

Reconsidering Depression

By Mel Schwartz

The plague of our times is a malady we call depression. In our society a tremendous percentage of the population will at some time experience depression. An industry has arisen around the treatment of depression and staggering numbers of pills are consumed to ward off the suffering imposed by this condition. We are quick to diagnose and seek treatments for depression. Yet, hardly anyone is asking, “Why is there an epidemic of depression?”

If we accept the traditional bio-medical approach, we would believe that our serotonin levels are responsible for this disease. Why then are our serotonin levels deviating from what they had been in the past? Rather than looking at our brain chemistry as the cause of this malaise, I would offer that we’re experiencing such alarming rates of depression because of the way that we’re living.

If you live a depressed life it will manifest in a host of ways, including your blood chemistry. The way that we live is lacking meaning and purpose. Our lives are often visionless and passionless. We live in an intensely competitive culture that rewards achievement and success. Our identity and esteem become reflections of these external markers of achievement. When this occurs we honor the material acquisitions at the cost of devoting ourselves to intimate and loving relationships. Worst of all, in the desire to fit in and conform, we lose our inner voice. These conditions are indeed depressing.

People that thrive in loving relationships don’t typically feel depressed. Depression is symptomatic of feeling isolated and cut off. In our drive to live the good life, we typically isolate ourselves from relationships that might nourish us. Nurturing and loving relations has become somewhat marginalized and lost value in our very hurried lives. Our frenetic pace of life sees one day blur into another, until life begins to lose its meaning. We haven’t time to nurture our loved ones or ourselves and we lose our vision of a well-spent life. In fact, the problem is that we don’t know how to live well.

Labels such as dysfunctional are attached to people and families. People are not dysfunctional; social systems are. People suffer and experience pain. We are human beings, not machines that dysfunction. Such terminology expresses contempt for the human spirit. A society that produces such staggering rates of depression is dysfunctional. Our culture has created this epidemic.

Part of the problem is that we become corralled into a consensus of belief that does not serve our higher purpose. We are products of a cultural belief system that ignores or devalues matters of the heart and then turns and points its accusatory finger at those who suffer. When we do so we victimize the victim. If we began to look at the depression as symptomatic of living depressing lives, we’d begin to understand that the cure lies in addressing what our souls are longing for. When we suppress the voice of our soul, depression arises. Depression surfaces for a reason. It is crying out for our attention. The epidemic of depression is simply indicative of lives lived without joy.

People who feel passion for their work and friends and love their families and partners don't become depressed as often as the population at large. People who are in touch with their spirit and enjoy a sense of community don't incline toward depression. People who maintain a sense of wonder and awe don't become depressed. Depression isn't the enemy. It's simply a warning sign that we're not on the right path.

Before the advent of modern psychotherapy and well before the pathologizing of the word "depression" we would refer to such symptoms as melancholia. Life would bring certain periods and events in which one might feel some melancholy. Sadness is appropriate at times. When people experienced such sadness, friends and family may have supported them through the difficult times. But they weren't told that there was something wrong with them. Loving support is the most powerful agent in the treatment of depression. When we lose our compassion and relegate depressed people to the status of patients, we tend to dehumanize them. A dominant theme in our society is that you should be happy and if you're not, there's something wrong with you. Life can be difficult at times. It is in the labeling of people as depressed, that the greatest injustice is done.

If we see depression as a signal that something is off, we might use the depression to catalyze positive change. Very often depression makes perfect sense. In my practice, I often treat individuals who are being abused, living in loveless relationships or suffering from loss. Depression in such instances seems quite appropriate. Rather than treat the depression I prefer to assist these people in coming to terms with their life challenges. It is essential to treat the person, not the depression. In some instances, depression is situational. Loss of a loved one, illness or job loss creates circumstances which are painful. Working through the loss is more healing than medicating the pain. It is essential to address the underlying causes and not simply suppress the symptoms. The difficulty is that in our quick fix mentality, we believe that if we can suppress the symptoms that all is well. When we come to see depression not as the enemy but as an expression of some inner struggle, the epidemic will likely subside as we come to honor the integrity of our human spirit.

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