

In this interview with ZENIT, Jean Vanier reflects on the causes of depression, and suggests useful ways of addressing it, both for the sufferer as well as those close to him.

Q: Depression is a plague of present-day society. How should it be faced? How can depressed persons be freed from their suffering?

Vanier: It is necessary to speak of depression, and to speak of it as a most human and real thing. The question is to know what one's values are. And the big question is that, if these values are focused only on success, power, etc., then one is neglecting a part of oneself, a part that is a child, a very frail woman, a vulnerable person.

To come out of depression means to find people who love you not because you are powerful or successful, but for yourself, with your frailty.

Q: We can say this to ourselves or to depressed people, but how can it be truly internalized in either case?

Vanier: This is a huge problem. It's not medicines alone that can help people. Drugs can lessen anxieties, but the big question is: Do I want to discover what it means to be human? The human being was born little and will die little. Are we willing to accept our frailty as it really is?

We are in a society that in fact rejects this truth. The weak are rejected, there is a desire to discard the elderly, to remove the handicapped and to do without our frailties. How, then, can we help people to rediscover the meaning of the human being?

Q: Can depression be regarded as a mental disability?

Vanier: It is not at all mental disability. A depressed person is what I would call "disabled by distress." Depression is an illness of distress, of energy. Somewhere the energy is blocked. And it is this blocking of the spirit that causes all kinds of anguish, all sorts of elements in one's interior that must be calmed.

So the danger is to hide behind the television, to take refuge in alcohol, in drugs, to look for something new instead of looking within oneself. And this is the tragedy!

Q: If the problem of the depressed person is precisely that he is unable to enter into himself and tries to find the answers to his condition outside of himself, what can be done to help?

Vanier: There must be someone who goes out to meet him. But it is necessary that he himself feel the need to change his life somewhat, because the blockages of energy appear in the sense that one launches oneself into something, for example, into success, forgetting another part of oneself.

The human being is complex. One must have both capacity as well as heart; relationships with people are necessary. However, it is not a question of dominating these relationships, but of being in communion with them. There is a part of spirituality that is an interior movement which will help me to live and to discover that I can do good things with my life.

Here there is an issue of faith that touches all the subjects of death, failure, etc. And very often people have omitted something. Then it is necessary to help them seek in their innermost being.

But the important fact is that it isn't necessary that there be many who wish to change people. There must be people who accept them as they are. When we want to change people, instead of loving them as they are, we run the risk of rejection on their part.

Q: How, then, can one learn to love these people? How can one help them in their distress?

Vanier: The real question that we must ask ourselves is how to help these people in our poverty, given that distress is a lack of strength. When we are with a depressed person, we must become poor. The question is: How to accept the other, as he is, with our miseries and our element of depression in the face of depression?

Q: Do you think that everyone is able to help a depressed person toward liberation?

Vanier: We are all subject to depression. We are all capable of entering the world of despair. Bernanos says that to find hope one must go down to the abyss of despair.

But in order to help, it is necessary to be careful, given that when we speak of helping there is a certain desire to change the other person. So that the first thing we must do to help the other is to change ourselves.

Q: The psychic well-being of patients is your daily concern. How do you see all that is done medically, as well as socially, to help those who suffer depression?

Vanier: For me it is a question of living in my community with people who go through highs and lows. For example, we have just accepted a 22-year-old girl who doesn't have a family. She has a mental disability, and was mistreated in the past by a caregiver.

She has just arrived, but has recently entered a mild phase of depression because one of my assistants, whom she very much appreciates, has to leave. How should one act in an appropriate way with her, not obliging her to change, but accepting her as she is?

She is a young girl with an immense need to find what she has never had. Time is needed. It is necessary that I myself see myself as helpless before her, and help her by just being close to her.