

‘Encountering Depression: Frequently asked questions answered for Christians’

Andrew and Elizabeth Procter

SPCK: London, 2012, ISBN 978-0-281-06472-4

Book Review by Irene Poiner

I was asked to review this book because I have been through depression myself - although not presently. Therefore, I read it with the thought: would it have helped me and the people around me at the time?

Further, as someone with dyslexia, I soon put books down that are ‘hard going’. I did not put ‘Encountering Depression’ down, finding Andrew and Elizabeth Procter’s approach interesting, informative and most of all practical. Their ‘user friendly’ style makes this self-help book accessible for everyone. In addition, I found it new on an Internet book site for £3.70 and at that price (or even £7.05, the highest price I found) it’s very affordable.

What I like most about ‘Encountering Depression’ is its flexibility. The person with depression can use whatever he or she can cope with at the time. This is achieved by dividing the 20 short chapters into sections:

Information: Simply-put answers to the chapter title questions;

Inspiration: Uplifting stories or helpful quotations, to help the person with depression start thinking positively;

Meditation: A helpful chosen reading from the Bible, to think/pray about;

Perspiration: Simple, easy to do exercises; aiming to bring some pleasure back in life.

The person with depression can use what the authors call the ‘butterfly approach’; dipping in and out and using what works for them. If I had been given this book when I was depressed, I would have looked first at the ‘Perspiration’ sections as I needed something to get me out of bed!

Moreover, the different sections in each chapter: helps remove guilt (*in Information*); lets the person with depression know they are not alone, and that the depression will end (*in Inspiration and Meditation*); and gives them something they can ‘do’/a purpose to their day (*in Perspiration*). (Action gives the feeling of being able to do something about depression, instead of it doing something to you).

I was pleasantly surprised to find 'Encountering Depression' was not a big, daunting book, which would have been the first stumbling block to me picking it up in the first place. On opening it and seeing its structure, my fears subsided and I enjoyed reading it. The way it is written enables you to use it in whatever way works for you. For example, you could just focus on all the 'Perspiration' sections. I am a slow reader, but I read the whole book over a couple days; each chapter taking me 15 minutes; so if you were only reading one section it probably would not take more than 5 minutes. If you are struggling to read, that is not too much to ask someone to read to you instead; and for you to be able to take it in.

I was glad to see the inclusion of two chapters on how family, friends and the church can help. I have experienced members of a church I used to go to, unable to accept that anyone who is a Christian can be depressed. This belief led to several members of the church with depression either trying to hide it or leaving the church. These chapters are very helpful, clearly showing how family, friends and the church can support the healing process rather than hinder it. For instance, the authors explain that it is normal to experience whatever you are feeling towards the person with depression, even irritation; the importance of a support network for the family as well as the person with depression; underlining the need to be practical; being prepared to be in there for the long haul; and warning about pitfalls the church might fall into.

The authors are credible because this book has been written both from their personal, first-hand experience of depression and in their professional roles of counsellor and consultant psychiatrist, helping others through it. This book is a collection of what they have found to be most helpful, put in a way that is workable on lots of levels, and written with the confidence it can help lead to recovery.

At the time when I was first depressed, I was not a Christian - I did not have a relationship with God. However, fortunately for me at the time, my mother helped by doing naturally just what is suggested in many of the 'Perspiration' exercises. She came and stayed, but allowed me to 'just be'; she listened to me when I wanted to talk; she stayed silent when I didn't (occupying herself, so I didn't feel guilty about not entertaining her); she played games with me; she went for walks with me; she made me food so I ate healthily and she took me on holiday; in short, she was 'there for me'. I do believe that had I not had the support of my mother, a book such as this would have aided my recovery.

Moreover, being now a committed Christian, I can understand the relevance of the questions raised in this book - for example, 'does my depression come from a lack of faith?', 'is it the devil's work?' and 'why can't I pray?' are questions that would go through my mind as a Christian; so the importance of them being aired and answered is crucial. I have a friend suffering from depression at present and I am going to give her a copy of this book. I would also give it to non-Christian friends with depression, but I think the relevance for them would need more explanation or they would not get past the cover. For anyone with depression not fortunate enough to have a friend, relative, church or doctor give them 'Encountering Depression', I can recommend buying it for yourself.

Irene Poiner is a Behaviour Support Teacher with Worcestershire County Council