

A LINE ON LIFE

9/17/95

Vicious Cycle of Depression

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

When you are depressed, everything seems hopeless. You feel unloved and rejected. This is partly due to your own negative thinking. However, your behavior may be *causing* others to reject you. How does this happen?

When depressed, people lack energy, have little ability to feel pleasure, and want to withdraw from most activities. They accentuate the negative aspects of their lives, ignoring or minimizing the positive aspects. Essentially, the combination of inactivity, isolation, lack of enjoyment and negative thinking creates a downward spiral.

After two decades of research, psychologists Chris Segrin and Lyn Abramson have found what depressed people do – or don't do – that affects the way others respond to them. The actions of depressed people impair their social skills.

"Impaired social skills both cause — and result from — depression."

Speech patterns change when people are depressed. Depressed people speak more slowly and quietly. In addition, they hesitate more, have more silences, and speak less often. They rarely smile or make eye contact. When they do speak, they are more likely to be negative, hostile and demanding. Overall, depressed people show *"a lack of responsiveness, little politeness, and failure to meet expectations."* This behavior leads others to avoid interacting with them.

When we interact socially, we want others to be **responsive** to us. *"Our well-being depends on emotional attachments, which require reciprocal enlivened communication."* This is lacking in communication with depressed people. Even infants need this responsiveness. If their mothers are depressed, their babies appear to withdraw from them.

Second, depressed people lack **politeness**. When we inquire about others' welfare, there is an expectation that the interest is mutual. We expect to be able to communicate our feelings too. Depressed people – in contrast to mutually inquiring about the interests and welfare of others – monopolize the conversation with their negative feelings and/or demands for help.

In contrast to offering interesting conversation, depressed people burden others either with their silence or with their unrelenting discussion of their problems. Since the depressed people are *"down,"* talking with them is a real *"downer."* Few people want to

continue discussions that lead them to feel sad, so they avoid conversing with depressed people.

This is a **vicious cycle**. First, a person feels a little depressed. These depressed feelings lead to low energy, less enthusiasm and negative thinking. Then the depressed person withdraws socially. When others do initiate conversation, the lack of response leads them to retreat from the depressed person. Depressed behavior leads to a **self-fulfilling prophecy**. Because depressed people feel rejected, they don't attempt to interact or reciprocate the interactions of others, so they eventually do become rejected.

To help them, depressed people are typically told to –

- socialize,
- be active,
- do something enjoyable and
- think positively.

If the person is in the depths of depression, it seems almost impossible to make these changes. However, if it is caught in the early stages, any disorder is more easily remedied. If the person is just slightly depressed, this advice is easier to follow. So when the symptoms of depression first appear, that is the time to put the above suggestions to work.

If the depression is already severe, seek professional help. Medications can provide higher energy levels to initiate these changes. Once energy levels are raised, psychotherapy can be helpful. Among other things, psychotherapy can help a person to gain – or maintain – social skills to improve interpersonal relationships.

Now you are aware of the effects of depression on personal interactions. If someone close to you seems depressed, – rather than avoiding them – you can increase your interaction with them to make them feel less rejected. You can make them aware of feasible options to deal with their negative thinking. This can include getting professional help. In this way, you can help them to break the vicious cycle of depression.

* Adapted from Jon G. Allen's article, "Depression causes vicious cycles in relationships," *The Menninger Letter*, February, 1995, page 6.