



Tips for Understanding and Managing Depression

What is Depression?

It is a:

- Diagnosable medical condition that includes far more than just feeling sad or down. Clinical depression (known as Major Depressive Disorder) can include depressed mood, minimal to no enjoyment with previously enjoyable activities, lack of motivation, low energy, changes in sleep and appetite, feelings of guilt/worthlessness, poor concentration, changes in motor/thinking activity (agitation or slowing), and thoughts of suicide/death. To meet criteria for the diagnosis, you have to have a number of these symptoms that persist for 2 weeks or longer, be present most of the day for more than half the days and cause impairment in daily functioning to be classified as "clinical depression."

In less technical terms:

- Depression makes everyday tasks feel burdensome, makes you see yourself, others and the world more negatively, and makes it harder to enjoy life and handle stressful situations. It's like trying to engage with life while waist deep in mud or dragging a heavy weight around with you that only you can feel and experience. Depression can slow down your brain and body, darken your perception of the world and make you feel that you are no longer yourself.

It is not any of the following:

- Personal failure, normal sadness, a character flaw or laziness. Believing clinical depression is something other than a medical condition that can be improved with changes to coping strategies and/or in many cases treatment (e.g. psychotherapy and/or medication) can lead to self-defeating thinking patterns and behaviors that keep you from recovering. It is common for people struggling with depression to think negatively and blame themselves. However, this is not accurate or helpful. Understanding depression as a treatable medical condition can be an important step in getting better.

How can I manage depression more effectively?

The first step:

- Recognize your body and brain can be deceptive and leading you astray when you are depressed
 - o If you continue to listen to your body and brain (e.g. "what you feel like doing"), you will likely feel worse over time.
 - Your body and brain are likely moving you towards the following unhealthy coping strategies to manage symptoms:
 - Isolation, disconnecting from regular activities/interests, reducing time with family/friends and increasing restful behaviors.
 - o These common coping strategies are known to worsen depression if used as primary coping strategies.
 - o These strategies can help in the short-term, but hurt you in the long-term.
 - Isolation and disconnection take you away from the bad or frustrating things in life, but also take you away from all the good things of life that can help to support your mood and protect you from depression.

The second step:

- Recognize that the remedy to depression is often counter-intuitive to what your body and brain are moving you towards
 - o Depression is often improved when people gradually work towards increasing their engagement with meaningful relationships, activities, interests and achievements that are consistent with their personal values.
 - o The opposite of depression is purpose, meaning, connection and values-based living not necessarily happiness or comfort. In fact, the road to recovery starts when you realize that short-term discomfort now will lead to what you really want in your life in the long-term.
 - o Depression will feed itself unless you begin to choose the counter-intuitive action.

The third step:

- Approach negative emotion and thoughts directly. Begin to challenge your perception of the world because your thoughts are often distorted, inaccurate and biased when you are depressed and lead to ineffective processing of emotions.
 - o When you are depressed:
 - You view yourself, others, the world and your future more negatively
 - thoughts and beliefs change in predictably negative ways
 - You pay more attention to negative information than positive (e.g. minimize positive things and enlarge negative)
 - Attention and focus are directed towards the most relevant information to you.
 - If you are depressed, that typically means negative information. This creates a significant bias in information processing.
 - You remember negative events/situations more easily than positive
 - You remember what you pay attention to.
 - If you pay attention to negative information then you more easily remember negative information. It is not that life is as negative as it seems, but rather you can more easily recollect negative aspects of your life.
 - o The combination of these three changes creates the common depression belief that things were bad, are currently bad and will continue to be bad.
 - However, this is the result of how depression changes perception and not reality!
 - Your life did not completely change when you became depressed, you started to become depressed and your perception of your life changed.
 - Correcting the faulty perceptions/thoughts influenced by depression can significantly reduce distress.
 - Start to write out and question your own thoughts like you are in a court room, a detective searching for the truth or a caring friend. Ask yourself some of these questions:
 - What are the facts?
 - Am I ignoring/minimizing important information?
 - Are there alternative explanations?
 - Is this way of thinking helpful?
 - Imagine someone you are close to was experiencing the same things as you and they had your same thoughts. What would you say to them to help them? Why are the standards different for you than someone you care about?

Conclusion:

Depression is a medical condition that changes mood, perception, attention, thinking, feelings, physiology and behaviors. The impacts of the symptoms over time can lead you away from helpful long-term strategies that support recovery for more short-term strategies that can make your depression worse. Remember that the antidote to depression is purpose, meaning, connection and values-based living. Gradually schedule daily activities that lead you in that direction and you are on the right path. Monitor and challenge your thinking along the way to ensure it is accurate and objective. Much of the suffering of depression is internally generated rather than an external reality. Meaning your life is likely far less problematic and solutions are nearer to you than you currently think. We are often our harshest and most relentless critics. A compassionate, patient approach to yourself and gradual movement to those things that matter most to you is a strong foundation for the road to recovery. We encourage you to try out some of these tips for yourself and reach out to us if you would like help along the way.