

## **Marriage: Laughter, Depression & Seeking Connection**

*In this article, Fr. Andrew Barakos discusses the way in which a Christian seeks out help with regard to mental health and wellness.*

Marriage, now that's an adventure!" It was a spontaneous remark I made during a sermon which resulted in an outburst of laughter. The remark revealed a connection being made between everyone who has been onboard the great adventure called marriage. In the article, "The Benefits of Laughter: Why laughter may be the best way to warm up a relationship (Psychology Today, Hara Estroff Marano, published on April 29, 2003)" the author wrote the following:

"But of all the elements that contribute to the warm atmosphere of a good relationship, there is one that seldom gets translated into advice or even therapy, yet is something that everyone desires and most people would like more of: Laughter. It's a safe bet that most of the laughs married couples get ... don't emanate from the relationship. More important, they don't feed it ... But homegrown laughter may be what ailing couples need most. Uniquely human, laughter is, first and foremost, a social signal - it disappears when there is no audience, which may be as small as one other person - and it binds people together. It synchronizes the brains of speaker and listener so that they are emotionally attuned. These are the conclusions of Robert Provine, Ph.D., a neuroscientist who ... observed thousands of incidents of laughter spontaneously occurring in everyday life ... Laughter establishes--or restores - a positive emotional climate and a sense of connection between two people, who literally take pleasure in the company of each other. For if there's one thing Dr. Provine found it's that speakers laugh even more than their listeners. Of course levity can defuse anger and anxiety, and in so doing it can pave the path to intimacy."

Laughter binds people together and creates an emotional connection. St. John Chrysostom spoke about the benefits of laughter as something that assists in comforting people who may be depressed or sorrowful. "But (one says) what harm is there in laughter? There is no harm in laughter; the harm is when it is beyond measure, and out of season. Laughter has been implanted in us, that when we see our friends after a long time, we may laugh; that when we see any persons downcast and fearful, we may relieve them by our smile...Laughter has been implanted in our soul, that the soul may sometimes be refreshed... (Chrysostom: XV Homily on Hebrews)."

Recently, Robin Williams, a genius of laughter, decided to take his own life. After a life-long battle with alcohol/drug abuse (27% experience depression), a diagnosis of Parkinson's (50% experience depression) and all the temptations of being rich and famous, his life culminated with an apparent "spontaneous" suicide (Depression is the cause of over two-thirds of the 30,000 reported suicides in the U.S. each year. White House Conference on Mental Health, 1999). There may not have been a goodbye note or any typical signs of giving away valued belongings, but hidden beneath everything was a battle between life and death in which death won. St. Paul wrote about an "un-

holy” sorrow. “For the sorrow in accordance with God works out repentance to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world works out death. [2 Cor. 7:10].” Un-holy or worldly sorrow has deep spiritual root causes. Knowing these causes and the deceptive slippery slope of allowing one’s thoughts to persist in doom and gloom only makes depression worse.

### **Seeking Medical Treatment, Counseling and Support Groups for Depression**

Seeking medical treatment, professional counseling and participating in support groups are vital to seeking relief from depression. At the same time, it is recommended to receive spiritual guidance from one’s parish priest so that he may make available the tools and wisdom of the Church in combating depression. 80% of people who seek medical treatment for depression show improvement (Depression & Bi-polar Support Alliance: <http://www.dbsalliance.org>) however; two of three people suffering from depression do not actively seek nor receive proper treatment.

### **On Being Watchful of Thoughts**

Elder Thaddeus taught about a great transformative power when God’s grace works in conjunction with our desire to change our thinking and not allow ourselves to pursue negative, destructive, self-deprecating thoughts. “We long for absolute good and absolute peace with all our heart. In reality, we long for God. God is life, God is love; He is peace and joy. In our hearts we long for God, but in our thoughts we oppose Him...Thus, we long after God in our hearts but oppose Him in our thoughts. Our opposition cannot harm God, for He is Almighty, but it can certainly harm us. Our thoughts, moods, and desires set a path for our life. Our thoughts reflect our whole life. If our thoughts are quiet, peaceful, and full of love, kindness, and purity, then we have peace, for peaceful thoughts make possible the existence of inner peace, which radiates from us. However, if we breed negative thoughts, then our inner peace is shattered.” (Our Thoughts Determine our Lives: the Life and Teachings of Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnic, Platina: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2009).

Usually something takes place which destroys joy, inner peace and happiness. It most often is an experience of a loss; the death of a spouse, a child, loss of a career/wealth/financial security or a diagnosis of an illness. Elder Thaddeus teaches that we have a choice to either allow our thoughts to follow the waves of the storm or to allow them to settle in the harbor of God’s grace and presence. The Church offers “spiritual practices” which act like inoculants which fortify the soul before the storms come. These practices, “ways of thinking” or “mind-sets,” are contra intuitive – they go against logic. Have a holy-sorrow which does not lead to despairing and losing hope but leads one back to God. If God is with us, nothing can prevail against us.

The discipline is spoken about in many different ways, ‘taking up one’s cross,’ dying daily,’ ‘fasting,’ or simply living a life which empties itself of worldly attachments and

luxuries. St. John Chrysostom puts it this way: “He (God) can take away your life without your consent, but His will is to do so with your consent that you may say with Paul, ‘I die daily.’ (I Cor. 15:31). He can take away your glory without your consent and bring you low: but he will have it from you with your own good will that you may have a reward. He can make you poor, though unwilling, but He will have you willingly become such, that He may weave crowns for you.” (Chrysostom, I Corinthians, Homily, X). In other words, the more we live a life of giving our pain to Christ, giving our sorrow to Christ, giving our anxiety to Christ the more we in return feel connected and not abandoned by God.

### **Get Behind me Satan!**

When we are assailed by destructive, negative thoughts let us know they are not from God and resist them by saying, “Get behind me Satan!” Elder Thaddeus continues: “Here is what the Holy Fathers say about thoughts: ‘If thoughts that take away our peace assail us, know that they are from hell.’ Such thoughts must not be accepted. They must be banished immediately. We must struggle for our own good and strive for peace to take root in our souls—peace, joy, and Divine love. Our Heavenly Father wants all of His children to have His divine properties. He wants us to be full of love, peace, joy, truthfulness, and kindness. He wants us to be able to comfort others. We also want to become meek and humble, for only such a person radiates goodness and kindness. . . .You see now why our thoughts must change.”

### **Worship & Paraklesis as a remedy for Depression – “Most Holy Theotokos, Save Us!”**

Giving in to evil thoughts, entertaining them and holding conversations with them, empowers the thoughts against us; the end of which is spiritual death (the death of the soul) which opens the door to physical death and suicide. At some point, anyone who has taken their life has allowed themselves to go down this wormhole of depression. Chrysostom remarks: “Since in us also surely there is a light, the light of reason, ever burning. But if the spirit of wickedness coming eagerly on with its strong blast quenches that flame, it straightway darkens the soul and prevails against it, and despoils it... but thenceforth, having that deceit as a tyrant over him, he comes to be easily vanquished by sin; and there is raised up before his eyes as it were a wall without windows, which suffers not the ray of righteousness to shine in upon the mind... (Chrysostom, Homily XI, I Cor.)” The church even provides a remedy should this path of hopeless be taken, Christians have turned to the Virgin Mary, as the mother of all Christians and sought her prayers to save us from the peril that was of our own creation.

If we pay attention to the hymns of Paraklesis it becomes quite clear these are prayers of Christians on the edge of despair and hope. The point of these services is to flood our minds and thoughts with the healthy form of “godly-sorrow” which leads us to repentance. The more we allow ourselves to hear the audible prayers, the more these thoughts dominate our own, the more we may experience healing and transformation. It should also be noted that when we worship we do so as a community and not in

isolation. This is another remedy to overcoming depressive thoughts that immobilize us and seek to isolate us from others.

### **Seeking True Connection Joy and the Presence of God**

Finally, the Church is the gift of the Eucharist, the celebration of coming into the presence of God. This takes place through the act of giving thanks for everything God has done and continues to do for our salvation. "The source of false religion is the inability to rejoice or, rather, the refusal of joy, whereas joy is absolutely essential because it is without any doubt the fruit of God's presence. One cannot know that God exists and not rejoice. Only in relation to joy are the fear of God and humility correct, genuine, fruitful... The first, the main source of everything is 'my soul rejoices in the Lord...' (Fr. Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*)." Worshiping God is therapeutic in that it gives us a taste in this world of the hope set before us in the next world. Every form of loss finds its restoration in the presence of God that we find especially as we gather to worship Him. It is His presence which makes all the "insane" comments of St. Paul make sense: "When reviled, we bless; when persecuted (by evil thoughts), we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly... (I Corinthians 4:9)." It is His presence which turns sorrow into joy.

In Christ's love,  
X Fr. Andrew