



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Depression: Encouragement for the Journey – Part 1

Guest(s): Rev. Tommy Nelson

Air Date: July 27, 2020

[Listen to the broadcast](#)

Dr. Dobson: You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting division of the James Dobson Family Institute. I am that James Dobson and I'm so pleased that you've joined us today.

Roger Marsh: Depression. It's a word that many Christians find to be confusing. If God is our Father and he loves and cares for us as his children, why then would he let us experience a season of emotional struggle and frustration? Today's guest on Family Talk knows that struggle firsthand. For 40 years, Reverend Tommy Nelson has served as pastor of Denton Bible Church in Denton, Texas. He's a well known author and well known speaker, but he also knows what it's like to experience a depression that was so strong it literally kept him out of the pulpit for four full months.

Welcome to Family Talk with your host, psychologist and bestselling author, Doctor James Dobson. I'm Roger Marsh, and during the next half hour we will hear the first of an important three part series called Depression: Encouragement for the Journey. I can assure you that your spirits will be lifted by this powerful presentation.

The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that one out of every five Americans will suffer a major mental depressive episode at some point in their lifetime. You know what that means? That means nearly 60 million Americans will suffer in our nation alone. Depression has impacted the lives of a number of people in my own family, and I know that here on the Family Talk broadcast, Doctor Dobson has spoken quite candidly about how depression impacted his family as well, especially when he was a teenager watching his father battle a major depression when he was 39 years of age.

Well we know that if depression is something that has impacted your family, you will benefit from this program today. We also know that if depression is something that's impacting a member of your church or your extended family, you'll definitely want to listen in. You will hear the passion in Doctor Dobson's voice for this topic as you listen to this broadcast. Right now, here is Doctor James Dobson to introduce our guest on today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. Dobson: Pastor Nelson is the pastor of the Denton Bible Church in Denton, Texas, which is 30 miles north I bel-

Tommy Nelson: That's right.

Dr. Dobson: North of Dallas. Been pastoring there for 30 years. He's authored four books and serves on the Dallas Theological Seminary board of incorporate members. I don't know what that means, but it's impressive. He and his wife Teresa have two grown sons and two grandchildren.

Tommy Nelson: That's right.

Dr. Dobson: It's such a pleasure to have you here, because the Lord has really gifted you with the ability to put things into words. How many people come to your church on a weekend?

Tommy Nelson: About 4,000 every Sunday. If they all show up at once, probably about 5,500, but about 4,000 a Sunday count.

Dr. Dobson: Now, the responsibilities associated with that have a lot to do with your story, your personal story of depression, because you have been there. Everything was going well. You were working hard. What was a typical day for you, if there was one before you became ill?

Tommy Nelson: Well, I never thought you could burn out doing what you loved. I thought you had to do what you hated. But I found out that you could and I didn't know this. Everything I did I brought on myself because I loved it so much.

I would teach four times on Sunday, and then Monday we had one of the largest singles studies in the country, the Metro Bible Study with about 2,500 Dallas singles. That was my day off, so I'd do that. Then on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, I had men's studies with about 200 men Tuesday, Wednesday, and then a faculty study on Friday. Then 10 times a year, I'd go do a Song of Solomon conference. I'd go around the country and I'd teach three times on Saturday morning, catch a plane, come back, go to bed, get up, and teach four times Sunday, and then Monday morning start again.

I did that because I loved it. Besides being the pastor to 4,000 people and a staff of about 40, and writing books and all of this, and speaking a lot for Campus Crusade and fellowship of Christian Athletes and Navigators and this and that. I did it just because I loved it.

In retrospect, probably three or four years ago, I began to see just nagging health problems. It showed up physically, and I just kind of wrote it off to maybe I was developing allergies or something. In the spring and in the fall, my body would kind of ache. They know now it was the results of stress, but-

Dr. Dobson: You were draining your body of vitality with all of that.

Tommy Nelson: Yeah, it was. I would run. Every day, I'd run three to four miles. I'd lift weights every day. I enjoyed what I was doing and making a great impact. We disciplined 600 young men. 200 of them went to Dallas Theological Seminary. They're great layman out there. I did all of these things because I loved doing them.

One Sunday evening about 18 months ago, I was sitting around and getting ready to preach on a Sunday evening, sitting in a chair, and all of a sudden all of the life went out of me, just physically. It was just like someone turned a switch off. Everything went out of me, and my heart rate that normally is about a 51 went to probably 90, and my blood pressure would beat so hard my whole body shook. I thought, "Am I having a heart attack?" I went and laid down and it passed after a while. It just kind of went off, and I went on, did my preaching. My thought was maybe I'd overworked, overheated, and got maybe dehydrated.

Well, it kept escalating for about another two weeks until finally my body would just in the night wake up just like it was dipped in oil. I found out later it was probably adrenaline, and it would just hurt incredibly. There was insomnia. I couldn't sleep at all. Ended up having to go to a hospital where they made me sleep and shot me up in my body just to make it quit hurting. They started testing for diabetes, for fibromyalgia, for you name it, trying to figure it out. Every time they would x-ray, they would MRI, they would urinalysis blood test-

Dr. Dobson: Everything would be all right.

Tommy Nelson: They said, "You're perfect. Just your blood pressure's too high. Your heart rate's too high. We can't understand that." Then one day it went from a physical pain, and they didn't know what the physical pain was about, that all of a sudden it dropped out on me emotionally. Not that I became emotional, but the switch was turned off emotionally. Anyone who has been through that knows what it means. But all of a sudden you found yourself in a black hole and you didn't know why, which made it worse because you didn't know why, and they can't-

Dr. Dobson: When you were overworking yourself in that way, you have a wonderful relationship with your wife, Teresa.

Tommy Nelson: Right.

Dr. Dobson: Did she see it?

Tommy Nelson: Yep.

Dr. Dobson: Was she concerned about it?

Tommy Nelson: Yes, she was.

Dr. Dobson: Was she warning you? Was she saying, "You've got to slow down"?

Tommy Nelson: Yep. She was saying, "You're not Ironman." She said, "At some point, you're going to give out. You'd better start backing off." But what it is, is whenever you succeed in something, you forge a new link in your chain that you've got to carry. Every time you succeed in something, you now have another responsibility. After a while ... It wasn't just the physical doing wasn't the problem, but there's an emotional burden that you bear. As you know, in the ministry, you just don't walk away from it. You carry that burden until finally it physically and then later emotionally, it just gave out on me.

I knew something was wrong with me. I knew it wasn't just that I wasn't having a quiet time, wasn't reading this, or wasn't doing that. I was doing all that you should do, but something clinically in me snapped, and it wasn't anything you could get on an x-ray.

Dr. Dobson: I am sure you know this, Tommy, that this is a disorder that's very common among pastors, because those who are successful especially have every excuse in the world to workaholic-

Tommy Nelson: Right.

Dr. Dobson: Because God's blessing it. Look what's happening. Look at all these people who need me. How can I walk away from this wonderful congregation that seems to be helped and influenced by what I'm doing? You go faster and faster and faster.

You know, in the old days they called it a nervous breakdown. Pastors had a nervous breakdowns. When I was a kid, I wasn't sure what a nervous breakdown was. When I went on into graduate school, I didn't hear those words, because it's not a breakdown of nerves, but it is a physical and emotional exhaustion that many, many people fall into, and especially successful men.

Tommy Nelson: Yep. It kept getting worse and worse to where it shut down ... I had to give up, just quit everything. I just got actually almost agoraphobic that it was like any kind of stress you got around, you just responded to it tenfold. It was like it was an anxiety. It would flip from anxiety to depression. It was like I was in fifth gear and it was stuck and the emergency brake was on.

Dr. Dobson: Does the word panic describe-

Tommy Nelson: Yeah. At times, it would crescendo. It would hit a definite panic attack, which is even worse because you don't know what it is. You're thinking, "Am I losing my mind?" That makes you more anxious, then you're anxious about it, that makes you anxious. It's kind of an emotional perfect storm. It's the only time in my life that I've thought about dying, that I've thought ... I asked God. I said, "You need to kill me," because it shuts your whole life down.

Dr. Dobson: You didn't ever think about suicide.

Tommy Nelson: No, but I can understand why people would. If you're thinking when you're in the middle of this that there is no hope, you can't live like this. If you have a broken leg or a whatever, or a separated shoulder, your mind can perceive that problem. But whenever your mind is the problem and this depression and the anxiety that you feel, you're not outside of it to observe it. You are the problem. It's like having dark glasses on and everything you see, your relationship with God, everything is emotionally gone, and it's a frightening place to be.

Roger Marsh: On that note, we have reached the midpoint of today's edition of Doctor James Dobson's Family Talk. Our guest is Pastor Tommy Nelson, and our topic is Depression: Encouragement for the Journey.

You can learn more about Pastor Nelson's book called *Walking on Water When You Feel Like You're Drowning* when you go to drjamesdobson.org. We'll hear more of this conversation in just a moment. First though, this classic commentary from Doctor James Dobson.

Dr. Dobson: Sometimes even the best of parents have a hard time accepting their children just the way they are. Parents of a child who is extremely shy, for example, will often ask me how they can pull him out of his shell. At home, he may make profound statements. He may share his observations about life and the nature of the universe. He may even tell the funniest jokes. But in public, his tongue becomes wedged to the side of his cheek and his head drops as if glued to his chest.

Why is Billy so introverted around strangers? It could be because he's been hurt or rejected in the past, but it's more likely that he was born that way, and no amount of goading or pushing by his parents will make him outgoing, flamboyant, or confident. His shyness is just a function of his innate temperament.

My advice to parents of such a child is simply this, give up trying to make him something he cannot be. Go with the flow, accepting him just the way he is made. Then look for those special qualities that give that boy or girl individuality and potential. Nurture them, cultivate them, and then give him time to come into his own as a unique personality like no other human being on Earth. You as a parent will be less frustrated by this acceptance and I guarantee you, so will Junior.

Roger Marsh: Now, here's the conclusion of today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. Dobson: You know, we need to tell our listeners that you were a very good athlete. You'd played college football and a lot of basketball and other things. You're a big man. You and I look eye to eye. I'm six-two. You're six-one. You're obviously in great shape. Was it very hard for you to admit that something had broken, that

you couldn't handle this, that of all things it wasn't that you had the flu or something, you are depressed?

Tommy Nelson: Yeah. That was-

Dr. Dobson: That was out of character for you.

Tommy Nelson: Yeah. It was like coming out of the closet and saying you were mortal, and that was hard to do. I finally went to someone who had been through it himself. That's really the guys you look to to help you are those that have been there, because a lot of times even a doctor may not know exactly what you're going through. You pretty well have to either know somebody or have been through it yourself that you have firsthand knowledge of it.

Finally, actually my wife called one of my closest friends, one of the elders of our church who was a doctor, an internist, and he called, believe it or not, his Hindu psychiatrist friend. My internist is Indian and he had a guy that came over from India with him that was his pal and he's a Hindu. He was a psychiatrist. He called him and he said, "He's having all of these symptoms."

You talk about help coming from the outside. Well, this is where it came from. The fellow listened to him and he said, "Oh, yes. I know exactly what it is. He's suffering from classical clinical depression anxiety," and he says, "It's no problem." He says he has ... He said this. He said when you have great stress, your body responds in adrenaline, and that produces ... and this is a layman's reference to it.

Dr. Dobson: Cortisol, right?

Tommy Nelson: That produces cortisol That's good whenever, he said, like the car falls off the jack on your friend and you have to pick the car up. He said, that's a good deal. But your body is meant to do that for little short seconds periodically. If you get under stress and you're continually on that, now that inhibits the use of a neurotransmitter called serotonin. Basically, and even though there's a lot we don't understand because it is so microscopic, that it's what makes your emotion work in your brain. Continual stress will turn you off emotionally.

Dr. Dobson: You know what's surprising to me is that nobody recognized it, because this is not like an unusual thing. I mean, men who just work seven days a week. It can happen to women too, but usually for different reasons.

Tommy Nelson: Right. I found out that half ... Time Magazine said that half of the Fortune 500 executives are on some sort of medicine for this.

Dr. Dobson: What a sad commentary that is.

Tommy Nelson: It's like 20-some odd billion I want to say is lost in employee wages every year under depression anxiety. One of the fellows I went to that was a specialist in it ... Because this was the first time I'd ever been to a counselor. The guy looked at me and said-

Dr. Dobson: In fact, you didn't want to go.

Tommy Nelson: I didn't want to go. He said, "This is the first time you've been on that side of the table," and I said, "It sure is." He said, "If it gives you any sense of blessing," he said, "Generally failures don't have this." He says you get this through being high intensity and driven. He said, "It's almost a badge of honor. If you hadn't had your nervous breakdown," he said, "You may not be working hard enough." He was kidding around, but I understood what he said.

But the doctor said, "Here's what you need to do. You need to take a serotonin specific reuptake inhibitor that'll slowly and surely let your body build back its own serotonin." He said it won't do anything for about three weeks, because it doesn't do anything to you. It lets your body start to build back what you have depleted over years. He said, "Try this." It was like a saccharin tablet.

About three weeks later, I was sitting around with my wife and I looked at her and I said, "I'm me." She said, "What do you mean?" I was just posed dead, silent at the table. I said, "I'm telling you, I'm me." I said, "Something just lifted," and I said, "It's not like I feel good. I'm me again." I didn't want to move because I might spill it from whatever it was, but slowly and surely ... Incidentally, you have to upfront deal with whatever puts you in that place.

Dr. Dobson: Yeah, of course. Medication alone is not going to do it.

Tommy Nelson: Medication alone won't help it. But with me, it was just classic overwork. I went to a counselor that had been through it himself and he sat down with me and he said, "Now, tell me your schedule," and I told him the schedule that I just told you. He looked at me and he said the words you don't want to say as a counselor, but he said it and he laughed out loud. He said, "No wonder you're crazy." He said, "You have four jobs." He said, "You've got to pick one job." James, I had to cut out 70% of what I was doing. I just worked too much.

Dr. Dobson: Do you have trouble holding still?

Tommy Nelson: Yeah, I couldn't. Well, have you had this?

Dr. Dobson: I know about it.

Tommy Nelson: Well, I couldn't sit for 25 seconds because my body was in continual ... it was like it was fifth gear and I had to walk continually. The only relief I would get is when I would go and work out. I would make myself work out and I didn't have

any energy. I lost 25 pounds. Just boom, it was gone. It wasn't that I started eating different. It's like my body was in high gear.

He compared it like this. He said if a car is in the ditch, you can put it in reverse all you want, but it's not getting out of that ditch. You're going to have to put something under that wheel to help get it on a level where you can operate it. He said, "You need something to get you physically out of the ditch where you can start getting your life back."

Well, I don't know what a serotonin reuptake inhibitor is, but within three weeks, and this is why you need to go too ... Instead, I got to tell you this. It was the first time in my life I had ever gone to a psychiatrist, because they're the guys that can prescribe something. I felt like Saul going to the Witch of Endor. As a Christian, you're just not supposed to go to these.

Dr. Dobson: You never thought you'd be there, did you?

Tommy Nelson: But it was a great blessing with me when I went into a Dallas psychiatrist and he said ... and he'd greeted it with almost flippancy, and I needed that, for him to say, "No, this is a common cold. You're all right. You're not going crazy. You're okay. Lots of guys have this, and here's what happened to you. Stress, cortisol, serotonin depleted, and it pulled the switch on you emotionally and you're dead. You don't feel anything toward God, toward people, toward anything, and you're done." He said, "You've got to get something to slowly start building you back." A lot of times, the psychiatrist, if he's a good one, can look at a person and talk to a person and know it's not this, but this, and it's not that, but it's here. He'll know it a little better.

Dr. Dobson: He gave you just a little bit of hope, didn't he?

Tommy Nelson: Yeah, he did. He said, "You're okay. You're all right." As a matter of fact, he said "Spurgeon had this. Charlotte Bronte had this. Alfred Lord Tennyson. He said Isaac Newton had this twice, and you're okay. In the old days they called it excessive sorrow. They called it melancholy." He said, "You're going to be okay."

Within three weeks, I felt better. Within about ... It happened in May. By October I was back in the pulpit, and I'm better now than I was then.

Dr. Dobson: Your church understood?

Tommy Nelson: You know, James, I got up in my church. You just don't disappear from a pulpit and then all of a sudden get back in four months and say, "Good to be back." You've got to talk about it. Incidentally, Christians don't talk about this. People from all over the country-

Dr. Dobson: That's why we're doing it today.

Tommy Nelson: Right. People all over the country-

Dr. Dobson: There are a lot of people out there who've been there.

Tommy Nelson: Used to, I did the Song of Solomon, and I was the sex guy. All right. If anybody had any sex questions, they'd call me. Now I'm the depression guy. It was more fun being the sex guy. People now will call me and say, "Now I'm going through this, and what should I do?" I tell them my story and I say, "Don't just take what I'm saying. You need a guy who knows his stuff. Because even though this is the first time you've gone through this, a psychiatrist, and a good one, they've talked to you 100 times and they know what they're talking about." I say, "Talk to them."

But I always tell them, you need to be careful of evangelicals, and of course that's what I am. I'm a fundamentalist Dallas Seminary evangelical. Because an evangelical a lot of times, he can get medieval on you real quickly. The same guy that is takin-

Dr. Dobson: I'm going to stop you, because we're out of time.

Tommy Nelson: Okay.

Dr. Dobson: We're going to stop one way or the other, but I won't come back to that issue because I know that it's a source of some of the frustration when you're in the midst of this not to have maybe your colleagues in the ministry understand what's going on.

Tommy Nelson: Yeah.

Dr. Dobson: Some of the comments that are made at that time imply that there's something wrong with your relationship with God.

Tommy Nelson: "You don't need to take anything. You just need to memorize scripture." Well, you know, I memorized Romans through Jude. I knew my scripture. I couldn't memorize anything. But it's something wrong in you. But a lot of times, those same well-meaning guys will say you just need to trust God and go through this, and that's the last thing you need to hear.

Dr. Dobson: It is good to see you obviously feeling better and back into form. We will look forward to talking about it some more next time. We'll pick up right here. We're talking to Pastor Tommy Nelson, pastor of Denton Bible Church in Denton, Texas. I hope you're going to write about this, because a lot of people need to see in print what you've been saying today.

Tommy Nelson: Sure.

Dr. Dobson: But we will get more of that information next time. Thanks for being with us, and we'll pick up right where we left off.

Roger Marsh: Truly a powerful testimony today here on Doctor James Dobson's Family Talk. You've been listening to Doctor Dobson's conversation with Reverend Tommy Nelson, the pastor of Denton Bible Church in Denton, Texas. They've been discussing Pastor Nelson's battle with major depression and the fact that so many of his Christian friends had a difficult time understanding exactly what he was going through. Remember, the National Institute of Mental Health estimates that one out of every five Americans will deal with a major mental depressive disorder at some point in their lifetime, so this is an issue that we in the church need to take very seriously.

Now at the close of today's discussion, Doctor Dobson suggested that Pastor Nelson should write a book about his experience with depression and well, he did. The book is called *Walking on Water When You Feel Like You're Drowning: Finding Hope in Life's Darkest Moments*. You'll find a link for that resource on our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org.

Now, while you're online with us, be sure to also browse the vast assortment of printed, audio, and downloadable resources available to you there as well. Again, you'll find what you're looking for at drjamesdobson.org. Then be sure to shoot on over to our Facebook page as well and join the conversation about this most important topic of depression. Depression is a topic that is impacting millions of families worldwide. It may be impacting your family right now, and so what better place to find valuable insights and meaningful dialogue on this crucial topic than our Facebook page? It's [facebook.com/drjamesdobson](https://www.facebook.com/drjamesdobson).

Finally, this word of thanks for your prayers and ongoing financial support for Doctor James Dobson's Family Talk. As you know, this program is completely listener supported. We rely on God through your tax deductible financial contributions to help us continue in the work that God has called us to do, equipping families to stand for righteousness in today's culture by modeling healthy marriages and healthy parent-child relationships. Now, you can make your donation securely online when you go to drjamesdobson.org. That's drjamesdobson.org, or you can make your contribution over the phone when you call toll free at (877) 732-6825. Thanks so much for your prayers and your tax deductible donations at this crucial time of year.

You know, when it comes to battling depression, is it true that evangelical Christians have a tendency to do what Pastor Tommy Nelson suggested earlier in our broadcast? He said they go medieval instead of modeling true biblical encouragement, telling people just to keep praying and memorizing scripture and you'll get through this. Well, find out tomorrow what true biblical encouragement looks like when Pastor Tommy Nelson from Denton Bible Church continues sharing his incredible story of battling depression and finding encouragement for the journey along the way. That's coming up next time on Doctor James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Doctor James Dobson Family Institute.

Dr. Clinton: Hi everyone this is Dr. Tim Clinton here for Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. You know, the news comes in all kinds of shapes, sizes and formats these days. But, how do you cut through the noise and get to the heart of the matters that affect your family? Come to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk and sign up for Dr. Dobson's monthly newsletter. You'll find clarity on tough issues, encouragement for your everyday life, and trusted principles to help you build strong, healthy, connected families. Go to drjamesdobson.org. Sign up today. That's drjamesdobson.org.