

# Is Depression A Sin?

## A Psychological Perspective on Church Models Of Mental Illness



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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper is about the perspectives on depression from different models and how they affect congregants. The paper will answer the question “is depression a sin?” It will be using the Christian psychological perspective to argue that depression is not a sin. This article will go over what the different perspectives are and how they are helpful or harmful. It will then go on to argue depression is out of control and not desired by those who experience depression. Those who experience depression also do not have an equivalent to sin; personal sin does not cause depression. Final argument will be to help those in the church and urge them that depression is meant to help us grow closer to God. By understanding the question “is depression a sin?” We can discover how to help struggling congregants and destroy unhealthy models.*

**KEYWORDS:** *depression, mental illness, psychology, church models*

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It cannot be seen, it is not heard, and is hidden away behind the veil of the skull: Depression. Churches today and in the past have been dealing with congregants that experience depression, but sometimes the church's responses are harmful. The real underlying question of the church's harmful response: Is depression a sin? Psychological views of depression have different perspectives than that of church models. Research says that depression cannot be fully controlled by those who experience it. Another argument is looking at whether depression correlates to a person's sin. Finally, depression and its hardships can be used to bring that person closer to God. Overall, Christian psychological research on depression points toward depression not being a sin. Depression is not a sin as it is a sickness that is out of the person's control. Depression can be used to bring them closer to God.

### Depression Perspectives

The view suggesting that depression is a sin is generally straightforward. Different parties believe that sin equates to depression while others do not. Traditional church models and some modern models view depression as a sin. There is even literature out there providing arguments to support this claim such as “a book aimed at lay Christians in which he stated that one cause of depression might be sin” (Sorenson, 2012, p. 344). Watts, Nye, and Savage (2002) also say that “there have been historical changes in the ways people handle emotional problems. The cultural norm used to be to suffer in silence” (p. 166). Alternatively, Scrutton (2011) makes an interesting case in saying that depression is voluntary. This can be helpful to understand the depressed experience, however, she does not include extreme cases of depression in this thought process (p. 2). Her claims are intriguing, and the overall stance taken in her book is a helpful way to look at depression. Scrutton (2011) claims that depression is a sin, but not in the traditional

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“guilty” manner (p. 3). She says that sin is a byword for human brokenness that does not imply guilt, moral responsibility, or the power to do otherwise, but simply points to the Christian belief that depression is not part of the fullness of life that God desires for God’s creatures (Scrutton, 2011, p. 3). Labeling depression as a sin, stemming from the fallen world, demonstrates that it is not of the kingdom of God, therefore He does not want it (John 16:33). The article also says that depression is not an individual sin, but a result of society:

A second [reason] is that sin should be understood primarily in a corporate rather than individual sense, and that depression is often caused by oppressive and dysteleological social structures. On this account, understanding depression in terms of sin does not impute blame to the person with depression. (Scrutton, 2011, p. 3)

Overall, even through the perspective of calling depression a sin, it is not original sin, but a result of a fallen world. Depression is a sickness that is not voluntarily obtained, therefore providing evidence that depression is not a sin.

### **Depression Cannot Be Controlled**

One simple, but strong point is that those who have depression cannot fully control it. The question of whether depression is a sin, can be answered through psychology. *Grace for the Afflicted* by Matthew S. Stanford (2017) goes over classifying different mental and neurological disorders for holistic care and approach in ministry. Stanford (2017) defines mental disorders as the “results from a complex interaction of biological (nature) and environmental (nurture) factors” (p. 35). This can also be supported from solely medical perspectives as gene makeup has been researched to prove influence or cause of depression. Genes cannot be picked by the person experiencing depression but simply received from their parents. This can cause a multitude of imbalances neurologically which affect the person's mental health (Cai, et al., 2020, para 6). Genetics not only affect neurological processes but also affect one's natural reaction to environments, in some ways a person's brain can overreact to a situation causing effects of depression (Saveanu & Nemeroff, 2017, p. 60). Also, it can be considered that traumatic experiences affect mental health leading to depression that are not onset by those who have it. Overall, the consensus is that those who are clinically depressed cannot control whether they have depression or not.

### **Depression Does Not Correlate to Individual Sin**

The second argument for depression not being a sin is that a person’s sin does not correlate to depression. Those who commit the same sin as those who have depression do not automatically get depression. Sorenson (2012) research shows how people draw from the biblical perfectionism which states we must eradicate all sin from our life (p. 349). This is not a helpful view as Sorenson (2012) makes the point that if someone is aware of continuous sin, they would try to eliminate that sin (p. 349). Someone with depression would desire to get rid of their sin to finally feel better but this is impossible as sin is consistent on earth (Sorenson, 2012, p. 349). This is unachievable, making someone with depression even more discouraged about recovery or being a participant in a church. This furthers the point that no one can achieve the perfect model of a Christian that churches hold for their members. Scrutton (2015b) points out that people with depression do not have greater sins than someone who do not have depression (p. 8). She also makes the point that those with depression and have consistent sin habits, their sins may stem from past trauma and problems that also have onset their depression (Scrutton, 2015b, p. 8). Naturally at first when you compare two people and their sins are similar, you would not notice anything extremely different about their composure. But below the surface one person can be

struggling with depression even though outwards their sin and face value are the same. It would be helpful to see more research done on the correlation between people who have depression and those who do not and their sins. This would help provide evidence for the theory that an individual's sin does not equal someone's depression. By doing so the church can gain a better understanding of the correlation between sin and depression. Once again depression is not caused by sin, as people who do not have depression experience and participate in the same sin as those who do.

### **Depression Can Bring People Closer to God**

The final answer to the question of whether “depression is a sin” is that depression and its hardships can be used to bring someone closer to God. Stating that depression is meant to bring us closer to God is declaring the opposite of what sin does. Sin pulls us away from God and ruins our relationship with him. It is also stated in scripture the position God has in our lives and the care he seeks for us; common depictions of being a healer, fortress, or safe place. It states in Psalm 25:16-18 (NIV) “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart and free me from my anguish. Look on my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins”. This is also demonstrated in Lamentations where people also were experiencing depression; many people can relate with as it states God's heart for those people (Lamentations 3). Scrutton (2015a) explains three perspectives on depression: spiritual illness, spiritual health, and potentially transformative (p. 275).

First of the three perspectives is spiritual illness which is the idea that mental illness is in concordance with sin (Scrutton, 2015, p. 275). Scrutton scratches out spiritual illness but makes strong arguments for both spiritual health and potentially transformative perspectives. Spiritual health is the view of depression being part of those who have mental illness as a journey with God (Scrutton, 2015a, p. 277). The potentially transformative view is that those with depression do have negative effects but can use it to still strive to be closer to God (Scrutton, 2015a, p. 280). Scrutton's (2015a) potentially transformative view is a helpful viewpoint for those who are depressed. This keeps the perspective in check, but also offers a chance for those who are struggling to grow, and “maintains that depression is inherently bad (in the sense of undesirable) and refuses to idealize the suffering that accompanies it” (p. 282). This understanding should push churches to guide followers to grow with Christ instead of disapproving of them. “[The church] exacerbate the depressed person's feelings of blame, lead to judgmental and alienating behaviors on the part of communities who might otherwise be a source of support, and induce apathy in relation to social injustice” (Scrutton, 2015a, p. 12). Those who might need the most help are being pushed away. On the contrary to church models Sorenson (2012) calls for the church model to change creating a safe environment for churches to guide the congregant and demonstrate God's love to those congregants who are suffering (p. 350). Previous results of holistic care and their positivity have been proven by psychiatrists that look at a multitude of resources from multiple church settings, such as Pargament and Lomax (2013) that demonstrate how people seek churches first for help and are more likely to get help from professionals when in a caring environment (p. 27). This can be helpful to heal these congregants as walking with God has scientifically proven to help those with mental illness (Lomax, 2013, p. 27). Christ can use our times of need to bring us closer to him, taking the bad and making it good. Depression is not a sin as it can be used to bring us closer to God.

### **Conclusion**

Depression is viewed as a sin in some Churches and is considered bad or undesirable. On the contrary, as many Christian psychologists point out, depression cannot be a sin. Those who experience depression do not decide if they want depression. Those with depression do not commit sins that correlate with their mental condition. Being closer to God can be found through the struggle of depression. The need to address this topic is pertinent, as many pastors are leading their parishioners to thinking they are helpless sinners, when in fact they are not, and need more help navigating life just like everyone else. Depression, the monster hiding behind the veil, is not in fact a beast, but just another obstacle of life that some people need help with. This is not a result of their human downfall, but of a broken world.

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