

# Providing Support and Help #3 Uncovering and Challenging Sin

## Overview

Our aim in this session is to help us think through how we can identify sinful motives and desires of the heart in those suffering from depression, such that we can speak the gospel, call them to repentance and offer gospel hope.

This is an area we can find difficult, the interaction between mental health and sin is complex, the suffering of depression is significant and we can fear getting it wrong.

This session will have three parts:

1. Introduce a model to help us locate sin within the experience of depression.
2. Consider a case study to think about how we might identify and address sin.
3. Review the benefits, problems and outstanding questions we have.

# 1 The Relationship Between Sin and Depression

## Question 1

A church has a member who has been increasingly struggling with depressive symptoms for a number of months. As things have become worse they've approached their church leaders for help and advice. Feeling out of their depth the church leaders have sought counsel from you in good faith. They want to know how they can work out whether the struggle this man is facing is a spiritual or medical problem. Is this something that is a result of a broken body/ mind, a spiritual depression, or sin?

**What would you say and why?**

## 1.1 Simplistic Approach

There are often two tendencies that can take us in an unhelpfully simplistic direction; lean towards a biological explanation or lean towards a spiritual explanation.<sup>1</sup> In a more familiar framework, these can overlap with whether we primarily see someone as a sufferer or a sinner.

<b>Biological</b>	<b>Spiritual</b>
<b>Positives</b>	
Recognises broken bodies/ minds	Recognises relationship with God
Avoids false guilt	Highlights responsibility to others
	Possibly increase agency
<b>Problems</b>	
Tends towards victim-hood	Illegitimate guilt
Minimises agency	Assumes bodily health
<b>Sin excluded</b>	<b>Tend toward sin-hunts</b>

### Question 2

**Which way are you more inclined?  
Is there anything you would add to the table?**

<sup>1</sup>In some sense it would be right to say that all depression is spiritual, because it impinges on our spiritual life. Here I'm using it to refer to an explanation which sees sinfulness as the sole, or nearly sole, root of depression.

## 1.2 A Better Approach - Unity of the Person

“Every act of man is seen as an act of the whole man. It is not the soul but man that sins; it is not the body but man that dies; and it is not merely the soul, but man, body and soul, that is redeemed in Christ.” (Berkhof 1938, p. 192)

When it comes to uncovering and challenging sin in those with depression it’s best to see the spirit and the body working in a bi-directional unity.<sup>2</sup> That’s to say we want to think about the whole person acting together as a person that is both biological and spiritual at root.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively we could think about it as operating on the threshold of the soul and body, at the point of interaction between the two.

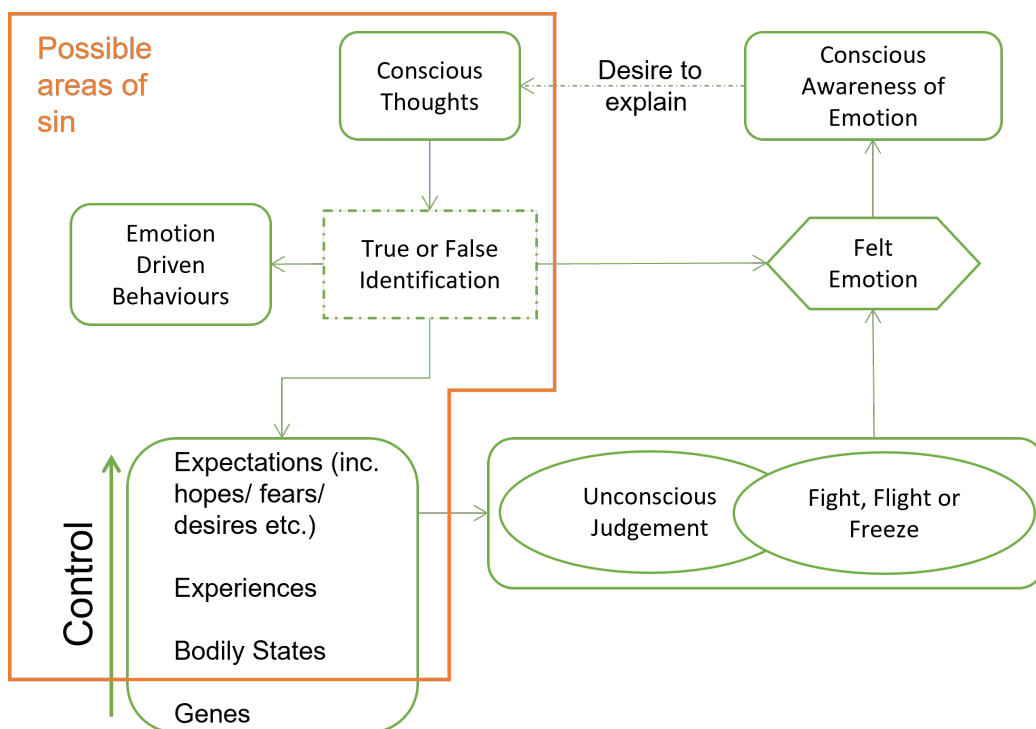


Figure 1: Schema illustrating the interactions at the interface between the body and soul. This figure is edited from LaPine (2020, p. 348), most of the work is his.

<sup>2</sup>I’m using spirit and soul interchangeably for our purposes today.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example Matthew 10:28, where the concern is with both body and soul together in judgement and salvation.

## 1.3 Some Implications

1. Be curious, don't assume.
2. Seek to understand enough, not everything.
3. Recognise varying levels of responsibility.
4. Give gospel hope, not false hope.

## 2 Case Study

Harry and Beth are a couple in their 30s, Christians, who have been struggling in their marriage.

Beth describes feeling low and having no motivation. She awakens after a restless night much earlier than normal. Immediately her thoughts go to whatever is happening that day and she feels overwhelmed. During the day she is more withdrawn than usual, often sitting staring into space, her eyes welling up with tears. She isn't getting through tasks as she normally would. Her family find the situation frustrating. Beth is a Christian and knows that God is with her but is really struggling to feel the assurance of her salvation. She can't shake off a sense of guilt and when people try to encourage her she just feels worthless and useless. A year ago she suffered a traumatic birth. She is trying a graded return to work. She would say she feels depressed. Some mornings, when she awakens to a crying baby, she just wants to stay in bed.

Harry, her husband, feels low in mood a lot of the time. He is irritable and gets frustrated at the smallest things. His sleep isn't great either. He can't understand why Beth can't just pick herself up. He tries to reason with her that a Christian shouldn't feel depressed like this because of all the Lord has done for her. But he doesn't seem to get anywhere, gets angry and ends up shouting. He's worn out with the burden of childcare falling his way and feels resentful that God is letting this happen in their lives. He would say that 'Beth isn't the only one' who feels depressed and has 'given up' praying about it.

### Question 3

**What do you make of Beth and Harry's differing experiences of depression?**

**In particular, where and how might we identify sinful motives and desires of the heart?**

### Question 4

Take some of these heart issues and consider how the Lord speaks to each of them. Consider not just the content of what the gospel says, but how you might speak it to each as individuals.

**How might you call each to gospel hope and repentance?**

### 3 Overview and Questions

#### References

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