

A LINE ON LIFE

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Dealing with Depression *

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Everyone has felt a little "blue" at times. However, sometimes this temporary "blue" feeling can develop into a serious depression. Recent studies have shown that depression is a serious problem with college students. During the school year, up to 78% of American students suffer some symptoms of depression. At any one time, roughly one-quarter of the student population is involved. Why are so many students "blue"? How can they deal – or be helped to deal – with their depression?

A variety of problems typically contribute to depression among college students. The most common are:

- 1. Stresses** from increased difficulty of college and pressures to make a career choice often leave students thinking that they are missing out on fun or that all their hard work is meaningless.
- 2. Isolation and loneliness** are common when a student leaves his/her support group behind. Formerly, one's family, circle of high school friends and often an intimate boyfriend or girlfriend could be counted on for support and encouragement.
- 3. Problems with studying or grades** frequently trigger depression. Many students enter college with high aspirations and little previous experience with academic failure. At the same time, many lack the basic skills necessary for academic success.
- 4. Breakup of an intimate relationship** is another common cause of depression. It may be a breakup with a high school sweetheart or a newly found college romance.

Most of us know when we are "down." How can we tell if the depression is more serious? Psychologist Aaron Beck (a nationally recognized authority on depression) suggests that you should assume that a serious problem exists when the following five conditions apply.

1. You have a consistently negative opinion of yourself.
2. You engage in frequent acts of self-criticism and self-blame.
3. You place negative interpretations on events that usually wouldn't bother you.

4. Your future looks bleak and negative.
5. You believe that your responsibilities are overwhelming.

If you have a serious depression, how can you deal with it? Psychologists Beck and Greenberg suggest that you make a *daily schedule* for yourself. Try to schedule activities to fill up every hour in the day. It is best to start with easy activities and progress to more difficult tasks. In this way, you begin to break the cycle of feeling helpless and falling further behind. (In contrast, depressed students spend most of their time sleeping.) A series of small accomplishments, successes or pleasures may be all you need to get going again. However, if you lack skills for success in college, ask for help. In college, this can be done by talking to a counselor or teacher whom you trust, getting a tutor for problem courses or both of these. Don't remain "*helpless*."

Beck and Greenberg believe that the above five thoughts might perpetuate feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness. To counteract these thoughts, write them down as they occur, especially those that immediately precede feelings of sadness. After you have collected these thoughts, write a rational answer for each. For example, the thought, "*No one loves me*," can be answered with a list of people who care about you.

The most serious depressions can lead to suicide or major impairment of emotional functioning. A person who is seriously depressed may not be able to use the methods mentioned above. That person might need professional help. The National Association for Mental Health has compiled a list of 10 danger signs to identify a depression that requires professional help.

1. A general and lasting **feeling of hopelessness** and despair.
2. **Inability to concentrate**, making reading, writing and conversation difficult.
3. **Changes in physical activities** such as eating, sleeping and sex. Frequent physical complaints with no evidence of physical illness.
4. **Loss of self-esteem**, which brings on continual questioning of personal worth.
5. **Withdrawal** from others due to immense fear of rejection.
6. Threats or attempts to commit **suicide** viewed as a way out of a hostile environment and a belief that life is worthless.
7. **Hypersensitivity** to words and actions of others and general irritability.

8. **Misdirected anger** and difficulty in handling most feelings. Self-directed anger because of perceived worthlessness may produce anger directed at others.

9. **Feelings of guilt** in many situations. Depressed people assume that they are wrong or responsible for the unhappiness of others.

10. **Extreme dependency** on others. This is accompanied by feelings of helplessness and then anger at the helplessness.

Except for number 6, no single item necessarily indicates a dangerous depression. But if several characteristics are observed, seeking professional help would be wise. If you don't know where to get professional help, calling the local **Suicide Prevention Hotline** is a good start. (In Yuma, AZ that number is **342-3668**.)

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West Publishing, 1986, pages 322-325.