

## Depression

*Depression stems from the unique outcome of your physiology and accumulated life experiences.* Our memories of the past act like filters to new things. We can only interpret the world from what we already know—memories. Memories carry emotional *tones* with them that shape our awareness, interpretation and integration of new experiences. You see this played out when your personal thoughts, feelings and actions are different to someone else's after the same event.

*Brain wiring contributes to being depressed, and we can “re-wire” the brain.* Your brain has *Neurons* that “wire” together to allow brain communication. To communicate, *Neurotransmitters* move across tiny gaps between the neurons. When the neurotransmitters are interrupted or out of balance you have problems. For example, dopamine is a neurotransmitter that gives the signal “I feel good!” It serves to help you pay attention, move smoothly and feel pleasure. If dopamine is lacking it can cause depression.

“Neurons that fire together, wire together” – so as emotions, thoughts and physical sensations are experienced together, they are recorded in a connected way. *Emotions, thoughts and sensations can be recalled by stimulating just one of the three.* That is why a picture can tap into an old memory and make you feel nauseous, or experiencing pain that is similar to a past accident makes you panic.

As I have alluded to, *the past organizing the present can be a big problem.* It is like seeing through a filter. As a memory is evoked, the *new* thing is seen in the “light” of the *old*. It is easy then to create a down hill spiral.

*Your brain needs a balance* of neurotransmitters to work well, and you need to recognize, manage and start to change your “filters” to make accurate meaning in life. Just like recovering from an illness takes sleep, food and reduced stress, the brain needs the right balance of care. *You can affect the levels of neurotransmitters by your actions, thoughts, emotional regulation and medication.* You can work with your “filters” by recognizing them and adapting.

The nervous system plays a big part in how you manage these things. The parasympathetic nervous system is activated to help you calm down and restores balance in the body. *Meditation and purposeful relaxation are prime examples of how the parasympathetic nervous system can work for you.* Intentional mindfulness starts to re-wire your brain, allowing you to step sideways from the normal “filters” and prepares you to build new adaptive ones.

The sympathetic nervous system gets you ready for action and moves you into the fight, flight or freeze responses. *Stress makes this system work overtime leaving you out of balance and exhausted.* This has a large impact on the physiology of your brain. In part this is because stress depletes the stores of neurochemicals like serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine, making you feel the symptoms of depression.

A couple of other important areas of the brain are the *hippocampus* that codes memories for you, the *amygdala* which operates as your early warning system, and the *basal ganglia* that is the center of motivation and pleasure. If the hippocampus keeps inputting negative things, your “filters” get darker and darker. If the amygdala is hyperactive then you are always waiting for the next problem. If the basal ganglia is underserved you are likely to feel unmotivated or turn to “high octane dopamine providers”, that are often addictive or destructive, to give yourself a boost.

### **Important takeaways**

- All of the concerns mentioned above can be addressed
- Building positive brain circuitry helps to balance the brain and offset ruminating negative thinking, which in-turn helps regulate emotions
- Depression is usually worse in the morning. Your brain chemicals will try to trap you in bed
- It is important to break the firing patterns of negatively associated emotion and memory. We want to break down negative neural patterns and replace them with positive ones

## **How Can Counseling Help Me?**

### **Common Processing Mistakes**

As we interact with the world our “filters” cause us to respond in fairly rigid patterns. We all tend to interpret situations in unhelpful or inaccurate ways that can leave us dealing with strong emotions. One example is “*all-or-nothing thinking*”, where we might be totally bad, or the best thing since sliced bread. Neither of those is likely very true. In counseling we can identify these and work to change them.

### **The Big Three! Sleep, Eat, Exercise**

Research attests to the importance of good *sleep*, *diet* and *exercise*. All three affect the neurochemical balance of the brain, regulating dopamine, cortisol and more. Sleep is very important for encoding new memories, which is where our “filters” are changed and we internalize a new way of seeing things. Diet is linked to our emotional responses and ability to regulate our actions throughout the day. Exercise is a key part of stress reduction and natural dopamine production. Just getting on top of these three can significantly improve your quality of life.

### **Goal and Value Clarity**

When we have a sense of what we value and how we would like to live out those values we find purpose and identity. Depression would have us lose all hope of achieving anything and clouds our ability to value what we once did. As we formulate goals that embody your values you will see what is important to you. *Moving towards goals is a rewarding process* and sharing them moves you into relationships.

## Interpersonal Effectiveness

Relationships can be hard, especially when you feel like isolating, or that you have nothing to offer. *We learn how to relate to others from an early age and tend to stick with some patterns that have proved helpful to us. They might not be working effectively now though.* There are ways to readjust our interpersonal reactions, stand-up for ourselves, consider others, verbalize our needs and be heard. Furthermore, we could all use help to slow down and assess how we manage the difficult relationships and situations we face on a regular basis.

## Mindfulness

*Mindfulness is a key that unlocks our ability to attend* to most of the things I have already mentioned. Depression keeps us ruminating, distracted or too tired to think. We can work on our ability to pay attention to what we want and need. As we do this you are more able to regulate emotions, calm yourself, identify processing errors and make effective relational choices. Practicing mindfulness shapes your brain's neuro pathways and allows you to live in the present moment—the only moment you can impact and enjoy.

## Medication

*Sometimes medication is a very helpful adjunct to counseling.* It can help stabilize the neurochemistry of our brains to allow us to think more clearly, concentrate and have more positive energy.

You may ask, “How do I know if medication would be helpful or appropriate?” Saying “Yes” to some of the following questions is usually a good indicator that medication would be helpful.

1. Are you having intensely ruminating, negative thoughts? Are these hard to shake off? Do you feel, as some of my clients describe, that your thoughts are like the ball in a pinball machine, bouncing around with out much control?
2. Are you able to push aside ruminating worry when you have something important to focus on, only to find yourself worrying again the minute you have nothing to focus on?
3. Do you feel fatigued and wish you could stay in bed or feel like you want to go back to bed or lie on the couch even after you have had enough time in bed?
4. Do you have difficulty with concentration? Does even the effort of considering therapy seem like it is overwhelming?
5. Are you having trouble remembering things you should know and trouble remembering new things that should not be hard to learn?
6. Are you feeling agitated but unable to focus your efforts on anything?
7. Do you feel achy, sore, or in pain and know that this is worse than it ought to be?