School Option

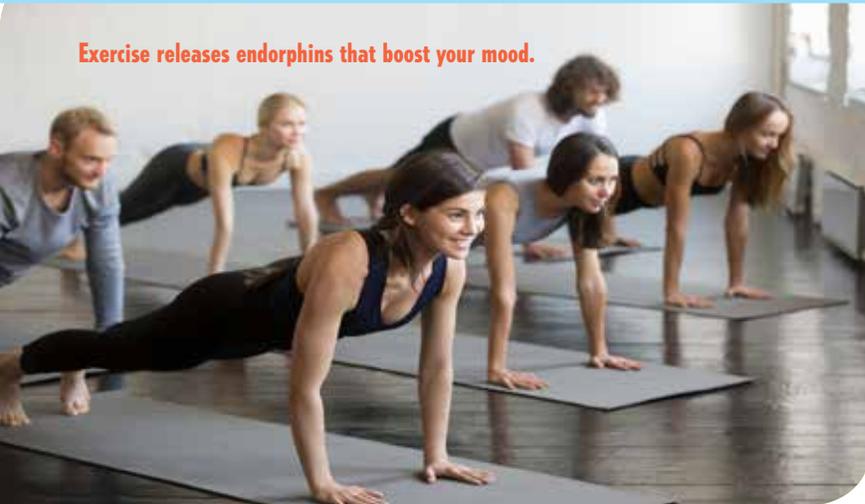
Say: "Depression and anxiety come from a sense of hopelessness. But one thing we can control is our sense of hope." Call on a volunteer to read aloud Hebrews 11:1-2. Ask students to define *faith* and *hope*. After a few definitions, form small groups and ask teens to open their Bibles to Hebrews 11. Point out the different characters mentioned in the chapter and allow each group to choose a character from the passage and answer the following questions about him or her:

- ▶ What did the person believe about God?
- ▶ What did the person trust would happen? hope for?



# FACING DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

Exercise releases endorphins that boost your mood.



- ▶ What obstacles did the person face?
- ▶ What kept the person moving forward?

When groups are finished studying and answering, call on each to report its answers.

## High School Option

Turn off all the lights in the room, and invite students to close their eyes and sit in silence for a few moments. After a bit, ask teens to describe the darkness. After several have answered, turn on a flashlight and again ask teens to describe the darkness. Finally, turn on the lights and, with eyes still closed, ask teens again to describe the darkness.

Now ask students to open their eyes and say: “Depression can feel like total emotional darkness. The fuel for the fire that lights our way out of the darkness is hope.” Call on a volunteer to read aloud Hebrews 11:1-2 and another to read 11:8-16. Then ask and discuss:

- ▶ What is the difference between hope and faith? How do they work together?
- ▶ What obstacles did Abraham and Sarah face, and how did they overcome them?
- ▶ How is Abraham and Sarah’s hope similar to your own? How is it different?

## BONUS SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Hand out candles, one per student, and invite teens to think back over any obstacles they have already overcome. After a few moments, invite them to think ahead about the obstacles that await them, known or unknown. Now ask students to look up if they begin to feel nervous or anxious while thinking about the future.

As students look up, light their candles. When a few have been lit, explain that the candle is a reminder that there is always enough light to put one foot in front of the other. Our hope in Christ can fuel our candle of faith, and someone will always be around to help if our light goes out.

## Talk Topic 3: Coping Skills (15 minutes)

### Middle School Option

Call on a volunteer to summarize the story of Noah and the ark. Also ask for two volunteers to read aloud Genesis 9:8-11 and 9:18-23, one passage each. Ask and talk about the following:

- ▶ What did Noah experience that might have made him want to get drunk?
- ▶ What does getting drunk accomplish?
- ▶ How do you handle strong emotions or intense pressure?

Say: “Healthy coping skills can keep our bodies strong and our minds calm. When you are stressed or angry, an easy way to alter chemicals in your brain is exercise. The body releases endorphins that boost your mood.” Show the following video and lead teens through this short yoga routine together: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Td6zFtZPkJ4>.

### High School Option

Ask students to tell what they know about depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Then summarize the story of Noah and explain where in the story our focal Scripture begins. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 9:8-11 and another to read 9:18-23, then ask:

- ▶ What is Noah avoiding by drinking?
- ▶ What is another way Noah could have processed his experience?
- ▶ What’s bad about numbing painful feelings? Why does it seem like numbing might help at times?
- ▶ When should a person seek professional help?

As a group, brainstorm a list of coping skills, sorting them into unhealthy and healthy categories. Remember to include professional therapy and doctor-prescribed medication. As the flow of ideas begins to ebb, ask teens to identify skills they have personally tried and that worked. Compile a master list of the successful skills and give to students.

## TAKE AWAY

“Creator God, you have given us beautiful, complex brains that don’t always work in our favor. Give us wisdom to decipher the lies depression and anxiety tell us. Teach us how to show ourselves grace and forgiveness. Fill us with courage to ask for help. Draw us close so we can find peace and rest in your love. Amen.”

# WORKING IT OUT

## WRITE YOUR OWN PSALM

Write a personal psalm using the prompts below.

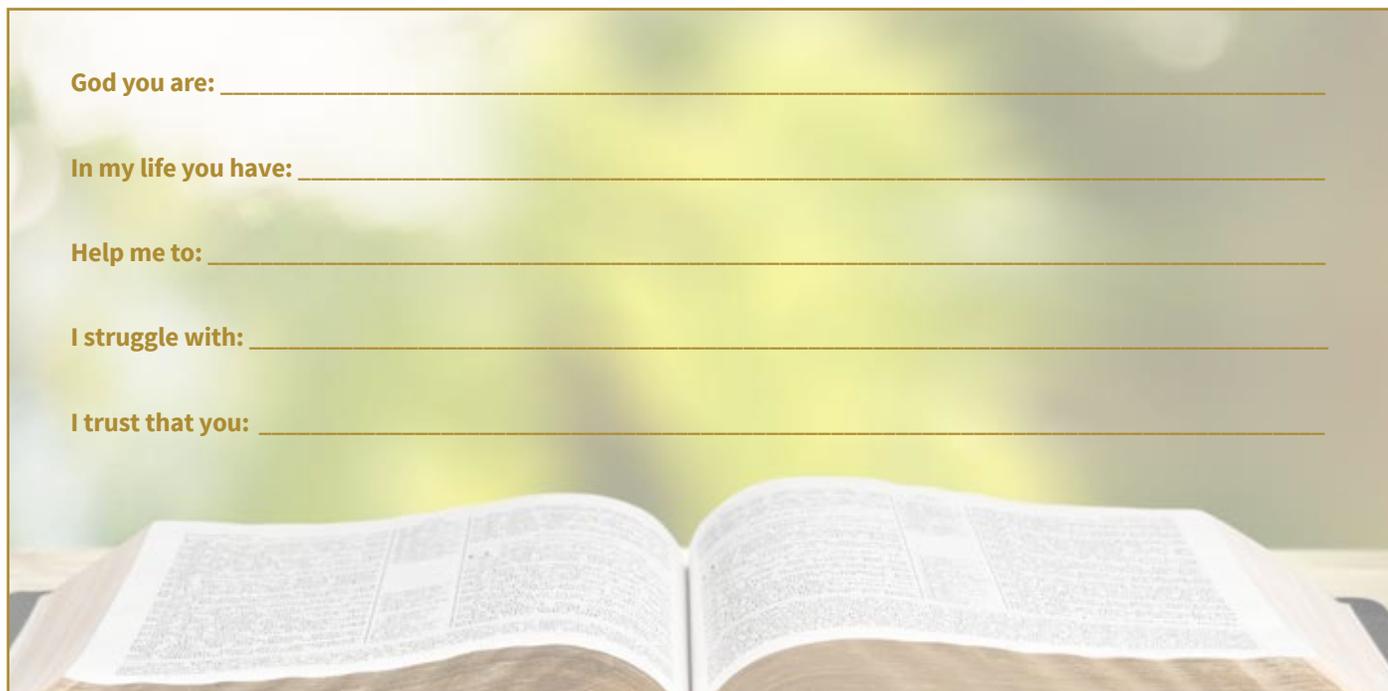
God you are: \_\_\_\_\_

In my life you have: \_\_\_\_\_

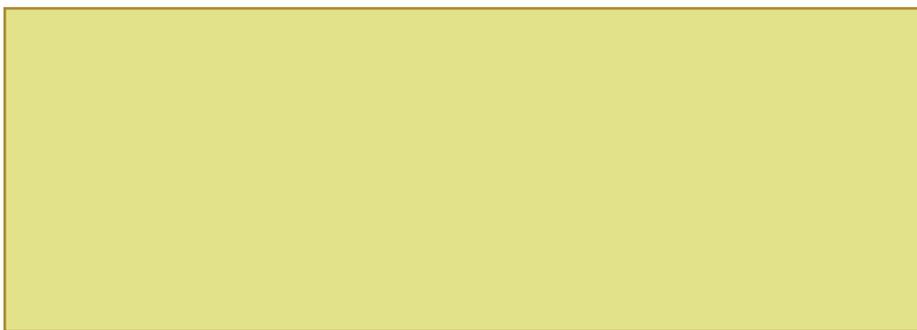
Help me to: \_\_\_\_\_

I struggle with: \_\_\_\_\_

I trust that you: \_\_\_\_\_



In the space below, write words that stand out to you while listening to Psalm 40.



### Inherit the Mirth



### In the Bible: Readings for the Week

**MONDAY:** Read Romans 8:26-28.

The Holy Spirit intervenes when we are weak.

**TUESDAY:** Read Isaiah 40:19-31.

It's OK to be tired. God will carry you.

**WEDNESDAY:** Read Psalm 23.

God comforts and provides even in the darkest moments.

**THURSDAY:** Read Jeremiah 29:11-14.

Seek God with your whole heart, for God has good things in store.

**FRIDAY:** Read 1 Peter 5:6-9.

God can handle your anxiety.

**SATURDAY:** Read 2 Timothy 1:6-7.

The Holy Spirit gives us strength and perseverance.

### WHAT'S TRENDING?

What do you say to encourage yourself? Tweet or post your response with the hashtag #stayingpositive on Twitter to @YMPartners or on facebook.com/youthministrypartners