



## Depression and Relationships: The Good News About Feeling Bad

by Pat LaDouceur, Ph.D.

*"...I've been depressed since my baby was born..."*

*"...I've been unhappy for years, but it got even worse when I lost my job..."*

*"...I keep thinking that if I'm just strong enough I can just get over it..."*

Depression is often seen as an individual problem. But new research shows that in many cases, the best treatment for depression might be improving your relationship.

### **The Negative Spiral: Depression and Relationships**

Depression, no matter what its cause, is hard on relationships. For Ana, one of my clients, it started when she lost her job. She was bothered that Nick, her husband, was now the sole provider for their family. She wanted to contribute too. And the loss of meaningful work in her life took a toll on her self-esteem. Nick tried to cheer her up by pointing out her skills and abilities. But to Ana it felt like he didn't understand her inner struggle, and she got frustrated. She told Nick she needed some "space". Eventually Nick felt shut out and alone, and stopped trying. Ana felt alone with her moods and even more misunderstood.

This pattern is a common one. It's hard to know a loved one is depressed, and at some point most people will try to encourage and inspire them. But the person who feels depressed is often caught up in a complex and confusing mix of negative thoughts and feelings. Support, whether it's "cheering up" or helping out more, can start to feel like pressure and disapproval. Depression is often a mix of sadness and anger, plus guilt for not being able to "snap out of it". In a relationship, eventually neither person feels effective, and both feel depressed.

It's not only that depression affects relationships. The quality of your relationship is also a strong predictor of whether you will feel depressed. Distressed relationships create depression; good relationships buffer you from it. When a relationship is going well, most people feel appreciated, supported, and loved. When a relationship is distressed, most feel frustrated, anxious, and depressed. We respond to each other's moods in many ways. According to Michael Yapko, "our brains change in measurable ways in response to other people....depression is contagious."

### **A Growing Problem**

Depression has become a worldwide problem. The World Health Organization estimates depression to be the fourth leading cause of suffering worldwide, and rising. A national study found that depression affects about 9% of the U.S. Population each year<sup>ii</sup>. Less than half of these people seek treatment, and most of those who do use medication. The possibility of a fast and easy cure has appeal. But while medication helps some people, recent research suggests that drugs commonly used to treat depression are about as effective as a placebo. Clearly new approaches are needed.

### **A Positive Spiral: Your Relationship can Improve Your Mood**

While distressed relationships can fuel a downward spiral into depression, caring relationships can create a newer, positive cycle. This happened for Ana and Nick. As Ana understood that Nick's attempts to cheer her up were coming from a place of caring and concern, she felt more supported



by him. The more Nick understood her struggle, the more he felt more motivated to help. During five months of counseling, I helped them create new, positive communication patterns that helped both of them feel more appreciated and cared for. They were able to share feelings on a deeper level than they had before and spent more time together. Even before Ana found a new job, they felt more like they were working as a team.

### Small Steps

Small steps to build closeness can make a big difference in both your relationship and your mood. Here are a few ideas to get started:

- Practice appreciation: Find a way to appreciate your partner in one small way every day. I ask my clients to keep an "appreciation journal" -- a small notepad located where both people will see it every day.
- Practice having fun: Create moments of fun together every day. Cook dinner together, perhaps, or sip tea together before going to bed. Do something that makes you laugh. Get physical – take a walk, dance, or hug.
- Focus on what matters most: Everyone has habits that can be annoying to someone else - one partner is messier, or less organized, or chronically late, or doesn't follow up on phone calls. Slowing down and focusing on the values you share can help put these in perspective – or sometimes even set change in motion.
- Couples Counseling helps many people reduce depression and increase intimacy<sup>iii</sup>. A counselor can provide a safe place to talk about difficult feelings; help both partners feel respected and understood; and help clarify and change stuck relationship patterns.

People who are in positive, supportive relationships recover more quickly from illness and trauma, have better immune functioning and physical health, and have more rewarding family lives. It's becoming clear that depression is more than an individual problem. It also affects, and is effected by, your relationship. Making positive changes in your relationship might be one of the best things you can do for your mood...and your health.

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- i Michael Yapko. (2009) *Depression is Contagious*. New York: Free Press.
- ii National Comorbidity Study, University of Michigan, 1998. U.S. Population ages 15-54.
- iii Johnson and Greenberg. 1985 ; Dessalles, A., **Johnson, S.M.** & Denton, W. (2003) The treatment of clinical depression in the context of marital distress. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 31, 345-353