

3 Unexpected Positives Things That Can Come From Experiencing Depression

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A lot is known about depression. We now know that there is particular neurological pattern that emerges in the brain of a depressed person. We also know that there are specific ways depressed people think — and don't think. And we also know that there are specific behaviors that accompany depression.

Yet for all we know about depression, there is an entirely different side that we — therapists and general public — know very little about. For every depressed person that struggles, there is another — and the statistics would point to evidence that the number is greater than 50% — that thrives. That's right, thrives. The same sort of events that seem to sideline one person, appear to be a catalyst for growth in another.

Depression, for some people, can lead to profound and dramatic growth. And yet, this is not the story we so often hear. Instead, for those who have been diagnosed with depression, the message is often much less rosy. And for those who work with depressed clients, the idea that depression can actually somehow propel growth is unheard of. Yet, here are three things that every therapist should know, and should be telling clients about depression:

Depression can be growth inducing. While we tend to associate depression with debilitation, the research shows an entirely different picture. In fact, studies suggest that percentages of people who experience growth in response to a stressful event range from 49-59% among total study participants, and 53-63% among females, and 43-53% among males (Morris, Finch, Scott, 2007). What this means is that not only does growth occur after challenging events — and depression is nothing if not challenging — it occurs more often than not. In the words of Powell and Garlington (2012), two researchers who study growth after trauma:

“Reports of growth experiences in the aftermath of traumatic events far outnumber reports of psychiatric disorders.”

Growth simply outnumbers disorders, and this is something every depressed person should know.

Depression can build mental fortitude. How does hardship build mental strength? In looking to answer this question, the Wested organization, who performed the largest statewide survey of resiliency, protective factors, and risk behaviors in the nation found four categories of resilience (1) social competence (2) problem solving (3) autonomy and (4) sense of purpose. These four categories, have held up after a decade of subsequent research, and according to Bonnie Bernard, author of *Fostering Resiliency In Kids: Protective Factors In Family, School, and Community*, “These competencies and strengths appear to transcend ethnicity, culture, gender, geography, and time.”

And these four traits, become engaged only when tested against challenges — and depression is challenging. In order to build resilience — also known as mental fortitude — we have to have challenge.

But here's the good part, according to researchers Richard Tedeshi and Lawrence Calhoun, who study growth after traumatic events, the type of strength that is built after setbacks is paradoxical — meaning growth is correlated with an increased sense of vulnerability. That is, people are more aware of their vulnerability, but also stronger.

It is a combination of the knowledge that bad things can and do happen and the discovery that “if I handled this then I can handle just about anything.”

Mental fortitude means being aware of both your strength and your vulnerability and it only comes through challenge, and this is something every depressed person should know.

Depression can clarify beliefs and values. Depression and traumatic circumstances — being uncontrollable, life threatening and irreversible — cause an upheaval of a person's long standing beliefs about the world, who they are, and how they make sense of their daily lives. Yet, although painful, upheaval leads to the reconsideration of existing beliefs and plants the seeds for a new perspective on what really matters.

Depression causes a person to ask some really important questions such as, What matters most to me? Where do I find meaning in life? What do I most want in life? What is my deepest purpose? And it's not until the path is cleared — because everything that was once known is now reconsidered — that change can happen. According to Janoff-Bulman and Berg who study growth in survivors of war,

“It is not simply that some trauma survivors cope well and perceive benefits in spite of their losses, but rather that the creation of value and meaning occurs because of their losses, particularly the loss of deeply held illusions. In the end, survivors often feel both more vulnerable and more appreciative, two states that are fundamentally linked.”

The creation of meaning and clarification of values comes because of, not in spite of, losses, and this is something every depressed person should know.

Depression is hard, and not something to be taken lightly. Certainly, if you feel you depression applies to you, you may want to consider seeking professional help.

Yet there is another side to depression — that it doesn't have to be debilitating, and as recent studies evidence, can be the catalyst for profound growth. And certainly, for anyone — depressed or not — it's a much more positive message.

References:

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