

# When Joy Feels Far Away

Understanding Anhedonia Through Faith, Wisdom, and Compassion

By Counsellor James Kofi Abbrey



**God is near, even when joy feels hidden.**

There are seasons in life when joy feels near. Worship is refreshing, relationships are meaningful, work feels purposeful, and ordinary blessings bring warmth to the heart. But there are also seasons when joy feels far away. A person may still attend church, pray, read Scripture, care for family, and continue daily responsibilities, yet inwardly feel empty, numb, tired, and disconnected from things that once brought pleasure.

This experience may be described as anhedonia.

## **Definition**

Anhedonia refers to a reduced ability to feel pleasure or interest in activities that were once enjoyable. It is commonly associated with depression, but may also appear in grief, trauma, burnout, chronic stress, and other emotional struggles.

From a Christian perspective, anhedonia must be approached with faith, wisdom, and compassion. It should not be dismissed as laziness, spiritual weakness, lack of prayer, or absence of faith. Many sincere believers pass through seasons where their emotions feel silent, even though their faith is still alive.

## **When Joy Becomes Quiet**

A person experiencing anhedonia may say: “I do not enjoy worship the way I used to.” “I feel nothing when I pray.” “I used to love being with people, but now I withdraw.” “Food, music, family time, ministry, and fellowship no longer excite me.” These statements should not be judged quickly. They are often cries from a weary soul.

The Bible gives room for emotional honesty. Psalm 42:5 asks: “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God...” This verse teaches us that a believer can be spiritually committed and emotionally troubled at the same time. Faith does not remove every painful feeling immediately. Rather, faith gives us a place to bring our pain.

## Anhedonia Is Not Always Spiritual Failure

One of the greatest mistakes in pastoral care is to assume that every emotional struggle is caused by sin, prayerlessness, or lack of faith. While spiritual issues can affect emotional wellbeing, not every loss of joy is a spiritual failure.

Sometimes joy is affected by exhaustion. Sometimes it is affected by grief. Sometimes it is affected by unresolved trauma. Sometimes it is affected by depression. Sometimes it is affected by prolonged caregiving, family pressure, marital conflict, ministry burnout, or loneliness.

In 1 Kings 19, Elijah became deeply discouraged after a season of intense spiritual confrontation. God did not first give him a long lecture. God gave him rest, food, water, and gentle direction. This is a powerful pastoral lesson. Sometimes what a tired servant of God needs first is not rebuke, but restoration.



## The Difference Between Joy and Pleasure

Christian joy is deeper than ordinary pleasure. Pleasure may come from good food, music, achievements, friendship, family, intimacy, recreation, or celebration. These are good gifts when received with gratitude.

Christian joy, however, is rooted in God's presence, promises, salvation, and faithfulness. Nehemiah 8:10 says: "The joy of the Lord is your strength." Yet when a person is emotionally depleted, even this deeper joy may not be easily felt. That does not mean God has departed. It may mean the person's emotional system is overwhelmed.

A helpful picture is this: the sun may still be shining, but heavy clouds may prevent us from feeling its warmth. The sun has not disappeared. In the same way, God's love may remain constant even when the believer cannot emotionally sense it.

## How Anhedonia Affects Christian Life

Anhedonia may affect spiritual life in several ways. Prayer may feel dry. Worship may feel empty. Bible reading may feel mechanical. Church attendance may feel burdensome. Fellowship may feel tiring. Ministry may feel like duty without delight.

This can create guilt in the believer. The person may wonder, "What is wrong with me?" or "Has God rejected me?" Pastors, counsellors, and mature believers must respond carefully. The wounded person does not need condemnation. They need understanding, wise assessment, compassionate listening, and patient support.

**Scripture for Pastoral Wisdom**

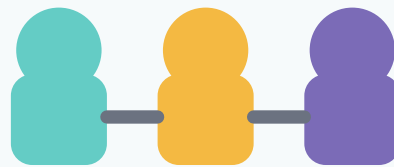
“To answer before listening, that is folly and shame.” - Proverbs 18:13

**Faith, Wisdom, and Compassion**

Faith reminds us that God is present even in emotional darkness. Psalm 34:18 says, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” Faith does not deny the pain. Faith brings the pain into the presence of God.

Wisdom helps us understand that anhedonia may require more than encouragement. It may require counselling, rest, medical assessment, family support, lifestyle changes, spiritual renewal, and sometimes referral to a qualified mental health professional.

Compassion allows us to sit with people without shaming them. Galatians 6:2 says, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” A compassionate church does not pressure hurting people to pretend. It creates a safe place where people can be honest and still feel loved.



**A compassionate church listens, prays, supports, and refers wisely.**

**What the Church Must Avoid**

The church must avoid careless statements such as: “Just pray more,” “You should not feel this way,” “A real Christian should always be joyful,” “You are ungrateful,” or “Other people have bigger problems than you.” Such statements may sound spiritual, but they can deepen shame and isolation.

Instead, we can say: “I am sorry you are going through this.” “Thank you for trusting me enough to share.” “You are not weak because you are struggling.” “Let us pray, and let us also think wisely about the support you need.” “God has not abandoned you.”

**Practical Ways to Support Someone Experiencing Anhedonia**

The first step is not to force joy. It is to gently help the person reconnect with life, meaning, God, and supportive relationships.

- Encourage regular sleep, nourishing meals, gentle movement, and rest.
- Invite honest prayer and lament without forcing religious performance.
- Help the person take one small meaningful step each day.

- Reduce isolation through safe fellowship, visitation, calls, and support groups.
- Encourage professional counselling or medical assessment when symptoms persist or daily functioning is affected.
- Build a referral pathway between pastors, counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and medical doctors.

### Counselling Reflection

A useful counselling question is: "What is one small meaningful thing you can do today, even if you do not yet feel joy?" Another helpful question is: "What has pain taken from you, and what has God preserved in you?"

## Honest Prayer in the Season of Numbness

People experiencing anhedonia may struggle to pray with energy or emotion. They should be encouraged to pray honestly and simply. The Psalms teach us that honest prayer is acceptable to God. Lament is not unbelief. Lament is faith speaking through pain.

### A Simple Prayer

"Lord, I feel empty, but I come to You. Lord, I cannot feel joy, but I trust that You are near. Restore what has grown numb within me. Give me strength for today. Lead me to the help I need."

Psalm 51:12 says: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me." This is a beautiful prayer for anyone who feels that joy has grown distant.

## When Professional Help Is Needed

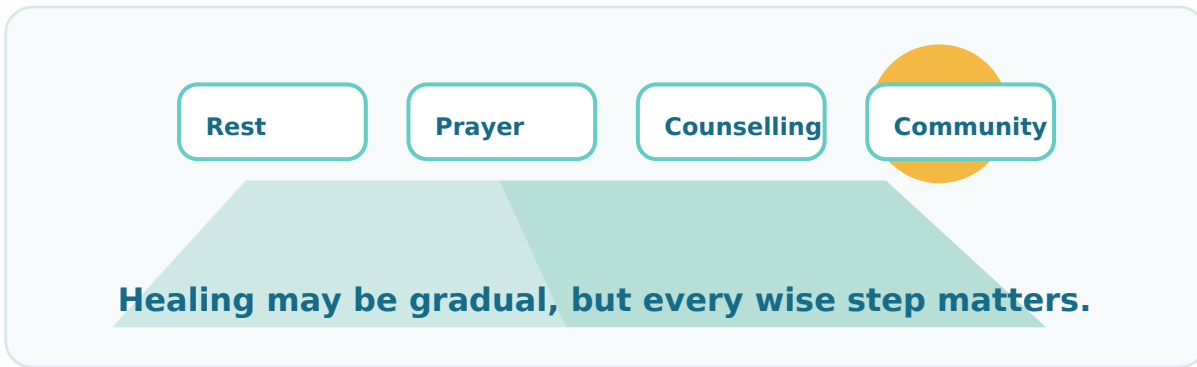
Anhedonia should be taken seriously, especially when it continues for weeks, affects work, school, family life, spiritual life, appetite, sleep, energy, concentration, or daily functioning. Professional help is important when the person feels persistently hopeless, withdrawn, emotionally numb, or unable to cope.

Seeking professional help is not a denial of faith. It can be an act of wisdom. God can work through prayer, Scripture, supportive relationships, counselling, medical care, and healthy routines.

## A Word to Pastors and Church Leaders

Pastors and church leaders are often the first people church members turn to in emotional distress. This is a sacred trust. But it also requires humility. The pastor is not required to be everything to everyone. A wise pastor knows when to pray, when to listen, when to counsel, when to involve family support, and when to refer.

A healthy church should develop a referral system with trusted counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, medical doctors, and support services. This does not weaken pastoral ministry. It strengthens it. The church should be both a spiritual family and a healing community.



## Hope When Joy Feels Far Away

Anhedonia can make life feel colourless. It can make faith feel dry, relationships feel distant, and daily life feel heavy. But it is not the end of the story.

God restores. Sometimes restoration is quick. Often it is gradual. Healing may come through prayer, rest, counselling, Scripture, community, treatment, forgiveness, grief work, healthy boundaries, and renewed purpose.

### Hope for the Weary

“He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.” - Isaiah 40:29  
“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” - Matthew 11:28

## Conclusion

Anhedonia is the painful experience of losing interest, pleasure, and emotional warmth in things that once mattered. From a Christian perspective, it must be understood with faith, wisdom, and compassion.

Faith reminds us that God is still present. Wisdom reminds us to seek appropriate care. Compassion reminds us not to shame the suffering. The person who cannot feel joy is not beyond hope. The numb heart can heal. The weary soul can be strengthened. The dry season can become a place where God gently restores life, meaning, and peace.

When joy feels far away, God is still near.

## References and Further Reading

American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed., Text Revision. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2022.  
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World Health Organization. “Depression.” <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression>  
The Holy Bible: Psalm 42:5; Psalm 34:18; Psalm 51:12; Proverbs 18:13; Isaiah 40:29; Matthew 11:28; Romans 8:38-39; Galatians 6:2; 1 Kings 19:1-8.

### Important Note

This article is for education, pastoral care, and counselling support. It is not a substitute for professional diagnosis or treatment. When symptoms are persistent, severe, or disabling, referral to a qualified mental health professional is recommended.