

The Freudian Slip

Pathways to Discernment

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Depression Doesn't Have to Rule Your Life

Depressing Situations

Sadness is common for all people. When sadness overwhelms a person for extended periods, the label of "being depressed" is applied to the person. Labels can be hard to escape, because we all don't like to be labeled. Instead of labeling a person as depressed, I would like to reframe the term, depression, to reflect depressing situations.

There are times in which we all experience situations we don't like. How well we handle these situations reflect our coping skills for these particular situations. Examples of depressing situations include, losing your job, getting a divorce, or feeling helpless to change the events in your life. In each case, the "rug" has been pulled out from under you.

I believe that self-talk affects the extent of the depressing situation. The self-talk can be placed in six different groupings. A person may feel others are unreliable for support, resulting in the individual feeling disconnected from other people. Self-talk related to this group can reflect issues of mistrust, abuse, abandonment and/or loneliness.

A person may feel as if he or she cannot do anything right, because he or she is constantly criticized. Conflict is avoided at all costs, which puts the person in the precarious position of trying to always, please others. This individual's sense of self worth is based on how other people feel about him or her at the time, so a "damned if you do and damned if you don't" depressing situations emerges.

Some self-talk deals with a person's perceptions of feeling undesirable to other people. Thoughts of failure, shame and alienation dominate the person's life. The self talk in this group reflects a person's expectations of being desirable and/or different from others. Abusive relationships predominate the person's life, where conditional affection is accepted as the norm. Social skills are lacking, so a person has the perspective of being on the "outside looking in," wishing he or she knew the "secret handshake" to find acceptance.

Fear of offending someone else can lead to depressing situations. If a person is afraid of offending another person, then he or she will usually defer

decisions, opinions, or preferences to avoid anger, retaliation or loneliness. To operate in this mode, emotions are under tight control, otherwise, others make life very difficult. When emotions have been under tight control for so long, a person then is stunted in expressing his or her emotions. The emotions are internalized as "bad feelings" which are detrimental to maintaining any relationship.

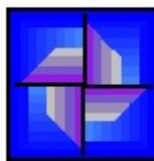
Have you ever met a person who may be competing for the "Mother Teresa Award?" The person, who is all things to all people, can't say no, has to "do it all" and gives until it hurts would be a candidate for this award. Usually these people are very noble in their intentions. These individuals resent how others seem to take advantage of them or don't appreciate them or their efforts. I often hear the phrase, "I have to do it, or it just won't get done!" What is missed in these depressing situations is the need to nurture yourself and set healthy limits for yourself and with others' demands.

Then the last group of depressing situation self-talk deals with a person's ability to discern how much he or she is entitled to have his or her way in life. Depressing situations can be controlling others, being demanding of the other's time and attention and really not caring about the needs of others. Frustration and

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tolerance limits are minimal or non-existent with these individuals. Failure is not tolerated and emotional outbursts are the norm instead of the exception.

I believe we all have to deal with these kinds of depressing situations. What separates the "thrivers" and the "survivors" is the self-talk about the situation. "Survivors" do the best "Sara Bernhardt" imitation of, ". . . I'll be all right, don't worry about me . . . I'll make it some how . . ." "Survivors" have difficulty balancing the needs of others with their own needs. Life may be a series of catastrophes, bad luck or paranoia about other people's intentions. Feelings of personal control are a fleeting thing, because other people ALWAYS have more control than the "survivor."

"Thrivers" are individuals, who can roll with the punches. They still encounter the depressing situations. Nevertheless, they acknowledge how they feel and get over "it" quickly. "Thrivers" are able to discern ownership of the problem, whereas a "survivor" takes ownership of EVERY problem. "No" is a complete sentence for "thrivers," because they have a strong sense of themselves as separate from others. They don't worry if you're going to get mad at them and leave. Which group do you see yourself belonging to the most?

Okay, so you've picked your group, what do you do now? The first thing would be to look at your role in the situation causing your depression. Often we take on the role of rescuer, persecutor or victim in the situations in our lives. This is known as the drama triangle.

One thing an individual can ask himself/herself is why is this particular situation bothering me so much. Does the situation remind you of something that's happened in the past and seems to continue to recur in your life? If this is the case, then the logical intervention would be to "stop doing that!"

This is easier said than done at times, because the pattern is so familiar. The behavior becomes a "knee jerk" reaction and before the individual knows it, the situation is repeated again. Getting out of the "auto pilot" mode means to step outside of the situation and look at it objectively. Again this is hard to do, but with practice can be accomplished.

So one way of getting in the habit of becoming more objective would be to learn from one's mistakes when "it's happened again". To do this, a person can ask how he/she got caught up in the situation. This is looking for the triggering event. Once this is identified a plan can be made to handle another similar situation differently or to change the person's role in the situation.

The body gives clues when we are about to react to a situation. Often we tend to ignore what's going on in our bodies, unless the situation is such that one can't ignore it. To become more conscious of the body signals given, one needs to pay attention to some

common clues. Some of the body clues can be: cold hands, clammy hands, headaches, shallow breathing, dry mouth, lack of appetite and shakiness.

With recognizing what's going on in a person's life, then the question of "how can I help myself in this situation" needs to be asked. Just by asking this kind of question, a person takes on a "problem solving" attitude which can help to distance oneself from a problem. A plan can be made to approach the problem.

Depressing situations cause a person to live either in the past or the future and in the meantime miss out on the blessing of the present. Feelings are the way to identify if a person is living in the future or the past. Anger is past oriented and worry is future oriented. By ruminating over past mistakes or future events a person can feel very helpless and fatalistic about his/her life.

Self talk about the past or the future just exacerbates the depression experienced by the individual. By asking a problem solving type question to oneself, a person shifts from a past and/or future orientation. When an individual lives in the present more options are available. Here is where the oxymoron of life is learned: "To gain more control, one needs to give up control". This lesson cultivates the attitude of having a plan to deal with the situation if and when it presents itself for those folks that are "worry warts".

The lesson of self forgiveness is necessary to let go of past mistakes. The choice of words used to describe in a person's life can help with self forgiveness. For one thing, mistakes are not necessarily bad. We learn from our mistakes as we negotiate life. Think of when you learned to ride a bicycle. Mistakes were made, adjustments were made, and the skill was learned.

The problem then arises in the reaction of others to our mistakes. For those folks that tend to "walk on eggshells" around others, the skill of separating ownership of the problem and associated emotions is necessary. If I do something and another gets angry with me, I am not responsible for his/her anger. I am responsible for my actions and will need to learn from the mistakes. I will need to cultivate the attitude of "He/she will get over it" so I am not fearful of making a mistake.

Suggested Readings:

Overcoming Depression by Paul Hauck, Ph.D.
Restoring Hope & Trust by Lisa Lewis, Ph.D.
Who's Pushing Your Buttons by John Townsend
Safe People by John Townsend
Hinds Feet on High Places by Hannah Hurnard
The Dance of Connection by Harriet Lerner, Ph.D.