



# Infrequently mentioned aspects of depression treatment

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If you Google or use some other search engine to find out more about depression because you or someone you know has depression, you are likely to find lots of information about the symptoms, the types of depression, the causes, treatment, and coping skills. I am not going to talk about those. I want to talk about some of the more subtle but important aspects that don't tend to be discussed a lot.

## 1. Getting help

One of the problems with major depression is that it can be almost mentally paralysing. You don't have the energy or motivation to do anything. Including going for help. It takes some level of motivation to actually set up and appear for an appointment. Many people in the throes of a major depressive episode cannot even do that. This is something that I have to remind myself of often. Not only with depression, but in general. It can be quite hard for people to actually make an appointment, and then keep the appointment and come and see you. And many people show up for appointments highly anxious. Because of this, if you have a friend or family member with serious and long-term depression, you may be the one to have to help them get help. You may have to make the appointment, and you may have to accompany the person to the appointment.

## 2. Low levels of assertiveness

The hopelessness and helplessness and loss of self-esteem which usually go with depression, can mean the person lacks the confidence to stand up for themselves and explain what they are going through. Someone with depression will often say things like, "I don't want to bother you", "It is nothing", "I am sorry for wasting your time", "I feel so bad for bothering you because I know how busy you are", etc. This is another reason why having someone to assist you can be very important. Generally speaking, getting the right medical treatment for any illness requires a level of proactivity and assertiveness on the part of the individual. And proactivity and assertiveness don't usually go together with depression, although anger and irritability sometimes can.

### **3. Responsibility**

Taking responsibility for your own life, including your health, is psychologically healthy. When clients have physical concerns and they don't like what a doctor said or don't agree with it, then I encourage them to be proactive. Track your symptoms daily. Record them. Go back to the doctor. Get a second opinion. And for the most part, most people can do this. When it comes to dealing with people who have serious mental illnesses this is not so. Asking such people to take responsibility for themselves, be proactive, work with the medical team in getting better, can be really hard when your ability to take responsibility for your life is diminished by your illness. This is why dealing with the mentally ill is really challenging. You are dealing with people who are not fully able to be responsible for themselves. So once again family and friends can be really important.

### **4. Delay in getting treatment**

For most physical and mental illnesses, a delay in seeking treatment usually means a worsening of the condition and more or longer treatment. One of the most significant is schizophrenia. As mental functioning can decline, sometimes irreversibly, following each successive psychotic episode, a lot of research looks at prevention of the first episode of psychosis. While not in the same category, delaying treatment for major depression does make things worse. If you are generally healthy and happy, and some traumatic event happens or you lose your job, and you do end up with depression, you can recover fairly quickly and fully if you get good treatment. If you have had major depression that has gone undiagnosed and untreated for 10 years, then it is going to be a lot more difficult to get better. The French philosopher and writer Albert Camus said, "When the soul suffers too much, it develops a taste for misfortune," suggesting that prolonged, intense pain causes individuals to become accustomed to, and even subconsciously attached to, misery. The longer you live with depression the more your negative, hopeless, and helpless thoughts get wired into your neural pathways and the harder it is to change.

Now this absolutely does not mean you should not seek treatment or continue with treatment. What it means is the sooner you get help the better. And if you seek help and it turns out you do not have a problem that is good. But rather seek help and find out you don't need it, than wait until you are in a bad way.

### **5. It can take a really long time to get better**

I have never run the Comrades Marathon. Nor do I want to. I can imagine however, that after running 87 km, by the time you come to the last 3 km you are hanging on and just wanting it all to finish. Your body is in such pain that you just want this to be over. And you know that when you get to the finish line it will be over. Some people say that HOPE means Hold on Pain Ends. When you are ill, including mentally ill, you do not feel good. And finally seeing someone for treatment can often result in a sense of, "at long last someone can do something to help me, and I will feel better". Sometimes that is the case. The problem with treating depression is that it can take a long time to find the exact right treatment that works. There are many, many different medications and finding the right one can take time. Then there is taking the time to find the right dosage. Then most of the medications require some time before they take effect even if you are on the right meds and right dosage. And, as if that is not bad enough, in around 20% of cases meds don't work and other methods have to be tried. I

once had a client who for years had been diagnosed with bipolar 1. Medication had not worked for her and she gave up trying. Since the last time she had seen a professional was about ten years before, I suggested to her that she go back because medicine advances a lot all the time. When I suggested she looked into new treatments I almost had my head bitten off. And I quite understand why. She had tried so many different treatments and nothing worked. Every time she psyched herself up to go and try something else and it didn't work out, her hopes were dashed. If that happens often enough you give up. And here comes this person (me) who has no idea of what she went through to try and get better, suggesting she try this painful exercise again. Do I understand why she felt like this? Yes. Do I think she should stop pursuing new treatments? No. Even if it takes you a long time to be able to live a healthy life, it is worth it when you get there.

Having written this, I realise it can be quite depressing reading. Which is not my aim. My purpose is to give you some insight into what I see and help you manage depression as best you can. And that means 1). Learn to recognise the signs and get help as fast as you can. Even if you think it is not that serious. 2). Everyone is different and treatment is different for different people. 3). Just because it may be taking time to get better, it does not mean you should give up. It can take a long time to get better. Sometimes people give up before getting better. Don't quit, because when you do get better, you have a life again. Most people are helped, a lot. And new treatments for depression emerge all the time. 4). Serious mental illnesses usually require the assistance of friends and family. If you notice a friend or family member becoming unwell, then step in. Often the person will reject your help (sometimes repeatedly) on the grounds that they are fine. Use your judgement and step in and do what you feel you need to do. Despite someone's protests, people do want to get better and live a full and happy life. You could be the one person who helps make that happen.