

Factsheet

BEWARE OF THE WORLDVIEW IMPOSED BY ILLNESS



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1 Beware of the world view imposed by depression

Depression makes you see everything in a negative light. It makes us magnify the difficulties and negative aspects of life, to see them as the only things happening. Depression makes us focus on problems rather than look for solutions or consider any positive aspects.

Many subconscious, reflexive errors characterise the depressed person's thinking.

- There's a tendency to see everything as a catastrophe, for example by seeing minor or occasional difficulties as lasting problems (an argument with a spouse means certain divorce; a child failing at school immediately conjures up total social failure). In this way, problems are turned into misfortunes.

- There is a tendency to generalise, making a one-off problem proof of an overall failure (« my car won't start: I'm never lucky »; « I'm having trouble with my job: I'm a fraud »).

- They tend to dwell on the problem instead of taking action. Studies have shown that if you give a depressed person a series of tests and they get stuck on one, they'll dwell on it and waste all their time, instead of moving on to the next point, as non-depressed people do.

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2 Starting to act again, getting moving, means getting better

We have seen that in depression there is a slowing down, a difficulty in taking action that is sometimes very significant, and has nothing to do with laziness. There are biological and physical reasons for these difficulties: depressive illness disrupts the functioning of the body and the brain. But there are also psychological reasons: pessimism (« what's the point? »), negativism (« it won't work ») weigh heavily on all everyday activities. We have also described how inaction worsens depression, both psychologically (« I haven't done anything today ») and mechanically (like a pump that has been deflated).

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Several studies have shown that daily physical exercise can help to improve mood to some extent. So it's a good idea, even if you feel like staying in bed, to try and do a bit of exercise or walking every day, because resting is not really restful when you're depressed. The tiredness felt during depressive illness, although very real, is not reduced by inactivity, but rather by exercise.

Another thing that discourages depressed people from taking action is their perfectionism. Faced with a messy house or a pile of overdue mail, they want to solve the problem in one fell swoop, and perfectly. But that's not easy when you're not depressed... The advice we give is to break one major objective (tidy the house) down into several smaller ones (tidy one room a day), which can then be broken down further (tidy half the room). All this while accepting that you won't be able to do as well as before. The aim is not to start succeeding again, but to start acting again...

3 Taking a step back from negative thoughts: unplugging sadness

Without being clearly aware of it, we're constantly judging and evaluating what happens to us in our daily lives. When we're not depressed, it doesn't really matter. But, unfortunately, during a depressive illness, this inner murmur becomes a major « selfo-intoxication to negative thinking ».

The depressed person is the victim of what is known as « automatic negative thoughts », one of the characteristics of which is that they advance in a blinkered way. Depression impoverishes our perception of existence, tending to promote the most negative hypotheses in our views of the world.

So-called « cognitive » psychotherapies aim to combat these negative thoughts. We learn to spot and discuss the evidence of these automatic thoughts. The aim is not to see everything as rosy and only have positive thoughts, but rather to step back from the dictatorial negativism of depression. Yes to lucidity, no to depression!

4 Coping with other distressing emotions

In depression, there's a generalised disruption of all our emotions, not just sadness.

Depressive thinking leads to discouragement and slowing down, with a negative assessment of everything that happens. It's only afterwards that we draw even more negative conclusions about what's going to happen: « I'm useless, I've failed at everything in my life, and that's going to continue... »

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Anxious thinking is accompanied by fear of the future and brooding on the past. It's also common for depressed people to experience fear or panic attacks during their illness, as if depression increases their overall emotional fragility in the face of life's difficulties.

Depression can also be accompanied by irritability and even anger. Everyone annoys them and inspires resentment, anger and sometimes aggression. Relatives, colleagues, neighbours, strangers and the whole world are all sources of irritation and additional negative emotions.

What can you do about it?

If you feel that sadness, worry, irritability and resentment take up more and more space in your emotions, don't blame yourself, but consider it as one of the symptoms of depression. And fight as hard as you can against the temptation to give up, to avoid creating a vacuum around you. Warn those around you: the more informed they are, the better they'll understand the reason for your mood swings.

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As soon as you start to feel better, build on your progress

We've already seen that it's important, when you're suffering from a depressive illness, not to wait until you feel like doing things before doing them... And that, on the contrary, doing as much as you can of the activities that used to give you pleasure helps to gradually make you want to do them again. Depression is a bit like losing your taste for life, your ability to savour the small pleasures of everyday life: but that doesn't mean you have to starve yourself to death!

This taste for life will return, all the more quickly as we stay in touch with « the things in life ». But the hardest part is accepting that we won't feel the usual satisfaction: that meal with friends, those moments with our children, that walk in the woods, that funny film... All of this - because of depression - will leave us a little insensitive, indifferent. But that's only temporary: with recovery, all these sensations will return. You can't summon them back, just facilitate their return (see at the end of this booklet: plan a programme of pleasurable activities).

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The impression of happiness depends more on the frequency and multiplicity of pleasant moments (the little pleasures) than on the episodic presence of great joys. These small pleasures (a friendly gesture, a sunny morning, a bird singing, a child giving you a drawing, a letter from a friend...) are fairly numerous in most lives.

But it's not enough for these occasions to occur; you also have to be receptive to them.

Depression makes it almost impossible to enjoy them spontaneously. That's why, as soon as the symptoms ease, as soon as the suffering begins to recede, it's important to work again on the ability to savour the little joys of everyday life. Like physical fitness, this « happiness intelligence » can also be cultivated and developed...

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Treat yourself in a friendly way: be your own best friend

Many people are too hard on themselves, criticising themselves a lot and praising themselves very little. This undermines their self-esteem, i.e., the way we look at ourselves. In depressive illness, the level of self-esteem is very low: we devalue ourselves, make ourselves feel guilty, constantly criticise ourselves. The result is a veritable « self-oointoxication » of negative judgements about oneself, making the person feel even worse.

It's depression that makes you so fiercely critical of yourself. It's important to learn to talk to yourself as you would to a friend. If they have faults, you don't hide the truth from them; if they make mistakes, you point them out. But you do it in a constructive way, with an eye to change. And we make sure to remind them of their good qualities. Depression makes it virtually impossible to talk to each other with the kindness and respect that we would give to those closest to us.

One of the major obstacles to progress during depression is the tendency to judge one's efforts or one's condition, without taking the illness into account. So don't compare things with what you were able to do before the depression, or what others - who're not depressed - are able to do. Act without judgement, be kind to yourself, as you would be to a beginner or someone recovering from an illness. Don't confuse your value with your performance: the former is always there, even if the latter is changed by depression...

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Combating negative moods

It's very difficult to combat sad moods when depression is in its acute phase, which is why medication is often necessary. But when you start to feel better, it's useful to learn how to manage your mood swings better. The idea is not to never feel sad: sadness is often a warning sign that our lives are not going as we would like. The advice is to make « good use of sadness » and not to get bogged down in it...

The « mood regulation » mechanisms are completely out of kilter in depressive illness. Little things that we used to be able to cope with are thrown into disarray and minor worries bring our spirits crashing down. Depressed people often realise after their recovery that much of their suffering stemmed from minor events, which, once they've regained their serenity, they can cope with very well.

There are several useful and necessary steps to better mood management: you need to learn to spot negative moods right away, instead of giving in to them. Sometimes they follow on from a life event, sometimes they're spontaneous. Whatever the case, it's always worth taking a moment to understand and analyse them, then to decide what strategy to use: resolve the problem if it's possible or, if not, move on to something else, so as not to get bogged down in gloom.