

Thoughts on Depression

Through my years of clinical practice, my understanding of depression has evolved. The symptoms of depression can look very different in different people, and the contributing factors or “causes” are varied as well. In some people depression looks like someone who cannot get out of bed or is tearful most of the day. In others, depression presents in that the person appears unusually irritable or quick to anger. My experience is that depression most often comes from one of three factors: a physiological/hormonal imbalance; a response to a specific life event; or negative/dysfunctional thought patterns. Those who experience a physiological depression often feel like the depression “came out of nowhere” and they struggle to identify anything in their life that they feel “depressed” about. Individuals in this group are often helped significantly through the use of anti-depressant medication or hormone balancing. I am especially mindful of the role that hormones play in women’s’ mental health throughout the lifespan. Many women in their late 30’s and early 40’s are surprised to find out that their hormones are already beginning to change and this is a contributing factor to their mood. Options exist for natural balancing of female hormones that many women are not aware that exist. Psychotherapy can also be beneficial for individuals in this category in that the therapist can coach you in additional strategies to manage your depression.

For individuals who experience depression as the result of a life event such as the death of a loved one, divorce, loss of a job, family conflict, trauma, etc., psychotherapy can be very effective in helping the person process this experience, manage their symptoms and begin to feel better. Antidepressant medications are sometimes indicated in conjunction with psychotherapy when the individual is emotionally overwhelmed, or having difficulty meeting obligations of work or family. As much as antidepressant medication may help a person to function in their life, there is a belief that you need to “feel” in order to heal. Sometimes it is through addressing pain in psychotherapy that one is able to process the experience and come to a sense of understanding or peace around a difficult life experience. A specialized psychotherapy treatment approach which has shown efficacy in the treatment of trauma is EMDR: Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. EMDR uses bi-lateral brain stimulation, through eye movement or hand tapping, to move a traumatic memory into the part of the brain where it is able to be processed and less disturbing to the individual.

An individual’s thinking style also plays a significant role in how one feels about herself and how she interprets life events and situations. The expression “glass half full or half empty” describes an optimistic

or pessimistic thinking style. Cognitive Psychotherapy can help you to understand how your thinking style may be contributing to how you view the world and events you experience. We all have our own unique “filter” through which we see the world and interpret our life experiences. Sometimes our filter is distorted and we tend towards a thinking style which keeps us stuck in negativity. One example of a distorted filter is someone who has black or white; all or nothing thinking. For these individuals, there is no “grey” or middle way. A therapist who uses Cognitive Therapy can help you to see if your filter is distorted and help you practice new ways of thinking which can contribute to feeling better.

In Southeastern Wisconsin, we are entering the long stretch of dark days before spring arrives. This can be a particularly difficult time for individuals who may be suffering from depression. For some people, the lack of sunlight can contribute to feeling depressed along with a lack of energy and feelings of hopelessness. People who experience an increase in depressive symptoms during the winter months may be experiencing Seasonal Affective Disorder. In addition to Psychotherapy, there are many treatments that have been found to be effective for treating Seasonal Affective Disorder.

1) **Light Therapy.** For this you need a special full-spectrum lamp, of at least 10,000 lux. You sit approximately one foot away from it for 20-30 minutes a day, typically in the morning.

2) **Vitamin D.** There has been much research as to the role that Vitamin D plays in maintaining our health. We know that our bodies manufacture Vitamin D from the sun. The lack of exposure to sunlight and the wide use of sunscreen have contributed to many peoples' levels being too low. Research shows that adding a supplement of 1,000-4,000 IU a day may be helpful.

3) **Good Nutrition.** Fast food, sugar, caffeine and alcohol are all stressors to the adrenal system. When our adrenal system is weakened, it's harder to tolerate physical and emotional stress.

4) **Exercise.** Exercise has been proven to boost brain chemistry and energy levels and promote better sleep. Even 30 minutes of exercise 2-3 times a week can do wonders to elevate your mood.

5) **Sleep.** Maintain good "sleep hygiene": consistent sleep/wake cycles, moderate caffeine and alcohol consumption and limit the stimulation of TV & computer screens before bedtime.

If you are concerned that you or a loved one may be experiencing depression, there is information and an online screening tool on the website of the Mental Health Association of Wisconsin at WWW.MHAWISCONSIN.ORG. It is also important to consult with a licensed mental health professional or physician to review your treatment options. Research has shown that the best outcome predictor for

psychotherapy is the relationship between the therapist and client, regardless of the type of therapy received. You need to find a psychotherapist whom you feel that you can “connect”.

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