

Depression

Depression, as a medical and psychological condition, appears to be endemic in our modern society. In its more severe forms it is a seriously debilitating condition. In its more moderate forms it brings much unhappiness to the lives of those who experience it – and to those who love them. It is, however, an overused term and over-diagnosed condition. In many instances I find that it is an unhelpful diagnosis for a person or family.

I met with a middle-aged woman recently who identified herself as someone who suffered from depression because, as she put it, it ran in the family. For this woman her diagnosis was almost terminal in that she felt there was nothing she could do about it. The fact that her mother “suffered from depression” brought a fatalism to her assessment of herself.

In a paradoxical way the diagnosis of depression can, for some people, be depressing in itself – while for others it can be a source of relief. The word depression is used to describe and summarize a variety of experiences, conditions, and dispositions. As such it reflects a poverty of imagination and language to use it as a rubbish-bin diagnosis for a wide variety of syndromes. Except for the more severe forms of depression – where people are literally unable to function – each person’s depression has unique qualities to them.

It is very important therefore that one describes one’s emotional condition in the right way. With this woman I was not convinced that the term depression was a helpful one. For example, consider how different are the following kinds of depression.

You can become depressed because,

- Over a long period of time, you feel ignored and unimportant as a consequence of your frantic attempts to achieve such importance,
- Or you find that intimate relationships fail to fill an inner emptiness,
- Or you find after many years that taking care of others and neglecting yourself you becomes worn down,
- Or you find that years of avoiding responsibility results in a gradual loss of friends and support.
- Or you find that your effort to control your life and others is impossible and you are left feeling helpless and frustrated,
- Or you find that your efforts to avoid others and develop freedom and solitude result in a lonely and bereft life,
- Or you find that your efforts to dominate and control others gradually result in rejection and a deep shame.
- Or you find that you have learned a helpless attitude to life that worked when younger but now, in adult years is of no use,
- Or you find that you have repressed your emotional life for years and now find in later life that it is too late to give expression to it
- Or you find that your chronic shame and self-doubt wear you down,
- Or you find that your dread of humiliation results in building an avoidant life that shuts out the world,
- Or you find you live a life of hostility and negativity in order to defend against the possibility of further rejection only to find in later years that such rejection never comes,
- Or you learn to reject your self on a constant basis in such a way that you do not feel entitled to peace or joy.

As you can see, there are a whole range of possible reasons why one becomes depressed in life. To accept the diagnosis of depression does not always provide the necessary explanations that point one through the gateway of transformation.

If you have been diagnosed with depression just remember that the diagnosis is not the cure, nor is medication always the only tool for change. Sometimes to diagnose someone who is psychologically distressed or unhappy over a lengthy period of time as “depressed” is like giving someone who is physically unwell the diagnosis of being “Sick”. Were your GP or psychologist to announce that “We have just got your results back from the lab and we have a diagnosis: You are suffering from Sickness”, you or your family would hardly feel well informed.

Understand that depression often emanates from on-going experiences of powerlessness, helplessness, inadequacy, anxiety, imprisonment, isolation, over-responsibility, or loss. Within each of these categories one needs to do a forensic of how these chronic experiences create a sense of depressive helplessness. Then you can begin to get an idea of where the log that is jamming up your emotional life might lie.

With a traffic-jam there is often just one single broken-down car that jams up the whole traffic system. So if you are feeling down and useless try not to feel that the whole emotional traffic of your life is a mess. Think of the possibility that it is one or two things that are causing the emotional back-up in your life. Find the offending “vehicles”, repair them, and you can free your entire emotional system up.

And sometimes you just need a holiday!