

HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM DEPRESSED? OR JUST HAVING A CASE OF THE BLUES?

Being depressed means feeling disconnected, isolated, separated. Truly, depression or melancholia is the dis-ease of our modern society. Our desire to isolate ourselves from everyone and everything when we are depressed isolates us from ourselves as well.

To recognize how it feels to be depressed more people will be able to liberate and unfetter themselves from their depression; lives will be saved as well.

People describe their experience of depression as being in some kind of prison. One man said that he was in a pit where the walls were of soft clay. One woman said that she was in a brick maze where there was no exit and the walls were closing in on her. "I'm in an infinite desert," said one man, "there's just me and a lone, scrawny tree." "I'm in a cage," said one woman, "the bars are thick and black and there's no door." Inside this prison the person has intense feelings of self-hatred.

Frequently, depressed persons imagine they are going crazy, are crazy or are being afflicted with some bizarre mental illness.

One of the beautiful things about a DA group is that everyone has the same symptoms, feels the same pain and is relieved that they are not the only ones in the world with this experience. They don't have to go it alone. They also don't hear people saying, "Snap out of it."

The following list provides a guide for those of you who are attempting to see whether you are depressed or not. If you feel you have a good number of these situations going on in your life at the same time and for a number of weeks, your melancholia might be indicating that you need to get in touch with persons like yourself., viz., the fellowship of Depressed Anonymous.

- n Wanting to isolate and be alone.
- n Changes in appetite.
- n Shifts in sleeping patterns (too much/not enough sleep)
- n Waking up early in the morning.
- n Fatigability or lack of energy.

- n Agitation or increased activity
- n Loss of interest in daily activities and/or decreased sex drive.
- n Feeling of sadness, hopelessness, worthlessness, guilt or self-reproach and possible thoughts about killing myself.
- n Weeping/not being able to cry.
- n Lapses of memory
- n Hard time making decisions.
- n Fear of losing one's mind.
- n Reluctance to take risks.
- n Difficulty in smiling or laughing!

Dorothy Rowe, in her award-winning book Depression: The Way Out of Your Prison, describes how people build their prisons of depression by holding the following six beliefs as though they were real, absolute and immutable truths.

1. No matter how good and nice I appear to be, I am really bad, evil, valueless, unacceptable to myself and to others.
2. Other people are such that I must fear, hate and envy them.
3. Life is terrible and death is worse.
4. Only bad things happened to me in the past and only bad things will happen to me in the future.
5. Anger is evil.
6. I must never forgive anyone, least of all myself.

As already outlined in this book Dr. Rowe delineates the six main ingredients of depression. These beliefs, tenaciously held, imprison the depressed until that day when they make a decision to choose to remove the bars.

Dorothy Rowe, a clinical psychologist from England, has written nine books which deal with how we humans as creatures create meaning for our lives. She possesses an almost universal recognition and respect from professional and lay alike about someone who has done her homework on the human experience that we call depression. She maintains that depression is not a disease or an illness

but is a human experience that is truly painful and isolating in nature. She points out that the belief that depression is a physical illness has the *good implication* that we are not to blame for our depression but the *bad implication* is that we could get it again, like a bout with the flu or another cold. Psychiatrists who believe that depression is a physical illness don't talk about curing depression but about managing it.

The *bad implication* for depression, using a psychological model, is that we caused it ourselves - by the way we think (our six immutable truths), live out our lives, and reflect on the world. But the *good implication* of this psychological model is that if we caused the depression we can likewise un-depress ourselves. This is the approach Dorothy Rowe takes. This is why she calls depression a moral problem --we have to take full responsibility for the way we think, feel and act.

Depressed Anonymous bases its healing and recovery on the premise that once depressed persons admit they are out of control, even to the point of having attempted suicide, they then come to believe that a power greater than themselves can restore them to sanity, while at the same time making a decision to turn their minds over to the care of God as they understand God.

The important thing is not so much whether depression is or is not an illness or a mental disorder but that people have to take responsibility for themselves and their feelings. So many people think that since they are patients of a doctor they must just sit back and wait for the medicine to kick in. The doctor will be doing these people a great favor to ask them what has been going on in their families, their work or with those whom they love. The depressed consumer of medical and mental health services might then get it that maybe they have a choice on whether they stay depressed or not. The consumer might also begin work on themselves knowing that everything they can do to take care of themselves will gradually eliminate the symptoms that we call depression.

So often those depressed are living out of step with their own expectations or the expectations of others, sometimes stemming back to early childhood. It would be great if the many people on antidepressant medication would start talking out why they depressed themselves in the first place. The pain might disappear with the medication but the experience is still part of their lives and memories. Unless one talks about the experience then the depression symptoms will indeed reappear.

Depression is a growing global mental health issue, according to the World Health Organization.

The numbers of depressed worldwide is growing as old traditions and values among groups are being lost, blurred or forgotten. Families become more fragmented with more single mothers attempting to raise children alone. The world is becoming a crowded place. An aging society in our industrialized nations brings with it those physical illnesses that come with a growing population. Late- life depression is an especial concern for those of us who are advocates for persons depressed. We all need to be in the forefront in advocating that more awareness be given worldwide to the need for mutual aid groups which possess the spiritual tool kits which can prevent further individual relapses back into depression. To stay depressed is to stay isolated and disconnected.

The main effect of Depressed Anonymous is that people can come together and find the support of fellow depressed people, and they in turn will find the emotional nurturing and acceptance. They can learn the social skills that can help them gradually enter life again with hope and heightened spirit. Once people realize that they are not alone they then take hope that maybe they too will feel better. The beauty of a self-help group is that a person feels acceptance from the group. No one is there telling you to "snap out of it" or that your depression is all in your mind.

Depressed Anonymous, once established in your community, will gradually gain new members as word gets out that a group exists in which people who are depressed can come and share their story with others.

I believe that the general public needs to see that they, even though not professional therapists, can still organize twelve-step self-help groups for persons in their area. Most communities are in contact with mental health specialists who would be happy to help set up self-help or support groups for community members and to meet on a weekly basis. (See Therapists Views on pages following)

IS DEPRESSION AN ADDICTION?

Webster's New World Dictionary defines addiction as "... to give (oneself) up to some strong habit..." Anytime you or I have a compulsion to repeat a behavior, be that a mental rumination or a craving to seek out an activity, be it the physical ingesting of a mood altering drug or ingesting unpleasant and mood altering thoughts, then you have an addiction. We believe the term "saddict" is appropriate for any of us who had the "habit" the "addiction" to beat ourselves up with a continued stream of unpleasant ruminations (thoughts and mental images) about ourselves, others, the future and our world.

What we learn is that the twelve step program of recovery can be used to overcome any compulsive/addictive behavior for that person who sincerely wants to get emotionally, physically and spiritually healthy. The beauty of a self-help group is that a person finds acceptance from the group. No one is there telling you to "snap out of it" or that your depression is all in your mind. The one thing that you will hear at the group meetings is that if you keep coming back, you will get better.

It has been our experience that those who keep coming back to meetings week after week always get better. Now, that's some promise! I've been in the program for twelve years and I have not had a relapse in that time. I am undepressed today! I give thanks to my higher power and the fellowship of Depressed Anonymous

Source: Depressed Anonymous. Harmony House Publishers, 1998.

INTRODUCTION TO

DEPRESSED ANONYMOUS

Life is unpredictable! Every living organism operates with a certain amount of unpredictability and uncertainty. The uncertainty of life creates in us a desire for predictability. If we did not believe in the possibility of change, we would all be hopelessly lost and forever bored. Hope would be lost. Potential for a better life would never exist. When there is hope, change is possible. The experience of depression is much the same. Depression is so predictable and unchanging that we lose hope for the pain of our isolation ever coming to an end.

WHAT IT WAS LIKE

More than ten years ago, I began to notice that something was very wrong with the way I was feeling. I can tell you exactly the place and the time when a terrible sadness began to swallow me up. I felt myself, without warning, sliding down and into the dark pit from which I was not able to climb out for a year of painful months. Feelings of inner pain and numbness descended upon me and began to rule my life.

At the time, I thought this descent into hell came from "out of the blue" but, like all feelings we experience, I knew that because of situations in my personal past, my emotional reservoir was overdrawn. My reactions to these situations had allowed thoughts and feelings to accumulate a wealth of debt whose note had come due.

I gradually found it more difficult to get out of bed in the morning. I began to experience a feeling of hollowness of spirit gnawing at me from the inside -- much like an out of control cancer. This black mood was eating away all that once interested me and I began to feel helpless and out of control. I felt that I was no longer able to retain mastery over my own life.

This painful sadness which began to grow gradually from a small-unnoticed seed was unconsciously nurtured to full and frightening heights by my own life choices. It overwhelmed my mind and spirit. My life had become unmanageable. Finally, I had to admit that I was powerless over that something which began to have a life of its own. Looking back over my life and experiences I discovered that my thoughts produced the feelings, the feelings produced moods and

the moods produced my behaviors. The mind-body connection is never as much in evidence as it is in this human experience that we label depression.

My depression, with its concomitant restlessness and despair, had been developing gradually over a period of a few months as one loss after another began to accumulate: the loss of a relationship with a woman friend; the fact that my dad was dying; leaving a career of twenty years; having to say good-bye to hundreds of friends; struggling inwardly with having to move back in with my parents at middle age and depending on them for help. At the time I moved back home my dad was recuperating from a massive heart attack and his health was failing fast. This was a great personal loss to me.

Within a month of returning home I entered a local university and started work on a Master's degree in counseling psychology. The studies did not come easy. A few months after I started my degree I found employment in an entry-level position, assisting minority persons who were unemployed. Because of political infighting this position came to be burdensome. I earned my degree, left my job and moved into private practice. Shortly after that I began to feel like I was walking into a fog. My mind was blank and my feelings were continually on edge. I felt as if a large hole with jagged edges was located between my gut and my throat. The pain that this produced became a daily reminder that something was not right. The anxiety and jitteriness was enhanced when I began having trouble getting out of bed in the morning. I also had this strong desire to go to bed as soon as I got off work. I could hardly wait to sleep off whatever had me by the throat. I had lost interest in everything and everybody and just wanted to medicate myself with sleep.

The fact that I quit smoking a few months after my dad died was also a large contributing factor in depressing myself. Over the years the cigarette had become a great friend. This friend was there when I was happy, or when I was nervous, or when I had just finished a meal or had a cup of coffee. It was like an alcoholic who craves just one more drink.

Whatever we humans do must have meaning. I lost my dad; my relationship with my woman friend was over; my role and identity as Christian minister with a ministry of 20 years. Friends of many years were out of my life and, most important of all, I felt that I had lost myself. I felt alone and worthless. If I saw someone laughing or having a good time it irritated me. How dare anyone smile while I felt so miserable? The feeling made me think that my brain was made of cotton. I couldn't shove another thought into my head. It was as if the cells of my brain had died.

There was nothing I could do to shake these horrible and painful feelings. My mind was unable to focus on or to concentrate on anything. My memory was affected and it was impossible to retain anything I tried to read. With each new day I felt my strength ebbing away. I was physically and emotionally drained. I knew that something was wrong -- but what was it?

WHAT HAPPENED?

The answer to this question seemed to lie within all the losses that I had accumulated over the past months. I had slipped down into the slippery and dark world known only to someone who has been depressed. I had to do something besides talking to break out of depression. I had to change the way that I lived my life. First I had to admit that my life was out of control. I was powerless to overcome my symptoms of depression by will power alone. I needed to believe in a power greater than myself. I had to have a spiritual experience. Having been in ministry for many years, I thought I had had a deep spiritual experience but I seemed to have lost it along the way.

I began to walk five miles a day inside a mall near my home to shake this awful feeling of emptiness that had taken over my very life. I set myself this goal to force myself to walk 'til I started to feel better. This was about a year following that day in August when I felt myself slipping into the abyss. After doing this exercise of walking day after day for a week I began to feel a little better. But then the old message came back and said, "yes, but this good feeling won't last." Of course it didn't last. Then I knew that since I had good days before the depression, I could have a good day again. I kept on walking and within time; I walked through the fog that had imprisoned me.

But I had to do the work! Did my symptoms have me imprisoned or did the meaning that I had created in my mind about my life have me imprisoned? I believe it was the meaning that I had given to those losses in my life that gradually threw me to the ground; hog tied me, and wouldn't let me go. I had to believe that somehow my walking gave meaning to the belief that I wasn't going to let these feelings of helplessness beat me down. I just believed that I was going to beat this thing! I learned a great lesson here in that "motivation follows action."

Previous to my own depression I had worked one on one with a client named Jane. Jane was depressed and confined to her home following quadruple by-pass surgery just weeks before I met with her in her home. I was learning hands-on counseling and my supervisor gave permission for me to practice my counseling skills with Jane. After seeing Jane for ten weeks I saw that she was beginning to improve and began to regain interest in cartooning and poetry writing, things that had given her pleasure before her heart attack. I started thinking -- if Jane could connect with others who

were depressed and participate in a 12-step group she might get better. She might find the same help that other hurting folks who utilize the suggested spiritual principles of a 12-step program of recovery have found.

In May of 1985 I started a 12-step group known as Depressed Anonymous. I had the conviction that a person depressed could find the same strength and serenity, as did those who, sick and tired of being sick and tired, had found when they stumbled into their first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. It began as a pilot project at the university where depressed people gathered as a mutual aid group. I discovered that people of all ages, beliefs, and occupations could gradually get out of the prison of depression if they were part of a supportive group, especially if the group followed the suggested 12 steps of the group now known as Depressed Anonymous. I saw that a 12-step program centered specifically on the subject of depression could help people escape isolation and the painful sense of hopelessness. They would no longer feel alone.

WHAT IT'S LIKE TODAY:

All members of the pilot group got better after a number of months of meeting together and applying the 12 steps to their lives. Others started to come, and this was the beginning of a group that is now slowly spreading from place to place and from community to community.

Those of us who have lived with depression on a daily basis know despair. For those who have depended principally on drugs and therapy and have found no relief --then this program is a good place for you. For those who have the courage to stay and are willing to go to any lengths to have what we have found, then this personal faith and persistence of yours will begin to pay off. That's a promise from us to you!

Once I finally admitted I was powerless and began to act out of a belief that I wasn't God it was quite a relief to surrender my trust to a Higher Power! (Steps 1, 2, 3.)

Many of us have suffered for so long that we want a quick fix now. It doesn't work that way. You will hear the success stories of those who have returned week after week and 'worked' the 12 steps to recovery. You can read personal stories of hope and renewal in this book.

We now have a solution to offer those who want to reach out and grasp onto this new way of life. A life that is now focused on recovery and a feeling of hope. With this offer and solution daily before our eyes we are beginning to see that the depressed have to depend on that spiritual experience in order to really be free from that debilitating scourge of depression. It is this spiritual

experience, coupled with the power of the fellowship of those like ourselves where we neither need to explain or excuse ourselves or apologize for being depressed, that is the basis for our recovery.

You must want to begin this journey seriously enough to actually take those beginning steps. Someday I hope to know you as a kindred spirit in recovery.

Source: (c) DEPRESSED ANONYMOUS. Harmony House Publishers, 1998.

THERAPISTS VIEWS ON DEPRESSED ANONYMOUS.

THE "BIRTH" OF A DEPRESSED ANONYMOUS GROUP

Judith Bouffiou, Ph.D. (Cand.), Olympia, Washington

Isn't life just full of expected and unexpected challenges, synchronous happenings, joys and griefs. Your life and mine. Following is a synopsis of a time in my life when I experienced all of the above.

The summer of 1991 saw the dissolving of a business partnership for me; a painful, but healthy decision. The counseling center my ex-partner and I operated had provided the community with a Domestic Violence/Anger Management (DV/AM) Program for court and self referred clients, plus each of us had a private practice. My decision to dissolve the partnership was motivated by a number of reasons, among them a desire to go back to school, and to spend more time and energy in my private practice. Over time my private practice had evolved into a growth and development type of practice, which I loved doing. Along with the dissolution of the partnership came the decision to no longer do the DV/AM work. I had a desire to still give the community some type of community service, but what?

Then I remembered reading some time earlier in one of my professional journals about a man who had developed a Twelve-step program, Depressed Anonymous for individuals who suffered from depression. Like most therapists, a significant number of the people I saw (and still see) in my practice were experiencing depression to one degree or other.

The more I thought about the concept of Depressed Anonymous, the more intrigued I was, so I contacted the founder of Depressed Anonymous for information and details. Information was sent to me and that was the start of the first Depressed Anonymous group in Washington State.

From the Depressed Anonymous material I received, I photocopied, organized, prepared and

advertized. I decided on a start time and date, sent notices to our local paper, our Crisis Clinic, therapists and physicians in this area, tacked up flyers all over town, and of course, lots of word of mouth advertizing. The Depressed Anonymous group originally met in a group room at my office, and eventually moved to a local church when I moved into a smaller office space.

As a therapist I organized, started, sponsored, and "mothered" the Depressed Anonymous group for a time, before withdrawing to just being the phone contact person that people can call in for information. From the very first meetings, which had 8-10 people, a "home" group evolved; fine people, some of whom had previous Twelve-step experiences. One of fine traditions and legacies of Twelve-step groups is the willingness of folks to be and do the supportive and necessary work (the glue) that holds the Twelve-step groups together. The Twelve-step tradition and service continues on.

As is often the case, I have received more than I've given as the person who organized and started this Olympia, Washington Depressed Anonymous group. Now that I'm not a person who suffers from depression, other than short term appropriate situational depression; nothing ever deep or prolonged. As I organized and started this Depressed Anonymous group little did I know that I would benefit from the Depressed Anonymous process and group in such a personal way.

The Depressed Anonymous group had only met two or three times when my middle son unexpectedly died from a type of cancer that years before had taken his father. So, in a synchronous manner, for a time and in a different way, the Depressed Anonymous group supported me as much as I supported them. In my prior work as a nurse, I had often been witness to dying and death, also in my personal life. However, the death of one son and then a year and half later, the death of my oldest son (two out of three) have been devastating experiences for me.

So in many, many ways being the organizer and sponsor of the first Depressed Anonymous group have been an exceedingly enriching experience for me. As mentioned before, because of the wonderful people in the group, and with great confidence on my part, I turned the operation of the Depressed Anonymous group over to the capable hands of the home group people. I remain the telephone contact. The Depressed Anonymous group continues to thrive and grow. Just recently I talked with a man from Portland, Oregon, who is thinking about starting a group in the Portland area. I urged him to do so, as I'm sure he'll find his experience as richly rewarding as mine has been.

Thank you for offering me the opportunity to share this positive experience with you.

MY VIEWS ON DEPRESSED ANONYMOUS

Denise L., Louisville, Kentucky

One of the greatest resources I've used in working with many depressed persons has been Depressed Anonymous. The transformation it causes in an individual's life is truly miraculous. This stems from it being primarily a spiritual program of healing and recovery. It encourages a person to seek a personal relationship with God, whoever they understand him to be. In doing this it helps a person to look inside for healing, rather than in a pill or some quick "cure". Many persons who suffer with depression look on God as a being who judges them harshly. This thinking usually leads to much anger towards God, which results in more negative thinking. I know this from my own experiences with depression, and the angry relationship with God I had during those times. This is where Depressed Anonymous offers hope by getting a person connected to a group who also suffer with depression, and are working the twelve steps. In doing this, it helps a person come to a realization that it will only be through a power greater than themselves, that they will find sanity in their life. Depressed people cannot do this alone because of the compulsion to ruminate endlessly over negative thoughts. It is only through coming together with a group of people like Depressed Anonymous, that they are able to break the cycle of negative thinking.

A client I was working with is a good example of the above. He spent his time alone and many countless hours thinking of all the disappointments in his life, which continually reinforced his depression. Then he started going to DA, and found that through being with other people like himself, he didn't feel as alone as he did before. He started sharing his pain, and found understanding and support. Then I noticed his face began to soften, and he started smiling more. Then I noticed his face began to soften, and he started smiling more. He also found help spiritually from DA, for he started working the twelve steps, and as a result he started trusting God more for his healing. He is one of many persons I've worked with who have found help and encouragement through attending DA.

The spiritual emphasis of DA is its greatest strength. People come together and hear from one another how their higher power is healing and guiding their lives. They realize that in being part of the group they are not alone, and also encourage true healing. DA has been a wonderful healing tool in the lives of many depressed persons I've worked with. It will always be one of the greatest resources I use in my work. It is true that "it works if you work it."