



Depression and the Festive Season

December 2013

Hello

Now I did say that I would look at the various stages of the grief and change cycle, and that I am going to do. However I have skipped the first few stages (shock/denial, anxiety, bargaining, and anger) because I particularly want to talk about depression given the approaching holidays. I will come back to the others though.

Not everyone looks forward to the festive season. For some this is not a season of good cheer. It is instead a stark reminder of what they are missing. If you have no family, have recently lost a loved one, experienced business or financial losses, or are commemorating the anniversary of a loss, then this can be a hard time to get through. It is not surprising that suicides peak over this time period.

What to do if you are experiencing loss and sadness

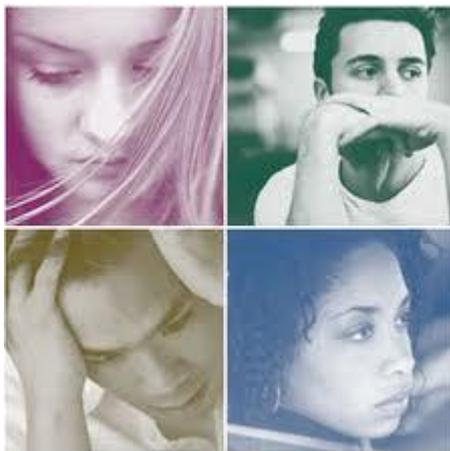
- Be with people. Don't isolate yourself all the time. Some time alone can be okay because people grieve in different ways, but don't shut yourself away for weeks on end.
- Do things. Get out a diary and schedule some events for yourself and others. These could be lunches, dinners, movies, coffees, participating in hobbies, etc.
- Do something nice for others. If you are one of those people who will be alone on Christmas day then consider that lots of others will be too. Arrange a get-together with people who you know will be alone. Or you could visit a hospital or residence for the elderly. You will get back as much as you give.
- Allow yourself and others time to grieve. Grief is normal. People grieve in different ways and allowing them to grieve in their own way is important for them to move through the process. You can't avoid grief, you have to go through it. Unless you are an expert don't interfere with the way people grieve. Let them do what they want to do as long as they are not causing any harm. We each have our own ways of healing.
- If you have an anniversary of a loss of some kind then you may want to have an event or organise some sort of ritual, for example, light a candle, say a poem, give a speech. Or you may not want to do anything. That is okay.

When does grief and sadness turn into depression?

Sometimes grieving, which is a normal process, can turn into depression. Depression is not normal or healthy and usually requires treatment. If you are in a depression then the sooner you get help the better. The longer you wait the worse the depression gets and the longer the time until you get better. When you grieve, even though you have times of extreme sadness and tears, you will still have times when you feel normal and do normal things. When you have depression it is as though everything in your world is dark and empty. This darkness shrouds your whole life. Each day is just another bleak day. There is little or no respite or let up to the sense of despair.

Signs of depression:

- Fatigue, exhaustion, low energy, slow speech and body movements.
- Change in appetite - weight loss or gain.
- Trouble falling asleep, frequent waking, too much sleep.
- Mood symptoms- feeling down, sad or blue, feeling emotionally flat, irritability or anger, tearfulness or frequent crying.
- Feeling worthless, hopeless, low self-esteem.
- Thinking - negative, catastrophic thinking, dark or bleak sense of the future, critical blaming thoughts towards oneself or others, suicidal thoughts.
- Attention and memory - difficulty concentrating, difficulty maintaining attention, memory problems.
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities, bored or unmotivated, wanting to return to or remain in bed.
- Drop in performance at school or work, unemployment or underemployment
- Withdrawal from current relationships, lack of interaction with people you meet.

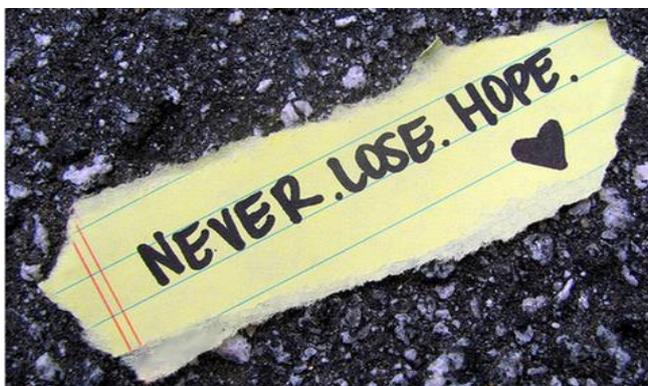


Self-help actions:

- Confide in close, supportive friends and family. Be around people who are supportive and nurturing and avoid those who aren't. Ask for help when you need it.
- Don't hide yourself away from everyone all the time. You need to get out and interact with people even if you don't feel like it. Spend some time with family or friends you trust and get on well with. Talk about your loss and your experience as honestly as you can without judgement.
- Do things. This can be hard, but plan activities to do each day, be it cleaning, shopping, visiting, doing some work, engaging in hobbies, or even doing some volunteering - which is very beneficial. Research shows that we feel better when we help others. Get out a calendar and start planning activities to do, and stick to them even though you may not feel like it. Don't say, "I will start doing these when I feel better," you have to start doing them in order to feel better.
- Take care of your body. Eat healthily, exercise, and get enough sleep. Too much or too little sleep can be symptoms of depression as well as exacerbate depression. Spend some time outdoors in the sun if you can. Low levels of light can make depression worse.
- Watch your thinking. Notice your bleak thoughts and remind yourself that they are caused by depression. Remind yourself that negative thinking is a symptom of depression and that

once you are over the depression you will not think that way. Most people with depression get better and you will too. A very helpful thing is to remind yourself that "this is the depression talking".

- Challenge the way you interpret events. Is there another alternative explanation? When you are depressed you usually interpret situations in the most negative way possible. This sets up a vicious cycle. There are some common thinking errors with depression. See if you fall into any one of them:
 - Black or white thinking, which means putting everything into extreme categories. So for instance thinking I will never find another job. That is extreme thinking because it is likely you will find another job provided you don't give up looking for one.
 - Taking things personally, which is believing that what someone says or does to you was intentional and purposely directed to hurt you.
 - Catastrophizing, as in assuming that everything that will happen is the worst case scenario.
 - Mindreading - when you assume you know exactly what your co-workers, friends, family and other people are thinking without asking them.
 - Glass half empty - when you focus on the negative in your life. You focus on what is going wrong only instead of what is going right as well.
- Learn to recognise when you are making thinking errors. Tell yourself to stop. Then attempt to correct your interpretations. Challenge your thinking. Ask "Is this really true all the time?" Consider evidence for and against your thoughts. For example, you cannot possibly be incompetent at everything. Practice identifying and challenging your negative thoughts.
- If you have a lot of negative thoughts, then write down some more positive, realistic thoughts and at various times throughout the day read these or say them out loud. It helps to stop your brain from "story fondling" negative thoughts and gets you to start thinking positive ones. Positive and realistic thoughts will depend on what challenges you are facing but could include the following: If I keep looking I will find another job. This relationship may be over but I have had a relationship before and so I can have another one. I have useful skills and capabilities. I have been through tough times before and made it and I can make it this time. I have people I can turn to for support and encouragement, etc.
- Sign up for and attend a support group for people in the same situation as you.
- Make a list of things you love doing, and commit to doing some of these every day. Be kind to yourself. Do things that you are good at and that make you feel competent and capable.



When to get help

If you are experiencing symptoms of depression and nothing you are trying seems to work then seek professional help. The sooner the better. This is a life-threatening situation. People you can contact for help include your GP, a psychiatrist, or psychologist. If the situation is an emergency then you can go to the emergency section of a hospital. You can also dial SADAG (South African Depression and Anxiety Group) - <http://www.sadag.org/>.

If you cannot get better without taking medication, then take it. This does not make you a bad or weak person. A type one diabetic cannot live without insulin and no one blames them for their condition. If medicine is required for you to feel well then it is silly to refuse to take it. If you do need to take medication then it is important to realise that it takes time to work. You may feel that at last you will come out of the darkness, only to discover that it takes some time for the right combination and dosage of medication to be found and to work. This can be like finishing a marathon and then being told you have to run another five miles. Often people give up at this stage because the trial and error process of getting onto the right treatment is just too much. If your depression is really severe then a combination of factors including medication, counselling, and a supportive environment all help. I don't believe everyone needs medication, however some people will not get well without it. If you are given medication then take it as directed. I have seen clients on antidepressant medication who think it works like tranquilisers and pain killers and they only need to take one every few days when they feel they particularly need it.

And most of all tell yourself (although you may struggle to believe it) that this is not your life. What you are going through is just one chapter of your life. This too will pass, and you will experience good times again.

Have a happy and blessed December

Best wishes

Penny