

Depression in a world of faith

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Many ministers who smile on the outside are withering inside. Some struggle even to put it into words. But counseling professionals know precisely what to call it—depression.

Research indicates up to 68 percent of ministers are dealing with symptoms related to depression.



Katie Swafford, director of Texas Baptists' Counseling Services. Ministers and depression has been discussed increasingly in recent months—particularly after Matthew Warren, the son of pastor and author Rick Warren, possibly the nation's most prominent evangelical leader, committed suicide.

Warren indicated his son battled depression. The pastor and his wife, Kay, also acknowledged struggling with depression. In recent years, Texas Baptist life has been dotted with ministers who have committed suicide following extended bouts of depression.

Ministers daily help other people through trying situations—marital strife, financial struggles, addiction issues or a variety of other troubles, noted Katie Swafford, director of [Texas Baptists' Counseling Services](#). It's easy for them to begin taking on the weight of those problems without realizing it.

The situation is compounded by the nature and perception of serving as a

minister, Swafford noted. Church staff members sense people want to believe their spiritual leaders have all the answers and have their lives together.

“Ministers get depressed for a variety of reasons,” Swafford said. “It could be long hours, periods of high stress, family issues or the emotional toll of serving. They’re susceptible to the same pressures as the rest of us.”

A ‘dark terror of a disease’

Kelly Petty’s husband, John Petty, former chairman of the Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Board and senior pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Kerrville, struggled with depression for a number of years. In 2011, he took his life.

“It’s a dark terror of a disease rising to epidemic proportions in our country,” she said. “I believe it’s one of the most common emotional problems in America, and it must be addressed by people worldwide.”

Her husband, a psychology major at Baylor University, took all the suggested steps to deal with his depression. He was following the proper protocol to fight the disease by consulting with medical professionals and counselors, taking the prescribed medications and exercising regularly to help regulate serotonin levels. He was doing all he could do, and yet he was not able to win this battle.

She watched as this disease altered her husband—a leader and pastor many Texas Baptists knew was loving, gregarious and warm, she noted. He made friends most everywhere he went and made people feel they were special—to him and to God. When the depression was strong, he became withdrawn and distant.

“It changed him, and I saw the light in his eyes disappear,” she said. “It overtook him.”

Ministers may be particularly susceptible

Ministers may be particularly prone to depression because of myriad problems they deal with daily. And that very nature helps them connect with people and feel deeply.

Despite the sometimes-significant internal changes, depression often is difficult to detect, even by ministers' closest friends. Particularly in Christian circles, some individuals feel a stigma remains in admitting someone of faith—especially a religious leader—struggles with the disease. Ministers worry that admitting bouts of depression will lead some to wonder if they're qualified to lead.

While it's relatively easy to find ministers and ministers' spouses dealing with depression, those who serve on church staffs did not want to be quoted in this story. They feared the impact it would have on their ministries, as well as their families.

Confidential help

Through Swafford's office, the BGCT offers confidential help. The convention can point individuals to tools, resources and professionals that may help.

Swafford and Kelly Petty each encouraged people dealing with depression to seek help. If a person had diabetes, they would seek help. Depression is simply another issue, they insisted.

"The illness of depression is a totally different ballgame for each individual," Petty said. "I think it is a very complex disease, and it is very hard to understand all that goes on in the brain. I think it needs to be brought out in the open and discussed, just like cancer or heart disease or anything else, because there is such a stigma that surrounds it. It takes lots of lives, I know that—whether that's suicide or ruining lives.

“I look forward to the day when there will be answer to this devastating disease that took my husband’s life.”

For more information about depression, visit www.texasbaptists.org/counseling or call Swafford at (800) 388-2005.