

Breaking the Patterns of Depression **Jude LaClaire, Ph.D.**

Perhaps you've dreamed of a life without problems, carefree and happy, nothing but 'blue skies.' Of course, that is a fantasy of the young, the inexperienced or the delusional person. Life brings with it all the opposites; suffering and joy, clarity and chaos, anger and peace, depression and elation. In today's society, where expectations for happiness are high and patience is limited, depression has a wonderful breeding ground.

Do you suffer from depression on a regular, almost daily, basis? If you have ruled out other mental disorders, an underlying physical condition or the effects of prescribed drugs or other mood altering substances as the cause(s), then this information can help you.

Current research tells us that 70% of Major Depressive Disorder can be attributed to the environment. About 30% can be linked to genetic heritage. This is a statistic and can vary dramatically from individual to individual. The good news is that many of the people suffering from acute depressive episodes or chronic, mild depression, can be greatly helped by changing their habits of thinking and acting.

Let's take a look at some of the patterns of thought and resultant action that can cause periodic depression or keep one mired in a constant milieu of depression.

One pattern, I will call the 'Chicken Little' approach to living. Remember the story of Chicken Little. He was walking through the forest and an acorn fell on his head. He was upset, alarmed and began shouting to all who could hear, "The sky is falling. The sky is falling." Before long, all the creatures of the forest were upset. Then it was discovered that it was only the acorn of an industrious squirrel dropped accidentally from the tree.

Think about your responses to events in the last twenty-four hours. Were there any times when something small happened and you immediately jumped to a conclusion that evoked fear and apprehension. For example; you call a friend several times and leave a message. The person does not immediately return the call. You begin imagining catastrophic scenarios. You imagine they are sick, angry with you, have skipped town, have been kidnapped and so on. Your active imagination is used to create many 'catastrophic expectations.'

Living in the here-and-now is a powerful antidote for catastrophizing and futurizing. If Chicken Little had stayed focused in the moment, he would have looked at what fell on his head and said, "Oh, an acorn. Must have fallen from the tree." But instead he went from one small event to a most horrible, future catastrophe. It is so easy to jump from the experience of the moment to next week, next year and five years from now, in one breath. When you are finished, you have quit school, lost a job, gotten a divorce and have become a lonely failure. Of course, you are now really depressed! You feel like a lonely failure. This is the image you just created.

How can you pinpoint thought patterns that might be destructive for you and causing depression? Keep a log of events. Write down 'happenings' and then write your response or reaction to these happenings. Try to refrain from judging yourself or what you are writing. At the end of a week, read your log. What kinds of patterns do you see? This technique assists you in taking those fleeting, recurrent thoughts that float through your head, putting them out in front of you. The physical act of writing them down will help you get some objectivity and clarity. Then you can more clearly analyze what thinking patterns are prevalent in your daily life.

Another pattern of thinking that can send a person spiraling into depressive anxiety is the 'kitchen sink' approach. You know the saying about throwing in everything but the kitchen sink, meaning the person tends to throw many extraneous topics into an argument or discussion, or

literally, packs many unnecessary things to take on a trip. The ‘kitchen sink’ thinker will meet an obstacle or problem, feel badly about something and say, “My whole life is a mess.” Or “I can’t do anything right.” If a friend or associate treats this person in a cool manner, they might say out loud or think to himself or herself, “Nobody likes me. I have no friends.”

The antidote to this kind of thinking is to look at events, both internal and external, as separate and individual experiences. Sometimes a present experience is linked to one or more negative or traumatic events in the past. When this happens, the person is likely to get into that ‘kitchen sink’ thinking. “All men are like that.” “I’ll never have a good relationship.” At this point it is helpful to identify the past experience which has contributed to this attitude and expectation and separate it from the present experience.

Studies have shown that these and other patterns of thinking predict who will more likely suffer from depression and who will not. Michael Yapko, Ph.D., in *Breaking the Patterns of Depression*, talks in depth about these patterns and ways to begin changing them.

Here are some steps towards breaking your patterns of thinking or habit, which feed depression.

- Take an inventory, establishing the causes of your depression
- If one cause appears to be coming from your habits and thought patterns, begin keeping a log of daily events and your response or reactions to them
- Choose one thought pattern to begin changing
- Write an alternative, positive response or behavior (thought or action) that could replace the distorted thinking and behavior
- Practice, practice, practice!

It would be helpful to 1) find a support group that deals with depression, 2) work with a qualified mental health professional who is knowledgeable about this approach, 3) research other complementary approaches that will interrupt and heal the depressive cycle, e.g., exercise, nutrition, nutritional supplements, acupuncture, and 4) pick a regimen and stay with it.

The fast-paced, high expectation, work driven materialistic society puts us at risk for depression. We begin to believe the hype that we don’t have time, we don’t have enough things and we don’t get enough love or success. The challenge is to develop your own set of values, attitudes and beliefs that are reflected in your thoughts, your speech and your actions. This is the path to a life without the blues, feeling happier, more content and ready to face each new day.

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