BEYOND THE BLUES: Understanding Depression and Its Spiritual Purpose

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Depression has become one of the most pervasive and destructive disorders of our time. The costs, both in terms of human suffering and economics, are staggering. Serious depression can destroy not only the lives of the sufferers, but also the lives of those who love them. Yet much of this suffering is unnecessary. While most people with depression never seek treatment, depression is highly treatable. And, as you will see, it can even lead to positive life change and spiritual growth.

Myths about Depression

One of the main reasons that depression is under-treated is that it is commonly misunderstood. On the one hand, too many of us still see depression as a source of shame. There is a part of us that still thinks that depression results from poor character, emotional weakness, or a lack of will. We don’t want others to know that we are struggling.

On the other hand, our culture has also inadvertently minimized the idea of depression. The term “depression” is often used loosely to refer to any feelings of sadness or grief. Depression is not a simple case of feeling “blue” on occasion. Depression goes beyond the normal periods of sadness that come with loss or disappointment.

In fact, one of the distinguishing factors between normal sadness or grief and clinical depression is the lack of any external reasons that could account for the changes in mood.

Causes of Depression

Depression is a complex disorder that has multiple factors. Depression is typically the result of some combination of life stressors, genetic predisposition, neurological issues, and learned patterns of thinking and behaving. This article will primarily explore the impact of thought and behavioral patterns associated with emotions.

The Role of Emotions

To understand an emotional disorder like depression, it is helpful to understand emotions in general. We basically have four emotions: anger, fear, sadness, and joy. All of the other emotional words that we have describe some variety of these four. None of the four is more or less important than the others. Each has its own value and purpose.

In fact, our emotions are vitally important survival mechanisms that provide us with the energy and impulse to take care of ourselves in the most appropriate way in any situation. Our emotions are here to serve us.
Here is how it works. When we perceive something to be a threat, we are designed to feel either anger or fear or a combination of both. These emotions are tied in with the most instinctual of our survival mechanisms, the fight or flight response. When we, or any other animal, perceive threat to our safety, the body automatically starts preparing to fight or run. Emotionally, anger gives us the impulse and energy to defend ourselves, and fear gives us the impulse and energy to seek safety (run, hide, get help, etc.).

Sadness comes when we perceive something to be a loss. This feeling gives us the impulse and the process for grieving so that we can mourn and move on with life. And when we perceive something to be a positive, we feel happiness or joy. Happiness provides us with positive reinforcement to encourage more of the behaviors that seem to be working.

**Depression as an Emotional Disorder**

Unfortunately, most of us have been trained to devalue, distrust, misinterpret, and ultimately misuse our feelings. How does this happen? We spend our childhood and adolescence learning how the world works and what our place is in it. Our experiences during this period largely shape our perceptions for the rest of our lives. Parents, peers, teachers, coaches, and media all help to shape which emotions that we deem safe and appropriate, and which we come to see as threatening and undesirable.

The main myth of our culture is that we are supposed to feel happy all of the time. We have come to view sadness, anger, and fear as being negative emotions that should be avoided. Since most of us cannot achieve full-time happiness, we begrudgingly allow one or two of the other emotions and put our focus on ridding ourselves of that emotion (or two) that we deem most threatening.

When we do not allow ourselves to grieve the losses in our lives, large and small, sadness becomes out of order. The sadness is going to come with each loss. The question is, are we going to let ourselves mourn and fully move on? When we don’t, the sadness can build to the point that it is so out of balance that it demands a disproportionate amount of attention. The excess sadness may become a depression that can dominate life.

You may have heard depression described as anger turned inward. This is often true for those who do not allow themselves to experience anger. When anger and conflict are seen as threatening, the anger can become inverted and exact a terrible toll.

When sadness or anger is converted into fear it leads to anxiety, which often coexists with depression. For some, continued on pg. 14

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**Sources**

- **NewLifeJournal.com**
- **Chinese Acupuncture Clinic**
- **Heartsong Animal Hospital**

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**Check newlifejournal.com for even more**

Great articles on healing plants & links to resources.

**Esalen Massage, Healing Touch Beyond Words**

Injuries
Relaxation
Alignment
Back problems

**Dancing Tree Massage & Rehabilitation**
Arthur Schiess LMBT
License # 2651
828-777-3622

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**Links**

- **Chinese Acupuncture & Herbotherapy Clinic**
  - 5000 Years of Time Tested Medicine
  - Offices located in: Asheville, Waynesville & Hendersonville 828-258-9016
- **Signs that Can Indicate Depression**
  - Persistent sad, irritable, or “empty” mood
  - Feelings of helplessness, worthlessness, hopelessness
  - Loss of interest or pleasure activities that were once enjoyed, including sex
  - Decreased motivation and/or energy, fatigue
  - Difficulty concentrating, making decisions, remembering
  - Insomnia, early-morning awakening, or sleeping too much
  - Changes in appetite and/or weight
  - Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide
  - Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to medical treatment (examples: headaches, digestive disorders, chronic pain)

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anxiety can be a main underlying cause of depression. Anxiety takes a tremendous amount of energy, restricts choices, and can come to dominate life. The grip that anxiety can have on somebody can become very depressing in and of itself.

Depression as a Wake-Up Call from the Soul

The most emotionally healthy people are the ones that accept and appreciate the full spectrum of their emotional experience. They seem to recognize, either consciously or intuitively, that the natural flow of emotions is in perfect order. They allow the emotions to serve them. Depression is one of the conditions that can occur when our emotions are in disorder. When we try to avoid our emotional experience, we end up preventing the emotions from serving their inherent purpose.

Depression can be seen as a wake-up call from the soul. I believe that at a soul-level, each of us is here to achieve, or to at least experience, certain things. The soul is not concerned about temporary pain or suffering. It is concerned with our purpose, with living our lives to the fullest. At a personality-level, on the other hand, most of us are very concerned about avoiding pain and suffering in the moment and are willing to do all kinds of self-destructive things to try to achieve that goal.

The soul will not let that process go on forever without intervening. Ignore sadness or anger when they tap us gently on the shoulder, and sooner or later the soul will return with a baseball bat to get your attention. Remember, the soul doesn’t care if we suffer, it cares if we grow: even if it takes a depression to get us to re-evaluate life. Seen from this perspective, depression goes way beyond the blues to offer an opportunity to become a better and more authentic you.

Available Treatments

Depression is not something to be afraid of or embarrassed about. From a more spiritual perspective, it can be seen as tough love from the soul, pushing us to live a more meaningful and fulfilling life. From a more scientific perspective, it is a treatable condition when competent care is received. If you or someone you care about is suffering from depression, seek out an experienced psychologist or counselor and/or talk to your physician for assessment.

There are many treatments available. Psychotherapy can be an extremely valuable tool for developing effective coping skills, more positive patterns of thinking, a healthier lifestyle, a more balanced relationship with your own emotions, and even a greater alignment with your soul’s purpose. Other valuable approaches include meditation and prayer, relaxation training, acupuncture, exercise, increased involvement with others, volunteering, and the use of specific food, herbs, and supplements. A combination of approaches is often most effective, as these interventions can enhance the power of each other. If you find that your depression is not responding to therapy and lifestyle changes, your physician may be able to prescribe medications that can help balance your brain chemistry to reduce the symptoms of depression. Whatever approaches you choose, depression can be a wake up call for you to improve your life.

Paul Fleischer, Psy.D. is a clinical psychologist who practices in Asheville. He treats a wide variety of emotional and behavioral issues, as well as working with people suffering from chronic pain and illness. Dr. Fleischer is also the author of multiple guided healing audios. For more information please visit www.healingworks-web.com or www.healingworksdirect.com.