

7 days of practicing joy

daily devotions for managing depression

Day 1

Psalm 19:14 “May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

God cares about what we say and what we think about. However, it is not just for His sake, it is for our own as well. If you spend ten minutes of every hour focused on all the things you’ve done wrong in your life, you are likely to feel depressed by the end of the day. If you trade those ten minutes of negative thinking for ten minutes of meditating on God’s promises that you have worth, you do two things--meditate on what is pleasing in God’s sight *and* start to feel better about yourself based on God’s truth. In doing so, you spend ten minutes each hour doing something that is both pleasing to God and healthy for yourself.

Practicing joy means focusing on God’s goodness even when we don’t feel like it. It means choosing to say aloud “I am going to be okay” even when you don’t feel like it. It means doing things we don’t feel, holding onto hope that we will feel it sometime in the future. God’s ways are *always* healthy for us. Start trading words and thoughts that might not be pleasing to him for those which are pleasing to him, and you will find they are helpful to you as well.

God, help me to meditate on healthy things today. On your things. Help me to trade my negative thoughts for thoughts about your goodness toward me.

Practice joy in your thinking: Whenever you find yourself in a negative thinking pattern, trade those thoughts for things that are both true and helpful. Not just true, but true and helpful.

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Day 2

*Psalm 34:8 “Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.”*

Find something that you like to eat. Taste it. What do you enjoy about it?

Find something that is pleasing to the eye, perhaps a picture of a loved one or a scenic place. Focus on it. What do you enjoy about it?

God gave us our senses so that we can use them to his glory. Moreover, using our senses to his glory helps us to “see that the LORD is good.” Using your five senses in any experience deepens that connection. Whether it be a good or bad experience, your sense of smell, taste, touch, sound and sight are working in each moment, collecting information and guiding you to certain emotions. If you can pay attention to something that smells good, you might activate my dopamine receptors and pleasure arrives, even if only temporary. If you can pay attention to something that looks pleasing to the eye, you might activate your serotonin receptors and smile for a few minutes. Activating these receptors—even through temporary means—gives them exercise and builds your brain’s ability to use them more often. This makes the neuron connections stronger and gives them more chances for future use where you might not need to try so hard.

Our five senses give us a deeper experience of God’s creation. Our experiences with these created things give us a glimpse into the God who created them. Take time today to “stop and smell the roses”—perhaps literally! Take time today to enjoy what God has created, to taste and see that he is good.

Lord, thank you for the good things around me. Help me to see, feel, taste, touch and smell them.

Practice joy by taking small moments throughout your day to see, feel, taste, touch and smell the good things around you that God has provided. Let this turn into a moment of gratitude for his goodness.

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Day 3

Psalm 92:1-2 “It is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High, proclaiming your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night.”

One of the goals in these devotions is to teach you how to pay attention to how you spend your mental time and your physical time. Do you spend time wallowing in despair, or doing your best to focus on healthy thoughts? Do you spend your time lying in bed, or going outside to smell some roses? Do you spend your time complaining to God (once in a while is okay!) or are you able to then move into praise? The Psalmist spends time complaining and worrying, but he eventually moves into songs of praise and acknowledgement of God’s character and faithfulness.

I’m not going to tell you to stop complaining or worrying. It happens. I am going to suggest that you keep those moments short and make the effort to move into words of praise and proclamations of how God has been faithful to you. This is practicing joy. It is both acknowledging the bad and choosing to focus on the good. Spending more time in these moments helps us throughout the day. It is good for us to praise God, for his sake and for our own.

Lord, when I’m feeling down I don’t want to praise you. Help me to do so even when I don’t feel like it, and bring to mind the ways you have been good to me.

Practice joy by trading negative thinking time for health thinking time. You won’t be able to trade the whole day, but a few minutes here and there can get you on the right track. If you need a suggestion, try writing down a few helpful things to think about in place of negative thoughts:

“God is with me, and I know this because...”

“God is good, and I know this because...”

“God is faithful, and I know this because...”

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Day 4

Psalm 139:23-24 “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Depression is often connected to unresolved anger or guilt. With anger, we might try to ignore or push away the realities of being hurt by another person, only to let those realities grow and fester in our hearts. In turn, our hearts become bitter and hopeless, eventually leading to depression. With guilt, we might try to ignore or push away the realities of wrongdoing, only to let those realities grow and fester in our hearts. In turn, our hearts become self-deprecating and hopeless, eventually leading to depression. In either case, the lack of unresolved anger or guilt leads to long-term consequences.

Resolving anger means first acknowledging the hurt that happened to you (with God, and possibly with another caring person) and then working on forgiveness. Resolving guilt means first acknowledging where you have hurt others (with God, and possibly with another caring person) and then working on accepting God's grace of forgiveness. To hold onto either anger or guilt is to work against God's plan for our lives. He never meant for us to hold onto these. Instead, he offers freedom when we surrender these to him.

Listen to your thoughts and see if there is any unresolved anger or guilt. Then, take these to God and ask him to help you let go of them so you can live life in the freedom of his grace.

Lord, I've been holding onto these things from the past. Help me to let go of them into your caring arms, and to take from you your offering of grace and forgiveness.

Spend time offering each past hurt (whether done by you, or toward you) to God by holding out your hand to him. Each time you find yourself ruminating about it, practice joy by reminding yourself that you have already offered this to God and he has offered you grace and forgiveness in return.

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Day 5

2 Thessalonians 3:11-12 “ We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat.”

Several passages in the New Testament call out believers for idleness. In the previous verses to the passage above, Paul gives testimony to the work that he and his friends were doing in ministry. His caution is that some were becoming tired of the work and simply killing time with “busyness” rather than doing meaningful things.

Depression is often coupled with idleness. A person becomes discouraged, causing him to withdraw from people and usually from meaningful work. This isolation only leads to more discouragement and contributes to depressive emotions. The depressive emotions cause him to withdraw even more, perpetuating the cycle of depression, isolation and hopelessness.

Engaging in meaningful work is a healthy and effective way to combat depression and isolation. Find ways to serve in God’s kingdom, regardless of how “small” it seems. Offer to greet people on Sunday mornings at your church, look for a ministry that feeds homeless people, or spend an hour at the grocery store helping older people with their groceries. By engaging in work that serves other humans, you not only honor God with your service but you also get the human connection that is necessary for our ongoing emotional and spiritual health. When we do things for others, we feel better. God designed us to thrive in service.

Lord, show me one person today who can use my help.

Practice joy in your service to others. Look for one person today that could use a little help and take time to help them. Or, engage in a local ministry or charity project.

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Day 6

Matthew 7:-5 “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

Everyone struggles with something. Humans struggle with anger, depression, anxiety, fear, alcohol, food, gambling, pornography...you get the picture. However, what we struggle with varies from person to person. If we start to compare struggles as “better than” or “worse than,” we miss the point that God wants us to trust in him regardless of our struggles. By comparing, we add either pride or shame, neither of which directs us to God.

People who struggle with depression are very good at feeling shame, oftentimes because they have been taught to feel shameful about depression. Others will say, “Just snap out of it!” or “If you really trusted God, you would have joy instead of depression.” You can’t just “snap out of it” (otherwise you would have done so) and you trusting God isn’t so easy when you are always feeling down. Then, you start to question your faith. *Do I trust God? Maybe I don’t really know him! Maybe I’m not a faithful believer after all...*

The shame added by others hinders healing, instead of helping healing. So, we need to let go of statements like these from well-meaning, misguided people and cling to truths that God gives us. Let’s start with a basic truth that God is love. If God = Love, then we can read the following, well-known passage in a very different way:

1 Corinthians 13:4 “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

Lord, thank you for being patient with me and slow to anger. Help me to be patient with myself and to trust that you are healing me.

Practice joy by speaking God’s truth aloud. Recite the verse from 1 Corinthians 13:4 aloud with a name of God (God, Jesus, Yahweh, etc.) in place of “love.” Think of this throughout your day when you find yourself feeling hopeless or ashamed.

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Day 7

Mark 10:51 “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.”

Somewhere along the lines, we got the idea that God doesn't care about listening to our desires. We seem to think he isn't interested in the details, just in how we are obeying him. But if we look at the life of Jesus, we see this is far from the truth.

Jesus's main purpose for coming to earth was to save people from their sins. If God only cared about this and was not personally invested in our lives, Jesus would have only done this and nothing else. However, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are packed with story after story about Jesus healing people from spiritual and physical diseases! The very nature of God is to care about how each of his children is doing, yes, even on a physical and emotional level.

In Mark 10:51, we read about Jesus' interaction with a blind man. Let's be clear, Jesus knew the man was blind before he approached him. However, he also gives the blind man an opportunity to speak to his (very obvious) desire: “Rabbi, I want to see.” Notice that Jesus doesn't shame him for asking for physical healing instead of some spiritual request. He's not that cruel. Instead, in the very next verse we read: ““God,” said Jesus, ‘your faith has healed you.’ Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road” (10:52).

Jesus cares about you. He cares about your hurts, your shortcomings, your struggles, and yes, your depression. Take time today to be honest with him about what you want and let him guide you in whatever way he feels is best. Trust that he has your best interests at heart.

Lord, thank you for caring about me. Today I ask for ...”

Ask God for what you want today. Then, follow him and see where he leads you as he answers your prayer.