

The faces of depression:

Depression might well be described as a loss of interest in one's own future. When someone is depressed they do not look forward with a sense of purpose, meaning, or expectation. Rather, they feel trapped in a present that seems to drain them of life, passion, and energy. Because the present is devoid of fulfilment the future offers little promise of relief. Depression then can be understood in terms of how one feels about tomorrow. A lot of adults experience these things around mid-life, when they are wondering how to move into the second half of life with a sense of inspiration and purpose.

It is clear that if one is to tackle depression and its effects one has to look at the how one looks at one's future. Many people who are depressed feel they are trapped in a present that seems to drain them of inspiration. Their everyday stressors preoccupy them so much as to make it difficult to find any enthusiasm about their future. It may be the on-going effects of a job that continually demands more of them than they feel they can give; it may be a family situation that is chronically stressful; it may be an on-going sense of failure that is a consequence of never living up to their personal goals. Whatever it is, the effect is that the depressed person is unable to look to their immediate or distant future with any real sense of purpose or anticipation.

Therefore, the depressed person may feel confined, without energy, cynical, tired, and unfocused. Their sense of purpose in life has gradually been erased. Instead of facing down a highway to a destination they can see in the distance, they are facing into a fog and, without guideposts, feel they are going nowhere and wandering around in a mist.

One of the difficult things about depression are the social stereotypes that are built around it. When people think of depression they think of sad, introverted, 'head-down', dishevelled people under psychiatric care and in a pretty sorry state. This kind of cartooned image could not be further from the truth because most depressed people are successful in life – they are working mothers, business men, professional people, well-liked individuals, stay at home Mom's, successful students, hard-working tradesmen, accomplished adolescents, etc. In fact the term depression has in many ways over-grown its usage because of its stereotypes and emotional connotations. Depression is by and large an invisible syndrome. It has a kind of viral effect on the sufferer who becomes drained of confidence, vitality, and hope in such invisible and clandestine ways that the victim finds it almost impossible to explain, justify, or understand why they feel the way they feel.

The advice they get is the same as the advice they try to give themselves – "I've got to be more positive"; "I need to count my blessings!" "There are so many happy people who are far worse off than I am". But they are words that find no purchase and are like the mustard seeds landing on barren soil.

The emotional fuel level remains dangerously low, despite the regular fill-ups the depressed person attempts. It's as if the emotional tank has a leak that make it impossible to plan any kind of long-distance journey because the person knows they will hardly have enough fuel to make it outside the 'county bounds' of the self.

Doubtless there are hundreds of mothers out there who, to all intents and purposes, have a good life with a decent husband or partner, well-behaved children, and an okay job who, despite 'looking at the positives' somehow remain down, depleted, or un-inspired by their own life.

If this sounds like you the first thing to know is that you are not crazy. Life, by its nature does this to people. The life-long efforts invested in trying to be a better person, or trying to make one's life work, do gradually take their toll. I would go as far as to suggest that everyone in life, by necessity, has to go through some depressive episode or crisis in his or her life to maintain contact with the vitality of life.

Depression, in truth, is a psychological symptom that confronts people with this truth: You need to step back, take stock of your life, and confront many of the habits, attitudes, priorities, and lifestyles that have become part of your identity.

Just as a blood deficiency can create an anaemia that results in fatigue, weakness, and poor well being, depression does the same to emotional life. If you do not take it seriously then you neglect the real seriousness of ones life problem. So what can you do? Here are four simple exercises to provoke your imagination and passion:

1. Take out a blank sheet of paper and on the top of it write this question: "What is my purpose in life?" Then write up to twenty answers to the question allowing the previous answer to inform the subsequent answer until you get closer to the real truth of your life. Stop when you become moved or inspired by your answer.
2. Draw a stick figure of yourself in the middle of a large blank sheet of paper. List in a clockwise way around the figure all the pressures, stresses, or expectations that are weighing in on top of you. Draw arrows from each stressor toward you in the middle.
3. On the top of a blank sheet of paper write this heading: "The top twenty little things I enjoy doing that, if I had the time and no responsibilities, I would do."
4. On the top of a blank sheet of paper write this heading: "The top ten big things I would love to do if I had the time and no responsibilities".
5. Draw a stick figure of yourself again. Using cartoon balloons to indicate your thoughts, fill ten balloons with the top ten negative beliefs you have about yourself in your life.
6. Do the diagram a second time but with the top ten positive beliefs about you that are the exact opposite of the negative beliefs.

Take two tablespoons of this twice daily!

Next week I will talk more about mid-life crises.

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