



Depression... "How did I get here?"

By Nancy Warkentin Houdek, MA, LLPC, NCC

It would be safe to assume that every one of us has described ourselves as feeling "depressed" at some point in our life, or perhaps several.

The assumption could also be made that we each experienced that feeling of depression in different ways and in varying extremes. Beyond depression's signature trait of sadness, we may have experienced difficulty sleeping, eating, concentrating or having enough energy to get through our day. We may have found our usual activities in life less joyful, feeling low self worth, and in some cases, thoughts of suicide. Regardless of which of these variables we identify with, the word 'Depression' itself seems to be universally understood to mean feeling emotionally worse than what we consider our "normal" self. In addition to our symptoms, the circumstances that create our feelings of depression may also be as varied as the way we experience it. An event or situation that produces a low mood in one person, for example, may be a completely benign occurrence to another. If depression is part of your world, you may be searching for answers. In particular, "How did I get here?"

Sometimes sadness is generated from a powerful, single event that has put our life in a tailspin, such as a divorce, loss of a job, or a death. These severe changes may leave us feeling hopeless and unable to look beyond our loss. With time, and perhaps outside assistance from counseling, we heal and are able to view our circumstances in a new way, eventually restoring our former balanced emotional life.

For many, however, feelings of depression have been a slow progression over time or an ever-present state of being. For some, it comes and goes like someone flipping a switch. This experience of depression doesn't seem to right itself with time, and in fact, may appear to worsen. Consider the analogy of a snow ball. At its origin, it is a small, tightly compacted, handful of snow. When it is rolled in more snow, it begins to grow bigger, heavier, as more and more snow is packed on. Like the start of the snowball, an individual may experience an event where a negative emotion or thought about themselves is generated, such as 'I'm bad' or 'I'm to blame'. As a result, a low opinion or identity of themselves is planted in their mind. For those who can relate to having depression for a very long time, or have been unable to recall its beginnings, this type of scenario may have occurred during childhood or adolescence. As the individual continues to go through life, that initial description of themselves never seems to fade. Instead, it continues to grow and strengthen as the person

unconsciously judges and attaches more evidence from the ups and downs of life to validate their negative view of self. When we aren't conditioned to think of ourselves in a positive light, neither will the flow of dialogue in our heads be supportive and encouraging. As the years pass, it may be more difficult for the person to perceive situations as they really are, instead packs on more layers of sadness and self criticism to their emotional snowball, resulting in low self esteem and a depressive personality.

This scenario may occur, for example, when children experience neglect or abuse. As infants we learn that our parents are those we need to depend on for support and survival. When they don't live up to that role or disappoint us in some way, such as not spending time or attending to our needs, talking or behaving in a hurtful manner, we may digest the situation in one of two ways. We may perceive our parents' behavior with the interpretation that we must not be worth loving which fills us with shame. The world may appear more lonely, empty, and a road to only disappointment. The other interpretation may be that we absorb all the blame for what has occurred. It may be too uncomfortable, as well as too scary, to consider that our parents could do something wrong, or worse yet, not love us. Taking on all of the blame for our parents' wrongdoing makes these situations easier to endure. However, it also plants the seed that we are bad, guilty, flawed and unworthy of love. Both scenarios describe the beginnings of the negative emotional snowball. As children we don't have the maturity to understand the unreasonableness of this faulty thinking, yet we may continue to believe this identity into our adulthood, thereby increasing the susceptibility of depression.

Whether your thoughts of depression are a new occurrence, or have been an ongoing companion, exploring your feelings of depression with the help of a Licensed Professional Counselor is the first step toward melting away the layers of the snowball and restoring your life.