

Coping with Depression--Enhancing Your Relationships and Lifestyle

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If you are depressed, you have perhaps wondered what is causing your depression. There is no single answer to this question. Chapter/handout 6 (“Coping with Negative Thinking in Depression”) explores one side of this problem. However, as powerful as negative thinking can be in causing depression, it is not the whole story. For many people, depression is triggered when they become dissatisfied with their most important relationships or when those relationships have become dysfunctional and no longer meet deeply felt personal needs for companionship or closeness.

The effect is a two way street: depression can damage relationships, and the crippling of relationships can bring on depression. A negative cycle can build up in which the depressed person withdraws more and more, resulting in the loss of practical and emotional support from others. Too often, the depressed person has only a few friends to turn to when they need advice or when they need to share some feelings or problems. It is ironic that even though depression generally benefits from social support, the disorder also tends to interfere with relationships which would be helpful. Depressed individuals may not realize that they need these things and may feel that they don't want to be “bothered” by other persons. They have little energy to deal with people, and there is often a strong tendency to withdraw. Depressed individuals sometimes unintentionally push people away by being irritable and disagreeable or, just the opposite, by being clinging and very needy of emotional support. However, research has repeatedly shown how important friendships and social support are in preventing and overcoming depression.

A useful part of treatment can be to focus on developing friendships or improving family relationships. When a person first begins treatment, however, their energy levels are so low, that it is difficult to make new friends. This is another part of the vicious cycle. The depressed person needs friends, but they don't have the energy to make new friendships. One alternative in this situation is to renew old acquaintances, which takes less energy than starting an entirely new relationship.

There is considerable research showing that improving the quality of the connection with a spouse or partner is an effective way of treating depression. Marriage acts as a “safe haven” for many people--a place to come to heal from the stresses of life. The natural tendency for a person under stress may be to look to their primary relationship for support, and when the marriage is functioning properly, it can be of great value in diminishing stress and lowering levels of depression. Almost everyone has certain basic interpersonal needs for companionship and support. People benefit from having someone to talk to about their problems and knowing that they do not have to face problems alone.

Once two people are married, they can truly say, “We are all in this together.” The stress and depression levels of a spouse directly affect the depression level of the other spouse. Studies

have found that persons with marital distress and unhappiness have between a tenfold and 25-fold increase in depression over happily married individuals. Criticism from a spouse has a very negative effect on depression. In one study, it was the single best predictor of whether persons successfully treated for depression would later have a relapse.

A sense of despair can occur in either sex when one partner begins to feel that a close, satisfying relationship cannot be achieved. However, the self-esteem of women tends to be highly affected by relationship quality, and relationship stress appears to hit them especially hard. Depressed women have been found to be very self-blaming when relationships are going poorly. They tend to treat their own needs as less important than those of the rest of the family. They often expect themselves to be selfless and sometimes have a type of "superwoman mentality"--that they should be able to do everything for everybody without meeting their own needs. To fulfill all of the roles which they think they should fulfill is to be "good" whereas to meet one's own needs is seen as "selfish." Women often feel guilty for having a job and trying to fulfill two different roles in marriage. They generally perform more of the housework and more of the hands on parenting, even when they are holding a full time job. But it is not always marital relationships that cause the problems. Dating relationships and long term live in relationships can as well. One study found college students had more depressed feelings as quickly as one day after problems in relationships occurred.

The desire of the wife to meet everyone else's needs in the family may be reinforced by the husband's behavior. In some relationships when women do ask for their own needs to be met, they can be hit with "stonewalling" and silence. This can be a form of control by the other person, attempting to direct the relationship through emotional withdrawal. In response to this, women may intentionally bury their own needs and feelings. Thus, the problem in some relationships may not be that women lack assertiveness skills or the ability to express themselves. Instead, they may actively silence themselves in order to preserve harmony in the relationship. Moreover, they may believe that to speak up and rock the boat would be "bad" since they would no longer be self-sacrificing and pleasing to the other person.

Women with young children are particularly vulnerable to depression, probably because of the constant physical and psychological demands which are put on them. This is made worse when they feel that their current husband or partner is not giving them any help or attention. It is also more of a problem when they do not have other women to turn to in order to share their problems and talk about their stresses. But the importance of a social support network is not confined to young mothers; it also relates to other ages as well, throughout the life span.

Getting Personal

Which of the following interpersonal stresses do you have that might relate to your depression?

Divorce, marital separation, or breakup of relationship

Relationship conflict or marital conflict

Grief

Loneliness

Feeling shy in groups; not knowing what to do or say

Being overly dependent on one or two persons for friendship

Pulling away from people--social withdrawal

Not knowing how to approach others for friendship

Being criticized by friends or family

Did You Know?

Women experience twice as much depression as men. This occurs the world over. Not just in the United States.

Severe life events, such as a divorce or the loss of a relationship, are major triggers of depression.

Depression in the mother is the strongest predictor of depression in children and adolescents. The quality of the mother child relationship is the strongest predictor of the long term outcome of depressed children.

The most important determinants of depression in women are poverty; having young children; lacking a close, confiding relationship; and having a non-communicative, hostile spouse.

Three Harbingers of Depression--Isolation, Shyness, and Loneliness

Think of social support as a web or net. If pressure is put on the middle of a net where the strings come together (i.e., where one of the knots would be), then that point does not give very much because it is anchored on four different sides. In the same way, if pressure is put on a person who has a good social support network, then they tend to be held in place by other parts of their social net. On the other hand, if a person has little or no support, they may sometimes feel more like a piece of string blowing in the wind, with no anchor. So when stress occurs, some people have a good support net and are well anchored. There are people they can turn to for help or to talk. There are relationships which will continue to provide a feeling of normalcy when there is significant change in their life. Other people without such networks are much more affected by difficult life circumstances because they must face them by themselves.

Persons who are shy appear to be particularly prone to depression. Shyness is likely to be a genetically determined personality trait, becoming evident as early as the first year of life. It is a personality characteristic which does not change much over time. Shyness makes it difficult for people to form the relationships they need for support. The tendency to become depressed for shy people is greatest when faced with a stressful situation, perhaps because it is at that time that they most need support. The high level of mobility of our population makes shyness and

difficulty forming relationships even more of a problem than it was in the past. The one or two close relationships which a shy person might have can be quickly disrupted by a job transfer, or by a person moving to another state to retire. Fortunately, some shy individuals actually have very good relationships, and for these persons, there is no apparent increased vulnerability to depression.

An issue related to shyness is loneliness. One study found that approximately one fourth of the population experiences this problem to an uncomfortable degree. Like shy persons, lonely individuals are more likely to become depressed. People who are lonely often need to be taught social skills in therapy so that they are better able to form and maintain relationships. There are other causes for loneliness than poor social skills and shyness, however. Divorce, having to move to another city, or being ill, can isolate persons from friends and family. Having to disrupt one's life to care for an elderly parent who lives in another town would be an example of an event which could be beyond a person's control, isolating them and perhaps even bring on some degree of depression.

Getting Personal:

Tell Others What You Do and Don't Want From Them When You Are Depressed

What is it that you want from others when you are depressed? If you don't tell them, they may not understand what you need. But first, you have to figure out what you need from them. What YOU need is very personal and individual. One person might experience the statement that "things are really not as bad as they seem to you" as a discounting, put down statement, and another depressed person might experience that as reassuring. You need to let people know what is helpful to you. Do you want them to:

*Try to understand how you are feeling?
Try to engage you in activities or "fun" tasks?
Give you advice?
Get you out of the house?
Listen?
Talk to you?
Be available?
Be loving?
Encourage you?
Be patient with your healing and treatment process?
Accept you as an individual?*

Perhaps you want them NOT to:

*Tell you to "snap out of it"
Tell you it's all in your head
Belittle you for being in treatment
Patronize you (treat you like a child)*

Be overprotective

Criticize you for being depressed

Give you simplistic advice about getting out of depression

Tell you a lot of their problems

Things to Do

Have you let family relationships go? Have you waited for them to contact you rather than you contacting them? What are you afraid will happen if you contact them? Are you separated from them by resentments? Or by guilt? Select a family member that you haven't been in contact with for awhile. Consider contacting them and strengthening that bond.

Select a friend that you haven't been in contact with. Contact them and renew that relationship.



Points to Ponder

Why do you think that it is helpful for people to be able to talk with others about their problems? Why is that more helpful than, say, just thinking about one's problems? What do you experience when you talk to others about your problems that is different from simply thinking about your problems? Are there times that you have been helped by talking with others? Are there times that you have been helped by staying to yourself and thinking about your problems? Which seems to be most helpful to you?

Have there been persons that you approached to talk that helped you? Persons that didn't help you? What was the difference between the two? Was there a difference in how you approached them? Or was the difference in how they responded to you?

Not all social support networks are created equal. How helpful are the people that you turn to when you are down? Do they listen to you without being judgmental? Or do they sometimes add to your feelings of inadequacy and/or stress?

Why do you think men are less likely to talk about their problems than women? Do you think that men need to talk as much about their problems and depression as women do?

FAQ: Frequently asked questions

Q. You say that it is important to have friends and be with people. What's wrong with

being by myself, if that's what I feel like doing when I'm depressed? If I'm happy spending time alone by myself, what's the problem with that? Isn't the main thing to do what makes me feel good?

A. Yes and no. Having high quality social relationships appears to be very important to emotional well being in the long run. What feels good at the moment may not be what makes you feel good an hour later, 6 days later, or 6 months later. Sometimes when we are depressed, we don't want to relate to people. In fact, we may simply want to sit in a dark room. However, that will not improve your depression over a period of days and weeks.

Q. I know that I need to get out more, but when it comes time to leave, I back out. I feel tired, or I get anxious about being around people. What can I do about that?

A. It can take a half an hour, an hour, or even more to get going to an event or party. During this time, you may feel more tension or depression as you have to make decisions about what to wear, where to go, and so on. The easiest thing to do is to stay home and watch TV. After getting over this initial period of unpleasantness or exertion, however, you are likely to feel better when you are actually out of the house and in a social situation. We call this getting "over the hump." Here are some ways to get past it:

--Remind yourself that you will not feel better in the long run by staying home.

--Try to imagine how much enjoyment you might have at the event. Focus on the pleasure you might have. This is difficult for a depressed person, but try.

--Commit yourself to go ahead of time. Arrange for a ride to pick you up. Pay for tickets. Tell someone you will meet them there--anything to commit yourself.

--Pay attention to whether your mood improves after you get there. In this way, you will have some ammunition to convince yourself to get out the next time.

Relationship Problems, Poor Choices, and Depression

Depressed persons have been found to have greater difficulty reasoning through interpersonal problems and coming up with good solutions. The lack of physical and mental energy that occur, along with the lack of motivation, undermine the interest or ability to find good solutions to difficulties. What is one to do with a child who is having problems in school? What should be said to a husband who is starting to drink too much? Or to a landlord that won't fix a leak in the roof? Poor problem solving strategies can lead to difficulties going unresolved and thus to greater stress. In turn, greater stress can lead to more depression. There is some research that suggests that poor choices by individuals actually create some of the stresses and depression that they experience. Studies focusing on college women, for example, have shown that poor interpersonal problem solving can lead to later depression.

Depressed Persons Often Place Themselves in Situations Where They Receive Negative Feedback

According to some research, mildly depressed persons tend to vacillate between seeking reassurance from others, and at other times setting themselves up for negative feedback. Why would a person who is already feeling bad encourage criticism? The reason for this may be that a negative view of them is consistent with what they already believe about themselves. It may seem familiar and perhaps even comfortable in a paradoxical way. But whatever the reason for this behavior, it is important that depressed persons try to counteract it. If you find yourself surrounded by negative, critical, or rigid people, consider whether it wouldn't be in your best interest to associate more with some different friends who would give you positive feedback more often. Also, you may need to reflect on whether you are doing or saying things which in some way invite criticism. Finally, the research showed that when persons exhibited all three characteristics at once--depression, negative feedback seeking, and reassurance seeking--it tended to drive others away.

Getting Personal

Have you made decisions (such as choosing an emotionally or physically abusive mate, or not completing school) which later caused significant stress and contributed to the development of depression? It is important to be able to look at bad decisions that you have made in an objective way without blaming yourself and thus deepening your depression.

Depressed Persons and Emotional Dependency

Another interpersonal problem which leads to depression is dependency--an excessive need for help and reassurance from others. Problems can arise when persons depend too much upon others for their self-esteem and good feelings about themselves.

Dependency can take a variety of forms:

A man puts one individual at the center of his life, avoiding relationships with other men or women.

A woman wants to be around her boyfriend all of the time and avoids spending time by herself.

A young man has difficulty leaving home because of the anxiety of living on his own.

A person feels worthwhile only when others are acting in a loving or approving manner.

A woman asks for repeated reassurance from her boyfriend that he cares about her and will not leave her.

The need which a person feels for high levels of emotional or practical support may not be real but only imagined. For example, the wife of an alcoholic may think that she cannot live without her husband, when in fact she is earning a good salary, paying the bills, taking care of all of the household and childcare duties, and mowing the grass. The sense of needing her husband to depend on may be a feeling which has little to do with reality.

Dependency is different from healthy interrelatedness. In a healthy relationship, we are aware of our strong feelings for our mate. We are usually aware that should divorce or death occur it would be very hard on us. However, we also realize that we would still be worthwhile, valuable persons, even without the companionship and love of the spouse. We realize that we can go on without them, even if it would be painful. Moreover, in a healthy relationship we provide just as much of the practical help and emotional support to our mate as they do to us. We are able to make decisions in the relationship which are in our best interest and do not allow ourselves to be abused and put down. We are not willing to go to any lengths just to hold the relationship together.

It is important for both depressed and non-depressed persons to preserve their individuality in a relationship. They need some degree of independence so that they still have a recreational and social life of their own. No relationship can be expected to meet all of one's needs. Moreover, there will inevitably be times in any relationship when there is tension and friction with the other partner. On those occasions, it is important to have other sources of social and emotional support. It is also useful to have individual interests and activities that bring feelings of satisfaction and pleasure. One way of overcoming excessive dependence is to gradually build a life for oneself which involves a variety of people and activities. This might involve

- developing new hobbies
- making new friends
- finding an organization to participate in and developing a sense of belonging
- going back to school and/or pursuing a career
- strengthening family bonds with parents, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, etc.
- developing an exercise program or otherwise enhancing one's appearance
- finding ways of contributing to the community

A further dilemma for the depressed person who is becoming dependent upon others is that family and friends can become upset with them. As a depression goes on, others may begin to be frustrated or even angry. If he repeatedly asks for reassurance, he may start to get negative feedback from others. As friends and family tire of trying to shore up the self-esteem of the depressed individual, the reassurance they give may become less frequent as well as less convincing. They may seem to distance themselves or even become outright rejecting. This is the last thing which a depressed person wants. It tends to reaffirm that he is worthless and undesirable.

This is not to say that it is abnormal to need relationships with others or to seek out reassurance in times of stress. Even persons with positive self-esteem can use such support and are not impervious to rejection. However, people who repeatedly seek reassurance may eventually bring on further difficulties for themselves. If asking for reassurance is the main way of coping for an individual, they may neglect to find ways of working on their problems by themselves. In addition, there are certain ways of seeking reassurance that are likely to be particularly bothersome to others. For example, whining, pleading, threatening suicide, telling others that we can't live without them, and so on, are generally experienced as unpleasant by people and

eventually tend to push them away.

Of course, it is easier to decide to stop asking for reassurance than to actually stop. One solution can be to broaden one's social support network so that no one particular friend is feeling overly burdened. In addition, finding ways to be with people without actually asking them for reassurance can be useful. The therapy relationship can provide support until one is stronger and better able to cope on one's own. Developing ways of coping by oneself as outlined in this and other chapter/handouts in this book is very important.

Another alternative would be to join a support group. If you can't find one in your town, you may want to start one. There are national organizations which can send you information about the process. For example, the Depressive and Manic Depressive Association has affiliated groups meeting around the country. (See the end of this chapter for more information.) If you have had alcohol problems, you may benefit from Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. There is also a group for persons with a variety of mental disorders called Recovery, Inc. Many communities also have local support groups not affiliated with any particular national organization. Feeling a part of a group of people who like you and accept you can be very healing. It is also possible to become involved in other types of groups where the focus is on volunteering and helping in the community. These kinds of organizations also provide opportunities for meeting people and developing relationships. In addition, altruistic behavior, that is being helpful to others, can lessen depression.

Things to Do: Developing Friendships and Acquaintanceships

The process of making new friends who are encouraging and positive can seem like a difficult, if not overwhelming task, especially for persons that have had difficulty with this before they were depressed. Indeed, it is not a quick and easy process, and for this reason, it is often more feasible for the depressed person to renew old relationships before trying to create new ones. As depression improves, it then becomes easier to start up new friendships.

A first step in developing a new relationship can be to meet people in an organizational or group context. This could be in a lodge, a church, a synagogue, a PTA, a neighborhood meeting, or just people who live around you. It is helpful to learn peoples' names. Once you learn their name, they will be more likely to feel the need to learn your name as well. Learn about the other persons. Show an interest in them and ask non-intrusive questions. This process begins to build a circle of acquaintances, that is people who know you know at a relatively surface level. Even this more superficial form of relationship can be helpful. When people recognize us and know who we are, it helps confirm our sense of self, and to some degree feelings of self-worth.

A second step would be to ask an acquaintance to join you in doing something outside of the group context. Rather than only talking with them at a meeting, you could see if they would like to go out to eat, play racquetball, see a movie, and so on. Once you and the other person are interacting on a one to one basis outside of an organizational setting, then the relationship has

started to move beyond just an acquaintanceship to being a friendship.

Finally, as time goes on, you may want to test the waters in terms of deepening the friendship. You might eventually want to share something personal and see how the other person reacts. Are they accepting of what you say, or are they critical? Do they reciprocate and share something about themselves, or do they keep that kind of information private? Another way of deepening the relationship is to be available to help the other person and to call upon them when you need help. This generally needs to be balanced so that both of you feel that you are benefitting from the relationship. When there is mutual self-disclosure and helping of each other, then there are the beginnings of a close friendship.

Getting Personal

Here are some questions to help you evaluate your social support network.

How many friends do you have that you can turn to if you have problems or need to talk? How many acquaintances do you have? In what organizational settings do you have these acquaintances (neighborhood, church, PTA, etc.)? Who can you call to talk to if you have problems?

Does your spouse try to limit your friendships, or do they encourage you to have friends? Have they ever caused you to give up relationships?

Are there friendships that you have let go that could be renewed?

Are you involved in an organization, church, synagogue, club, VFW, union, or lodge? Is there somewhere you can go as in the TV show "Cheers" where "everybody knows your name?"

If you feel lonely and isolated, what would be some specific steps that you could take to work on this issue?



Points to Ponder

Despite considerable research literature indicating that having friends and social activities is important for staying out of depression, many depressed persons insist that they don't want friends and don't want to socialize. Even when they are out of their depression, they may resist forming relationships. Why do you think this might be?

Depressed Persons Sometimes Surround Themselves with Negative, Critical People

With what kinds of persons do you associate? And what kinds of friends, roommates, or spouse do you choose for yourself? The interactions you have with the people around you are important in determining how you feel. Recent research suggests that depressed people have such low opinions of themselves that they unconsciously tend to seek out people who will agree with those negative views. As strange as it may seem, even though it can feel bad to get negative feedback and criticism from others, the depressed person may be uncomfortable with being seen in a positive light, perhaps because that would contradict how they see themselves. In addition, the depressed person may actually provoke negative feedback from others and take an interest in it. It is important not only to surround yourself with positive individuals but to make sure that you take note of their complimentary comments and supportive behaviors towards you.

Spousal criticism is especially detrimental to the depressed person. Research has shown that persons who recover from depression are more likely to relapse, i.e., develop a new episode of depression, if they receive criticism at home. If your spouse is critical, then marital therapy may be helpful to deal with that issue. Sometimes spouses simply do not understand the nature of depression. They may believe that it is only a feeling and that a person can “snap out of it” if they try to. Or, on the other hand, a spouse can become fatigued trying to be supportive of their depressed mate, leading to resentment on their part. Having a chance to talk to your therapist or to discuss these issues in marital counseling can enlighten your spouse about the nature of depression and perhaps lead them to be less critical.

Using Energy Surges to Improve Relationships

At some point in the treatment of depression, the depressed person is likely to feel an unexpected surge of energy. Good feelings start to emerge. They experience some mental and physical vigor which they didn't have before. At times like these the natural tendency is to simply want to enjoy it--to take it easy and enjoy living in a way that they haven't been able to for a long time. But it is important to invest this newfound vitality into making new friendships and developing a social support network. These bursts of energy may be short lived. It is easy to take them for granted and to assume that they are going to continue. However, that unfortunately is often not the case. These periods can be compared to a situation where a person suddenly comes into an unexpected sum of money, such as winning a lottery. It would be normal to want to immediately enjoy it and spend a certain amount of the new wealth. But one might also want to put some of it into a savings account or certificate of deposit which would be available soon but which would also earn interest and be an investment. A third portion might be put into some type of very long term investment, such as bonds or stocks. In the same way, the newfound energy that occurs during the treatment of the depressed person can be enjoyed, but it can also be invested. What would it mean to invest this kind of energy? A short-term investment might involve recontacting friends whom you have not seen for awhile. Perhaps it has been a few months since talking with them. This kind of contact can pay very quick dividends and rewards. It doesn't take much energy to get back together with old friends and to enjoy being with them. What would a long-term investment be? This might involve deepening a relationship with someone who has

only been an acquaintance until now, or It might involve starting a totally new friendship. It might also consist of joining a new organization or church. Starting from scratch is the hardest way to make friendships and to develop the social support network. However, in some circumstances, starting at the beginning to develop new relationships may be unavoidable.

Attachment Style and Depression

Psychologists and mental health professionals have found that there are at least three fundamental ways or styles in which we relate to others. These styles appear to be relatively enduring over a period of years, and perhaps for a lifetime. They involve how we bond with others and the nature of our attachments to people. These styles of bonding are thought to begin in our childhood relationships with our parents and to continue into our adult years. The three basic styles of attachment are

- Secure attachment
- Avoidant attachment
- Anxious attachment.

As the name implies, the **Secure** attachment style describes people who generally do not worry about whether significant others are going to be available to them. While they realize that any relationship can be disrupted, they do not feel anxious about it or dwell on it. They feel relatively assured about the stability of their friendships and ties with family members. These persons appear to be more resistant to depression.

On the other hand, some persons keep their distance in relationships and avoid closeness. It is as if they want to avoid becoming vulnerable to others. Persons with this kind of **Avoidant** attachment style may have had very negative experiences in childhood with caregivers, involving neglect, physical or emotional abuse, or separation. They tend to keep relationship partners at arm's length and avoid true closeness and intimacy. They prevent others from becoming too important to them emotionally.

Finally, there are people who very much want intimacy but because of life experiences have come to view relationships as unpredictable. While they continue to seek closeness, they don't feel that they can depend on it being there when they need it. In fact, they worry a great deal about losing relationships that have been established. Persons with this style of attachment--the **Anxious** style--feel vulnerable to being left behind. There is a strong desire to be very close to another person; yet at the same time there is an equally strong fear of being abandoned and hurt. These persons are prone to develop psychological symptoms, including depression, when interpersonal stress occurs.

Getting Personal

Did you have a depressed parent? If so, how did your parent interact with you when they

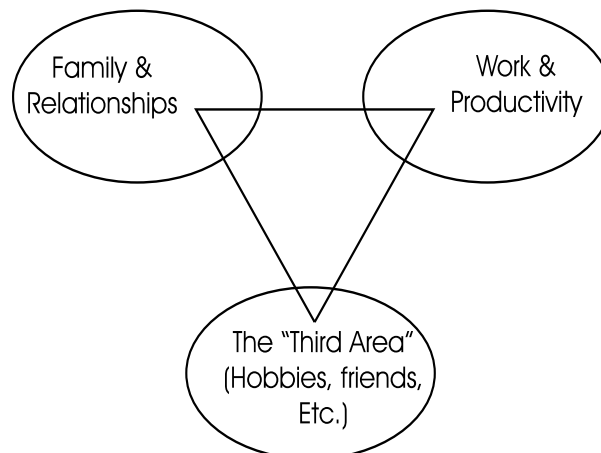
were depressed? Did they withdraw? If they did, what kind of message did you get from their behavior? In other words, did you blame yourself or feel that there was something wrong with you because of how they acted toward you? Do you remember getting encouraging statements from your parents? How positive are the current significant persons in your life? Who has been more positive towards you--your parents or your current spouse or significant others?

Developing Pleasurable Activities

The Need for Diversity in Life

A full life requires that we have a variety of types of pleasures and satisfactions, including not only a home life, but leisure interests, friends, and so on. Some persons, however, settle into a routine of getting their needs met primarily in just one or two areas, such as their relationship with their spouse, their family, or their job. This arrangement may seem to be suitable for awhile. However, when life circumstances change or stresses occur, then an overly restricted lifestyle may reveal itself as being inadequate. For example, our spouse may become unavailable to us for some reason, such as illness, divorce, or going away on business trips. Our job may change from being a source of satisfaction to a cause of stress.

Even having two major sources of interest and satisfaction--work and home--can be a problem. Under normal circumstances, when one area is stressful, the other can be a place to retreat to and be less pressured. People can tolerate stress at work, or they can tolerate stress at home, but they do not deal well with stress at work and home. This double barreled stress can lead to depression. If a person is resilient under such strain, it usually seems to be because they have a "third area" of life, which is outside of both work and home. For these reasons, it is important for persons to have a variety of sources of support and satisfaction in life. A well balanced life might look like this:



The “Third Area” involves friends, hobbies, volunteer organizations, church or synagogue, lodges, clubs, exercise, travel, further education, and everything which does not fall under the categories of family and work. Having a full life in this area makes us less vulnerable to stresses from our primary relationship and from work. Of course, there are pressures which can come from the third area as well. However, we are usually more free to walk away from these, whereas we often have to deal with the problems from work and home. Having activities in the third area not only keeps our lives in balance but also helps to keep us from becoming “workaholics.”

Becoming involved in leisure activities is also helpful in depression by pulling our attention outwards and away from our internal negative thoughts. In depression there is usually a see-saw battle going on for our attention. On the one hand, our minds seem to pull us inwards towards unpleasant, negative, depressing thoughts. When we focus outwardly towards our environment, negative thoughts can decrease, and depressive feelings usually subside somewhat as a result. It is easier to focus away from the negative when there is something around us which is different and stimulating to hold our attention. However, when we stay in our house, apartment, or office there is less to pull our attention outwards. In psychological terms, our brains are said to have habituated to what we are seeing and hearing in the house or other familiar places. Our brains are simply less interested in paying attention to what we have seen over, and over, and over. Habituation is a process by which the brain cells start to respond less and less when repeatedly stimulated by the same sights or sounds. For example, when a bell rings, our brain cells are likely to fire, because they are encountering a new type of input. However, after hearing the bell ring many times, the brain cells begin to fire less and less. Our brains are “tuning it out.” We are not aware of its ringing any more. That is why a chiming clock may wake us up at first, but after several nights, we no longer hear it. By limiting our lives to a few restricted locations and types of events, we are more susceptible to dwelling on our inner negative thoughts while we are depressed because our brains have become habituated to most of the stimuli around us.

In the early parts of treatment for depression, taking steps towards socializing or beginning new leisure activities might seem almost impossible. But as depression lifts, there is an opportunity not only to enjoy oneself in the moment but also to invest in the future. Surges of energy can be used to renew old hobbies and interests. The depressed person might want to try a little fishing or dancing if this is something which they know how to do and used to find enjoyable. They may have ceased doing it simply because they were so depressed. As depression improves, the ability to experience pleasure also improves. However, it is important to understand that while in depression, the person may have gotten out of the habit of doing these things. In addition, because it has been a long time, they may have forgotten how much fun these activities used to be.

Scheduling positive events can be helpful as one is attempting to overcome depression. See the book by Peter Lewinsohn and colleagues Control Your Depression for an excellent list of pleasurable activities to try. Negative events and problems tend to occur without any planning. Positive events often seem to require more preparation. By scheduling positive activities, they are more likely to occur than if you simply wait for opportunities to arise. You can plan events

which involve people (such as going out to eat with others) as well as events which are pleasurable but more solitary (taking a walk in the park by yourself).

Getting Personal

What kinds of hobbies do you have? Do you have leisure interests that can be enjoyed at various times of the year? Or are there times during the year when you have no available hobbies (for example, if your only recreation is water skiing)?

If you were to diagram the amount of time and energy you devote to work, home, and the "third area," how big would each of these be? Try drawing a diagram for yourself. Do the three seem to be out of balance?

Things to Do

Schedule something positive for yourself to do or experience at least once a day. Then give yourself something even more enjoyable to look forward to at the end of the week.

Plan a treat for yourself. Avoid inactivity. Stimulate your mind with new things to do. If you are having difficulty thinking of something pleasant, try looking at the list of pleasant activities in the book by Peter Lewinsohn et al. Control Your Depression.

Basic Activity Scheduling

If your depression is so severe that it is difficult just to get out of bed and perform basic chores, then you may need to try scheduling your daytime hours. This will give you some goals to accomplish. Depending on how severe your depression is, you can set very modest goals. Try to include some things which will be necessary chores and others activities which will be enjoyable. Here is an example of such an activity schedule:

<i>Time</i>	<i>Activity</i>
8:00	Have breakfast and wash dishes
9:00	Vacuum one or two rooms Watch TV program
10:00	Talk to neighbor on phone
11:00	Wash clothes
12:00	Rest and have lunch
1:00	Vacuum one or two rooms
2:00	Start planning supper
3:00	Fold clothes Read or watch TV
4:00	Start supper
5:00	Get kids started on homework
6:00	Have supper
7:00-10:00	Rest or spend time with husband

The above schedule was designed to have plenty of rest periods because the person was moderately depressed and had little energy. In addition, it also included “rewards” for getting chores done, such as talking with a friend, watching TV, and so on.

Things to Do

Create a schedule for yourself, and include several positive activities in it. Make a note of how you felt while engaged in the activity. Were you surprised by enjoying something which you had not expected to find pleasurable? Don't blame yourself if you don't get everything done. The schedule is not intended to be a ball and chain. It is only supposed to help you become more organized and accomplish more. By doing this, it is likely to help you develop feelings of self-esteem.

Time	Activity	Level of Pleasure 1=very little pleasure to 5=very enjoyable
8:00		
9:00		
10:00		
11:00		
12:00		
1:00		
2:00		
3:00		
4:00		
5:00		
6:00		
7:00-10:00		

Pay close attention to whether scheduling creates any difference in your mood. One way of doing this is to closely examine the numbers in column 3. As an experiment, you could fill out the above form for several days when you do not schedule activities ahead of time and then again on several days when there are scheduled pleasurable activities. Is there a difference in how much you get done? Is there a difference in ratings of enjoyment between scheduled and unscheduled days?

Other Chapters from this book which you may find helpful and which are relevant to the topics in this handout are:

- Chapter 4 You Can Assert Yourself
- Chapter 6 Coping with Negative Thinking in Depression
- Chapter 8 Coping with Grief
- Chapter 13 Coping with Social Anxiety
- Chapter 14 Coping with Relationship Problems
- Chapter 15 Coping with Anger
- Chapter 17 Understanding and Using Medications for Depression and Anxiety

Further Reading for Clients

- Bhaerman, S., & McMillan, D. (1986). Friends and lovers: How to meet the people you want to meet. Cincinnati: Writers Digest Books.
- Hallowell, E.M. (1999). Connect. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Lewinsohn, P.M., Munoz, R.F., Youngren, M.A., & Zeiss, A.M. (1978). Control your depression. New York: Simon and Schuster. This book has an excellent list of pleasant events and activities from which you can choose.

Further Reading for Therapists

- Brown, G.W., & Harris, T. (1978). Social origins of depression: A study of psychiatric disorder in women. New York: Free Press.
- Joiner, T., & Coyne, J.C. (1999). The interactional nature of depression. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Klerman, G. L., Weissman, M. M., Rounsaville, B. J., & Chevron, E. S. (1984). Interpersonal psychotherapy of depression. New York: Basic Books.

Support Group Information

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