

TENTMAKERS

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DEPRESSION

by Gary North

This word "depression" has two popular meanings in American life. The first refers to a psychological condition. people are described as depressed who are dejected, pessimistic, unable to take effective action, and seemingly paralyzed by external events. The second meaning was coined, oddly enough, by President Herbert Hoover, when he described the economic slump of the early 1930's as a depression, a word which he hoped might become an alternative to "panic" or "crash." As it turned out, the term became widely used by critics of the economic policies of the Hoover Administration. An economic depression became the great bugaboo of American voters.

Both definitions are fitting. When an economic slump of the magnitude of the 1930's hits—and it was the worst slump in modern times—psychological depression becomes widespread. The man who is deeply in debt and today, this would include virtually the entire middle class—is faced with humiliation when he loses his job. He has bills to pay. He has normal living expenses to meet. He loses the camaraderie of his fellow workers at the plant or office. He faces his burdens alone, and repeated failures to land a job in the same income bracket or status position as his former job may lead him to despair. He loses face in his own eyes. He fears losing face in the eyes of others. The market has, in effect, voted away his dreams. He becomes a failure, at least temporarily.

These signs of depression in a person are familiar to psychologists: inability to concentrate on real-life problems, yet concentrated attention on the disaster; inability to take decisive action; long periods of staring into space; shuffling gait; and worry. Men are unable to take the steps necessary to extricate themselves from the crisis which has hit them.

When a man loses his job, especially when he has served the company faithfully, he is likely to suffer guilt pangs. Why did the firm reject him? What did he do to deserve this? How had he failed? He seldom analyzes the market itself. He fails to take note of the fact that consumers have switched to a competing firm, or the management of his company had failed to forecast the present conditions of the market. He sees the failure as personal—a defect of his character, or a failure of performance.

When the economy throws millions of men out of work at the same time, he may be able to console himself, since the forces that removed him from the labor market are more visibly impersonal (distant). This external environment produced his misery. Nevertheless, if he has grown pessimistic about his ability to rebound in the face of mass unemployment, he can grow so depressed as the men who lost their job in the midst of an economic boom.

Therapy

The most successful therapy is to find a better-paying job with higher prestige. That's a very difficult form of therapy for unemployed workers. What they have to face first is the reality of their

position: temporarily unemployed. The accent is on the word "temporarily."

Anyone who has to counsel a person who has lost his job has to be able to recommend concrete steps. Employment professionals generally emphasize the same basic steps. The first thing the unemployed person must do is to get back into the job-search market. He has to get those resumes into the mail. He has to get on the phone to old contacts. He has to get to an employment agency, or onto the pavement, looking for work. He has to knock on every door, because good jobs do not generally strike out of the blue. They are the result of effort spent in pursuing them. This does not mean that we always find a job out of the list of prospects that we drew up when we began looking. Very often, we "fall into" a job. But had we not been searching energetically, the opportunity might never have appeared. Some friend tells a friend, who tells a cousin, and the next thing we know, we receive a phone call. But the original friend had to know that we were looking for a job.

A man knows that he has done all that he can when he gets through with ten hours of job hunting. The guilt syndrome is badly likely to overwhelm him when he is taking every possible step in search of a job. Guilt paralyzes men, and every step possible to cut off guilt at the beginning is a positive step.

A man who is pounding the sidewalks is also demonstrating to potential employers that he is serious, that he continues to function under pressure. This is a positive sign to any potential employer.

The man who is busy looking for new opportunities cannot spend a lot of time worrying about his plight. He has so little time for morbid introspection that he is far less likely to fall into a downward spiral of psychological depression. Introspection seldom accomplishes anything positive. Our focus should be outward, toward the world which is to be overcome. Hard work, a strategy of action, and true determination count for more than a pathological examination of a man's faults, weaknesses, and fears. Pessimism has deeper soil when it feeds on introspection.

Jay Adams emphasizes that we must break bad habits. We have to avoid those familiar circumstances that produce evil behavior on our part. If we get together with other people who are equally depressed, and we spend our time discussing our shared inability to overcome external circumstances, then we find reinforcement for our own failure. We get the opportunity to justify our own lack of discipline. To escape this mutual reinforcement, we have to avoid these get-togethers. In other words, if we find that certain environmental settings produce defeat, then we have a moral obligation to avoid these settings.

Checklists

One way a counselor can help the unemployed head of household is to sit down with him and draw up lists of daily tasks that have to be

performed to keep the household going. Another list of potential employers should be drawn up. The man should be encouraged to search out employment handbooks, such as Austin Marshall's *How to Get a Better Job* (Hawthorne Books, 1964). Any city library will have a whole section on job seeking.

These checklists have to be used. A man should be required to accomplish several important tasks each day. If he is taking the time of a deacon or other church official, then that official has the right and obligation to see to it that the person being counseled has taken concrete steps to improve himself. If he has received advice, then he should have put it into action. Constant counselling of someone who refuses to take the suggested steps, once they have been agreed upon by the person being counseled, is futile. The counsellor is simply serving as an unpaid listener, someone to participate in the self-reinforcing downward spiral of despair. But if the person has made progress, has begun to follow the outline, then he deserves encouragement. He is taking the steps to escape the downward spiral.

Checklists should be prepared every evening by the job seeker. He should list each activity to be accomplished, in the order of importance. The items on the top of the list must be finished, or at least begun, at the end of the following day. A daily tally is mandatory, with a brief description of what the results were under each entry. This lets the man review his accomplishments, and it also serves the counsellor as a guide to the man's daily self-discipline, which is crucial to his Psychological stability.

These lists can be used by anyone, of course. One professional time management expert, Al Lakein, recommends the making of lists in his useful book, *How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life* (New American Library, 1973). It keeps people productive simply by helping them to sort out priorities. They can accomplish those things that are most important to them. He recommends a lifetime goal list, as well as intermediate and immediate goals. He thinks people should be able to measure their success and failure in achieving a sustained program to finish their goals on time.

Money

If the unemployed man has fallen behind in his monthly payments, he may need temporary financial aid from the church. The church has to determine what the man really needs. This means sitting down with him and drawing up a basic minimum budget. He has to allocate his funds sparingly, down to the last few dollars. (A perfectly accurate budget is wasteful; it takes too long to draw one up, let alone stick to it perfectly.) However, if a man is wasting funds, then the deacons have an obligation to help him reduce costs, and if they are financing him in any way, this obligation is on the church members, as well. They are not to use the church's funds in order to finance a wasteful, undisciplined member.

The man's whole family should be included during at least part of this counselling session. Everyone in the family should understand just how important it is to reduce expenditures.

It may be necessary to contact creditors and offer them an extended time repayment plan. They probably don't want the merchandise back, especially in a recession. It is far better for them to be receiving a reduced but regular payment than to have to go out and bring used merchandise back to the store. If the creditors know that the situation is temporary, that the man is actively engaged in a job search, and that a board of deacons is advising him, then they probably would be willing to accept a reduced but regular monthly payment schedule.

A man must be forthright in presenting the deacons a complete picture of his financial position, if he comes to them for a loan. They should have an opportunity to counsel the man on the possibility of selling some of his assets to raise money. When the church is asked to finance a family, its representatives have the right to make judgments about whether or not the family is truly in need. To ask other members to support one family, if that family has assets in reserve, is to place too great a burden on the givers. The church's finances are limited.

Prayer

The head of the household should be encouraged not to depart from his responsibilities as the family priest. He should lead family prayer, read the Bible, and otherwise demonstrate his leadership. This is important for his self-esteem and for maintaining his confidence. Prayer time with the wife is advisable, to bring the decision-makers closer together during a period of stress. This is not the time to make things more difficult by family squabbles.

The church should be asked to pray for the family, possibly by actually naming the family (with the consent of the head of the household), but at least the congregation should be alerted to the problems facing one family. This upholds the family in a time of crisis.

Psychologists classify personal disasters according to their effects on the victims. The most serious crisis is the death of a mate or child. Second, the loss of a job. Third, a move. When man faces the second, and also faces the prospects of the third, they are under considerable stress. It can affect every other aspect of a man's life. It is at this point that he gains support from the congregation. He needs help if he is to pull himself out of depression, and the congregation, as the representative of God, can give him assurance of this outside support.

Those who are employed may have difficulty in sympathizing with the unemployed man. We all presume that someone can always get a job. But "a job" maybe nothing like the one the man had. He has to reset his sights; he has to give up old hopes; he may have to move to a smaller house. He has to build a new world for himself if the job he is offered is too different from his old one. To expect a man to deal with these problems by himself is expecting too much. The man with a job takes it for granted; the man who has lost his can take nothing for granted until he is employed. In that interim period, men need to gain confidence in the reality of Romans 8:26.

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