

CRUISING WITH CLARITY

Mental Health



"Don't be afraid to cry. It will free your mind of sorrowful thoughts."

Con Talyesva, Hopi, C. 1940

"When I discover who I am, I'll be free."

Ralph Ellison

According to Webster's Dictionary the term health refers to a condition of being sound in body, mind or spirit; especially in terms of being free from physical disease or pain. Historically, health as a concept has been viewed with some variation as an absence of disease or illness. However, a more definitive and globally acceptable concept of health was provided in April 7, 1948 by the World Health Organization (WHO – a specialized agency for health established by the United Nations), which classified health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." The scientific efforts of the WHO helped to set the stage for a more formal clarification and understanding for the concept of mental health to be defined as an equally important state or condition similar to that of physical and social well-being. In 2000 the Surgeon General of the United States of America issued the first ever report on mental health and mental illness. This science-based report conveys several key messages.

One is that mental health is fundamental to health. The qualities of mental health are essential to leading a healthy life. Americans assign high priority to preventing disease and promoting personal well-being and public health; so too must we assign priority to the task of promoting mental health and preventing mental disorders. Nonetheless,



mental disorders occur and, thus, treatment and mental health services are critical to the Nation's health. These emphases, combined with research to increase the knowledge needed to treat and prevent mental and behavioral disorders, constitute a broad public health approach to an urgent health concern. A second message of the report is that mental disorders are real health conditions that have an immense impact on individuals and families throughout this Nation and the world. Appreciation of the clinically and economically devastating nature of mental disorders is part of a quiet scientific revolution that not only has documented the extent of the problem, but in recent years has generated many real solutions. (Surgeon General Report, 2000).

For students, the Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health "refers to the successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and cope with adversity." This suggests that by establishing a healthy lifestyle, you can help promote a sound mental capacity for yourself as a student that increases the likelihood of experiencing a productive, adaptive, and resilient quality of life. The opposite of this course of action would be for you to live in a state of constant distress or impaired functioning that reduces your psychological, physical and spiritual well-being, resulting in the type of thinking, mood or behaviors associated with mental illness. Mental illness just like physical illness can limit the mental/physical/social capacity to fulfill a healthy lifestyle. Mental illness also increases the state of psychophysiological problems that create vulnerability to both disease and illness.

Depression and anxiety are two of the most prevalent and debilitating mental disorders affecting mental health today. According to Webster's Dictionary, depression refers to an emotional state in which a person experiences the following symptoms:

A state of feeling sad "... a psychoneurotic or psychotic disorder marked especially by sadness, inactivity, difficulty in thinking and concentration, a significant increase or decrease in appetite and time spent sleeping, feelings of dejection and hopelessness, and sometimes suicidal tendencies."

(Webster, 1998)

Given these symptoms, it is apparent that depression might apply to any one of us, who at one time or another experience some degree of unhappiness brought on by some sad or distressing event in our life. However, when we experience a state of sadness that feels emotionally overwhelming to the point we sink into a state of despair and hopelessness we are beginning to experience clinical depression. Depression can seriously erode away the quality of life resulting in personal and interpersonal problems.



Mental illness ranks second in terms of causing disability. "The burden of mental illness on health and productivity in the United States and throughout the world has long been profoundly underestimated. Data developed by the massive Global Burden of Disease study, conducted by the World Health Organization, the World Bank, and Harvard University, reveal that mental illness, including suicide, ranks second in the burden of disease in established market economies, such as the United States ... Nearly two-thirds of all people with diagnosable mental disorders do not seek treatment ... When people understand that mental disorders are not the result of moral failings or limited will power, but are legitimate illnesses that are responsive to specific treatments, much of the negative stereotyping may dissipate." (Mental Health: A Report from the Surgeon General)

WHO GETS DEPRESSED?

We believe that almost every living human experiences some type of experience that incorporates symptoms of what might best be referred to as depression. Depression is not something that happens to people who are "unusual" or "crazy." It is everywhere. Along with anxiety (which occurs more frequently than depression), it is the common cold of emotional problems. During any given year, a large number of people will suffer from major depression: 25% of women and 12% of men will suffer a major depressive episode during their lifetime. The chances of recurrence of another episode after the initial episode are high.

The reason for the sex difference in prevalence of depression is not entirely clear. Possible reasons may be that women are more willing to acknowledge feelings of sadness and self-criticism openly, whereas men may "mask" or hide their depression behind other problems, such as alcohol and drug abuse. In addition, women are often taught from an early age to be helpless and dependent. Women may also control fewer sources of rewards than men do, and their achievements may be more often discounted (Leahy and Holland, 2000).

For some people a discussion about their feelings associated with clinical depression is difficult, at best, to initiate. Some of the difficulty may be dealing with the consequence of a variety of societal and cultural stigmas or myths. One popular myth forwards that anyone experiencing a mental illness is revealing a sign of personal weakness, defect, flaw, a weak-willed personality trait, or laziness. Unlike physical illnesses, mental illnesses are not easy to see and detect. As a result, mental illness can also appear confusing to the observer who must understand how someone might appear normal



one minute and very strange the next minute. Mental illnesses often include a combination of strange behavior with irrational thoughts.

A client, who reports feeling depressed, may not be aware that they are exhibiting depressive symptoms in their initial signs of mental illness. Therefore, when the client does not recognize any early signs or symptoms of depression, depression can result in personal difficulties both emotionally and physically. There are occasions when the sufferer becomes aware of their emotional and/or behavioral difficulty. They may decide not to disclose to others for fear of being labeled and isolated socially and/or interpersonally from family, friends and people in general.

Another fear the sufferer might have is that they will be regarded as "crazy", "bizarre", or "strange." Being labeled "crazy" and being treated as if they are under quarantine conditions scares people into avoiding the responsibility for seeking mental health treatment. As a result, sufferers and observers alike might be inclined to avoid taking immediate responsibility to contact appropriate mental health services to manage their depression. This type of avoidance only makes it more difficult for a depressed person to receive timely and proper treatment. The benefits of proper and effective mental health treatment far outweigh the negative side of enduring unnecessary pain and suffering that results in exhaustion and unproductivity. Anyone who struggles with symptoms of depression should immediately seek the support of a mental health professional. DePaulo (2002) explains:

Depressive disorders can be lethal...Several recent studies have shown a link between heart disease and depression; a significant proportion of people with depression (but without any history of heart disease) will develop a heart attack within several years after an episode of depression. And people who have heart attacks or strokes when they are depressed are two to four times more likely to die from them than are people who have them but are not depressed.

The economy, too takes a real hit from depression. Depression alone costs more than \$44 billion in the United States economy each year. The impact on society includes decreased economic productivity because of days of work lost due to illness as well as increased health costs. And because few people with depression receive the diagnosis and treatment, the cost for them, their families, and their employers is even greater. Of the 11 million who suffer from depression each year, about 7.8 million (72 percent) are in the workforce. Major depression carries the greatest risk of disability days and days lost from work (DePaulo, 2002).



The effect of depression, as a mood disorder, has been recorded throughout human history. In each instance, reports suggested that the sufferers' quality of life had been significantly debilitating for both the sufferer and their significant others.

Depression and mental illness can affect anyone. The following famous people have had mental illness:

- Hans Christian Anderson
- Ludwig Von Beethoven
- Winston Churchill
- Kurt Cobain
- Charles Darwin
- Emily Dickinson
- Thomas Edison
- F. Scott Fitzgerald
- Betty Ford
- Paul Gauguin
- King George III
- Johan Goethe
- Ernest Hemingway
- Victor Hugo
- Thomas Jefferson
- John Keats
- Abraham Lincoln
- Michelangelo
- Florence Nightingale
- King Saul
- Robert Louis Stevenson
- Sir Isaac Newton

THE ROLE OF ANXIETY IN DEPRESSION

According to Webster's Dictionary, anxiety represents "an abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physiological signs (as sweating, tension, and increased pulse)." Anxiety is extremely common; it is estimated that about 13% of the United States population has anxiety. Anxiety disorder affects all ages, including teens and children. People who have anxiety disorders experience feelings of



intense stress, worry, fear, and panic. There is no one cause for anxiety; it is likely that many factors contribute to a person's chances of developing anxiety. Scientists have broken down the potential causes into three groups, genetics and early learning, brain biochemistry, and the fight or flight mechanism. Anxiety can affect many aspects of a person's life. If someone is always anxious and worried, it is doubtful that he or she can fully enjoy life. Anxiety might affect one's ability to make friends, perform well at work, and try new things. Sometimes people who suffer from anxiety revert to alcohol or drug abuse. Using drugs or alcohol to treat anxiety is extremely dangerous and could make anxiety worse and cause other serious health problems. Physically, constant anxiety can cause problems with eating and sleeping habits, and prolonged anxiety may lead to more serious physical problems.

Anxiety can play an important role in activating some symptoms related to depression. The perception of experiencing an emotionally overwhelming situation can initiate brain events resulting in the cortex regions of the brain action to alert the amygdale. This initiates the release of hormones that stimulate the brain stem and activates the sympathetic nervous system. Those hormones are necessary to create an adequate "fight or flight response" to a particular situation.

The secretions of hormones are critical to generating a series of actions and reactions of the heart, lungs, and muscles in response to a possible life threatening situation. Paradoxically, the same system designed to protect us, if not managed properly, can move us into a state of emotional exhaustion resulting in distress and/or anxiety. It is at this point the body and mind become overwhelmed and are unable to effectively maintain a balanced quality of life status.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRESS AND DEPRESSION

Homeostasis is the state of balance for our bodies - the ideal body temperature, ideal level of glucose in our blood streams, etc. Stressors are short-term crises that knock us out of our homeostatic balance. The stress-response is what we do to ultimately reestablish our homeostatic balance.

Depression is characterized by helplessness, despair, feelings of being overwhelmed to do anything, and a loss of feelings of pleasure. Accordingly, depression has a different biology dynamic and requires some specific strategies for treatment. But it, too, can be related to stress, and there is evidence of this association.



One way in which stress generates depression is by acting on the brain's mood and pleasure pathways. Most plausibly, this means that the person becomes less attentive, less vigilant, and less active.

Continued stress also decreases levels of serotonin, which is important in the regulation of mood and sleep cycles. Stress affects dopamine, the main neurotransmitter of the pleasure pathway. When dopamine production is restricted feelings of pleasure fade. The enhanced autonomic arousal seen in anxiety--thought to be driven by the amygdala--is often observed in depression as well. Yet, the helplessness of depression is not a quiet, passive state. The dread is active, twitching, energy-consuming, distracting, exhausting, but internalized. A classic conceptualization of depression is that it represents aggression turned inward--an enormous emotional battle fought entirely internally--and the disease's physiology supports this analysis (Cooke, 2005).

Warning signs of depression include:

- Feeling sad and hopeless without a good reason to the point where the feelings won't go away
- Feeling angry most of the time
- Frequently feeling worthless or guilty
- Feeling considerably more anxious or worried than those around you
- Doing poorly in school
- Crying for no obvious reason
- Losing interest in things you usually enjoy
- Having unexplained changes in sleeping or eating
- Avoiding friends or family and wanting to be alone all the time
- Daydreaming so much that you can't get things done
- Feeling as if you can't handle life
- Considering suicide

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

If you think you or somebody you know may have depression, get help! Don't wait or try to deal with the problem by yourself. Talk to a parent or other trusted adult like a



counselor, coach, relative, or teacher. They will help you figure out the best kind of treatment. Sometimes treatment involves talking to a doctor or counselor who may know all about depression and how to make you better. Sometimes it means taking medicine. Sometimes both of these things are useful. The most important thing to remember is that depression won't go away by itself. If you get help you will eventually feel better.

These are things that you should NOT do to avoid your sadness and depression:

- Smoking and using drugs or alcohol
- Joining a gang to feel accepted
- Running away from home to solve your problems
- Getting pregnant to feel needed and loved
- Accepting verbal, emotional, and physical abuse
- Thinking about suicide

If you feel like you need help right away, there are many hotlines that you can call for help. If you ever feel like you want to commit suicide, you must get help immediately. Call a suicide hotline number or talk to a trusted adult. No problem is so big that you can't handle it with the help of someone else. Reaching out for help could save your life. Sometimes parents think their children can handle their own problems. They might forget that there are some things a person can't handle on his or her own. It's not good to keep your troubles or bad feelings to yourself. Talking to someone you trust is an important part of working through a problem. If your parents seem too busy, talk to an older brother or sister, teacher, or another older person that you respect and trust.

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