

Social Connection in Depression

Besides robbing life of pleasure, depression can bring a sense of dread that makes us avoid some things all together. Most often, the thing we avoid is other people.

A large part of our brain is designed to read and relate to other people. Depression shifts these areas in ways that makes social interaction difficult and painful. Here are a few:

Rejection sensitivity: this makes us feel easily disliked or excluded. For example, you might have an intense sense of rejection if your friends went out for lunch without you. Rejection sensitivity happens more often in *atypical depression*, which also tends to cause high appetite, fatigue and heavy feelings in the arms and legs.

Reading faces: there's a part of our brain which reads other people's faces. In depression, we may be more likely to read neutral, content faces as critical or hostile. We may misread fear as anger. It is hard to engage with others when we are flooded with these reactions.

Agoraphobia: this is a fear of being in public places, such as shopping malls or crowded theaters. It probably relates to basic fears that we share with other animals, such as the fear of being attacked or hunted. In depression, and in panic disorder, it can keep us from even leaving the house.

Shame: depression makes us feel guilty and ashamed. We may avoid returning someone's phone call because we don't know what to say, and then avoid it even more because we're embarrassed by our own procrastination.

Low confidence: depression can lower our confidence to the point that we no longer assert our own needs. It's hard to speak up for yourself when you believe you are worthless. This actually strains relationships, because other people have a hard time

knowing what we need or even what is going on with us when we don't assert ourselves. Most people like relationships with some give and take. Depression often makes it easier to be a giver than a taker.

Think about how each of the items above has impacted your relationships. Though the voice of depression comes out in slightly different ways, it's more or less the same for all of us: "worthless, guilty, rejected, afraid." You can't turn that voice off, but you can practice seeing it for what it is. It is not the truth, it's just depression talking.

The reason to look past that voice this is that social relationships are key to overcoming depression. It is unlikely that the internet or the phone will suffice – it seems that our brains need to see and talk to people to fully get it that they are there. We also need to feel that the people around us are supportive, and that can be difficult during depression.

Social connection is one of the more difficult steps to take in this book and it is best done with the help of a therapist. Some of the most effective therapies for depression are designed to help people communicate more clearly, read others more accurately, and resolve conflicts in their relationships.

Further Reading

The Interpersonal Solution to Depression: A Workbook for Changing How You Feel by Changing How You Relate, by Thomas Ellis Joiner Jr PhD, Jeremy Pettit PhD

Patient's Manual for CBASP. by James P. McCullough Jr. PhD.