

How Can Therapy Help Depression?

When depression hits, a cloud moves in. Depression steals the light. Through the gray filter of depression, even activities and people who were once before a source of pleasure now feel irritating and overwhelming. Nothing brings joy. Everything's an ordeal.

If you are one of the estimated 20.9 million people who are suffering from some form depression in a given year, it's vitally important for you to realize *you do not have to feel this way*. Depression is a treatable condition. There really is a path to a life that is again filled with vitality and moments of joy. Psychotherapy can do a lot to help you understand your depression, while helping you find your way out of the darkness.



A sad fact about depression is that many people suffer from it without knowing they have a condition with a name and a remedy. Some forms of depression come on suddenly, but other forms creep up gradually over the years, so that it begins to seem like “just the way things are.” However, those nagging feelings of emotional numbness and weariness, disconnection from others, negative thoughts about one's self and a pessimistic outlook on life may well be symptoms of depression.

Escaping from under depression's cloud is a tricky business because many of the symptoms of depression actually make depression more entrenched. Sleep patterns often get disturbed when a person is depressed, yet restful sleep is vital for mental and emotional well-being. Appetite is often affected, yet nutritious food is important for healing; and wrong foods can make mood swings worse. Mental brooding is a hallmark symptom of depression, yet this merely strengthens depressive patterns of thought. Support from friends and family can go a long way towards lifting the cloud, but with depression, you withdraw. You may know you should exercise, but it can feel like moving a mountain just to get out of bed, much less get to the gym.

Taking the step to begin therapy with a therapist you are comfortable with can be an important turning point. Many people find that even just that first act of seeking out a therapist helps them feel proactive again. There can be a sense of re-connecting with life. In a safe, non-judgmental environment, you can put your feelings and thoughts into words and talk through your inner and outer conflicts. This, in itself, can feel liberating, cleansing, empowering.

Many therapists practice a form of psychotherapy called *cognitive-behavioral*. Our thoughts (or, *cognitions*) go a long way in influencing our moods. So often, our thoughts are made up of automatic habits of self-criticisms and pessimistic views of ourselves. Our own “inner critic” can be relentless. Cognitive therapy helps us tune into, and observe, the thoughts we are “feeding” ourselves. We get some perspective. We come to appreciate that thoughts are only things, and not necessarily facts. We can challenge irrational thoughts. We can tune out the “static” and tune

in to the positive. We can practice being kinder and gentler with ourselves and learn to “talk” to ourselves as we would a good friend.

The *behavioral* part of therapy focuses on those things we may be *doing* that contribute to our feeling bad; most importantly, it helps us learn what things we can do to feel better. Nobody likes to feel bad, but it’s all too easy to pick up – along the road of growing up – some coping mechanisms that don’t serve us well in the long run. Therapy helps us shift into healthier coping skills.

To help calm and soothe anxious emotions, therapy may help you learn relaxation skills such as grounding and centering, or the use of mindfulness as a way to be with your experience without judgment. To energize yourself, you may find some needed encouragement to try a new hobby, maybe join an exercise or yoga class, or write in a journal. Therapy can help you learn communication skills or new tools for managing angry feelings and deal with people who may be a source of difficulty. More peace in your relationships can contribute a lot towards more peace in your life.

Issues about medication can be addressed in therapy and when a chemical imbalance seems present, a therapist can discuss a referral to a medical doctor who can further evaluate you and prescribe medication. Sometimes this is used just for a limited time, helping a person get through an acute period. Even if you decide to use medication, you will still find it immensely helpful to engage in the work of therapy.

Psychodynamic is another form of therapy you’re likely to see many therapists use. There are times when it’s helpful to explore some of our past experiences – not because we want to blame others or stay stuck in the past – but, rather, to better understand how our past experiences have shaped us. Much of this shaping goes on subconsciously. The insights gained through therapy can be tremendously helpful, as we gain more conscious awareness about what was once “in the shadows.” Therapy helps us sort out, refine, reorganize and, sometimes, re-interpret the past. Through therapy we also gain insight into defense mechanisms we may have picked up through past experiences, but which may now be counterproductive to our goals. Through all this, we gain greater skillfulness for living in the present.

Many therapists also practice what’s known as *Positive Psychology*, which brings attention to those things that are *right* with us, rather than focusing solely on what’s wrong. Human beings are complex creatures with strengths and talents, as well as problems. Researchers point out that each person has “signature strengths”. When these strengths are used amply in the course of our lives, we feel more alive and energized. Positive psychology calls for reflection on what values we hold dear and what gives meaning to us. By clarifying our values, we have more freedom to align our behaviors with our values. We gain peace of mind and self-confidence in the way we’re living.

Whether depression comes on suddenly or creeps gradually into life, it is important to know that healing is possible. If, in the process of healing, you gain greater self-knowledge and skills for living, you may even find that life becomes enriched in important ways. Indeed, there may well be bright colors of a rainbow waiting for you on the other side of the darkest clouds.

Some resources for further reading on Depression are:

Depression 101 by John D. Preston and Melissa Kirk

The Mindful Way through Depression by Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal and Jon Kabat-Zinn (this book comes with a CD of guided mindfulness exercises)

Undoing Depression by Richard O'Connor

You can also refer to the Resource section of this website for more titles.

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