

ELLEN WHITE

# DEPRESSION AND MENTAL HEALTH

If anyone knew the depths of despair—as well as the aid and counsel of God in its midst—Ellen White would be among those who could claim both experiences.

"For years I have been afflicted with dropsy and disease of the heart, which has had a tendency to depress my spirits and destroy my faith and courage. ... I had no desire to live, therefore I could not take hold of faith and pray for my recovery," she recounted.(1) But following prayer by pioneering ministers J.N. Andrews and J.N. Loughborough, "the depression, the heavy weight, was lifted from my aching heart," she wrote.(2)

Ellen understood that her lifelong health struggles, related to the near-fatal accident(3) she endured at age 9, had an effect on her emotional state. But she also experienced depressed feelings in times of good health. Some of these were related to her sensitivity over issues in the church. At other times, she described how the painful loss of her three-month-old child, John Herbert, brought on a "despondency and gloom [which] settled upon me."(4) She would encounter other losses in her life, not least the passing of her beloved husband and co-worker, James. In a letter to Elder Haskell in her retirement years, Ellen White wrote this personal counsel on how to deal with thoughts of depression, "Do not be discouraged and disheartened. I am sometimes greatly perplexed to know what to do, but I will not be depressed. I am determined to bring all the sunshine into my life that I possibly can."(5)

How did Ellen White combat thoughts of doubt and depression? She turned to the Bible and its accounts of Elijah, David, Paul and Jesus, each of whom had their own crises and "dark moments"(6) She stated, "If the Bible were read more, if its truths were better understood, we should be a far more enlightened and intelligent people. Energy is imparted to the soul by searching its pages."(7) She also "learned that support from family and friends can be invaluable," and "recommended the benefits of outdoor activity, gardening, enjoying nature, and simply praising God."(8)

It should be noted here that when talking about depression and its resolution, Ellen "was not diagnosing mental states as a licensed psychiatrist might do today after a patient's thorough examination,"(9) and it must be emphasized that those suffering major or clinical depression would do well to avail themselves of medical treatment. But for those who are merely facing life's burdens and challenges—from personal circumstances, illness, or other causes—her counsel

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to recall God's goodness as documented in Scripture, and to cultivate a positive disposition through activity and praise, can be valuable aids in recovery. "The relation that exists between the mind and the body is very intimate. When one is affected, the other sympathizes. The condition of the mind affects the health to a far greater degree than many realize. Many of the diseases from which men suffer are the result of mental depression. Grief, anxiety, discontent, remorse, guilt, distrust, all tend to break down the life forces and to invite decay and death."(10)

In 1903, to her son Edson, she wrote, "With the continual change of circumstances, changes come in our experience; and by these changes we are either elated or depressed. But the change of circumstances has no power to change God's relation to us. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever; and He asks us to have unquestioning confidence in His love."(11)

That confidence sustained Ellen in many of her darkest moments and it can do the same for us today.

(1) White, Ellen G., *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 1, p. 185., cited in Poirier, Tim, "Ellen White and Depression," *Adventist Review*, Jan. 3, 2017, <https://www.adventistreview.org/1701-58>

(2) *Ibid.*

(3) See "Early Life and Traumatic Accident," Ellen G. White Estate website, <http://dev-egw.ellenwhite.org/articles/72>

(4) White, Ellen G., *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, p. 296, quoted in Poirier, *op. cit.*

(5) White, Ellen G., Letter 127, 1903.

(6) Poirier, *op. cit.*

(7) White, Ellen G., *Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene*, p. 126.

(8) Poirier, *op. cit.*

(9) Poirier, *op. cit.*

(10) White, Ellen G., *Counsels on Health*, p. 344

(11) White, Ellen G., Letter 150, 1903, <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/8140.2000001#1>, cited in Poirier, *op. cit.*