

Using Cognitive Therapy to Break the Cycle of Depression

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Many of my patients who have been depressed describe a similar pattern of what happens in their minds: a "*downward spiral*" of increasingly negative thoughts and emotions. Even people who aren't clinically depressed may experience this, especially at stressful times.

This downward spiral might start with an ordinary situation, like losing touch with friends after an illness, move or job change, which leads to feeling lonely and thinking "*I don't seem to have any friends anymore.*" This thought triggers another emotion, sadness, which then generates the thought "*nobody cares about me or wants to be my friend*" and perhaps some social withdrawal behavior (not reaching out to others). If this cycle continues, it may ultimately lead to a state of total isolation, a feeling of utter despair, and thoughts like "*who would want to be friends with a loser like me.*" Sound familiar?

These thoughts, emotions, and behaviors all feed on each other and serve to keep this destructive cycle going. But **it's possible to break this cycle by intervening at any point:** for example, **you can change your *thinking***, by considering that "*thoughts are not facts,*" or challenging the evidence for the negative thoughts being true, and allowing for the possibility of a more positive or neutral interpretation ("*maybe all of my friends have been as caught up in the demands of their lives as I have*").

You can change your *behavior*, by forcing yourself to pick up the phone and call an old friend, or making a conscious decision to go out and be part of social activities, even if you still feel like nobody loves you. And it's almost always true that if you can reach out, you will find that others are glad to hear from you or see you.

It's also possible to intervene by changing your *feelings*. Sometimes just allowing full expression of the emotion helps: for example, having a good cry can actually relieve feelings of sadness, as there is a chemical in tears that is similar to an anti-depressant; while going for a run, or pounding a pillow or punching bag, can help to let off the steam of anger. Another way to change feelings is to focus on engaging in a pleasant activity, like watching a funny movie, or playing with a child or pet - because not only will you be distracted from your misery, but in fact smiling and laughing also send chemical signals to your brain that can help to boost your mood.

Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which blends cognitive therapy techniques with meditative practices, has been clinically proven to be as effective as medication at preventing the recurrence of depressive symptoms, and can help relieve mild to moderate depression. MBCT teaches us to become more aware of our thoughts and emotions, rather than change them - yet at the same time learn to not be so affected by them. If you'd like to try cognitive therapy, or MBCT, contact me at:

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