



HOW WE UNDERSTAND DEPRESSION

What is depression?

Depression can be really serious, and it can be really scary. When someone in the family is depressed, there are lots of feelings flying around. From guilt, to hopelessness, to helplessness, to shame. It can lead to self-harm or even suicide. Often people think you either have depression or you don't. But as psychologists, we tend not to think of depression as a binary state. When we use the word depression, it can encompass a range of feelings where everything seems slower and much more muted. Depression can be thought of as a continuum from feeling a little bit low to a much heavier state when things feel seriously dampened. We also tend not to think of it as a disease, because more often than not, there is an understandable experience that has led to feeling this way. It's not just something that has happened out of the blue.

What does depression look like?

Depression can affect us at multiple levels.

At the 'thinking' level, our thoughts become slower and more negative. We become more critical of ourselves and we feel helpless or hopeless. Often, it's quite hard to think of a future. In fact, it's hard to think at all.

On a behavioural level, we become slower. We may not take very good care of ourselves. Our sleep may be affected. We withdraw socially, in part, because we think other people don't want to be around us when we're like this. Our energy levels dip and everything simply feels too demanding. This can also lead to more destructive behaviours like self-harm or suicidal ideation.

On a 'feeling' level, depression can often be described as despair or darkness. It can feel like wading through treacle. We feel numb, slow, and heavy.

On a neurological level, depression can cause chemical changes within the brain. This is often why some people call depression a disease. But changes to the brain can actually happen for a number of other different reasons that no one would ever classify as a disease. For example, falling in love or playing a competitive sport.

One way of thinking about depression, instead of as a disease, is as a normal survival system. The Polyvagal theory explains this (see our **Instagram post** for more details).

When we're in our normal state as humans, we feel at ease and connected. But when we sense danger in our environments, we tend to move to one of two positions. Either fight/flight response, where we feel anxious and agitated. Our heart rate might go up. We might breathe faster. And we get ready to fight or flee. But we're also capable of another position. Sometimes, when people feel under attack, they simply withdraw, freeze and go into a low arousal state. This can be very helpful. If we think back to the caveman-women days, whenever there was any danger, such as insufficient food or resources or a predator, they would withdraw to safety, and shut down their bodies to conserve energy until the threat had passed.

Sound familiar? Depression in many ways can be thought of as our bodies picking up on modern danger cues around us. When these feel too much,

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our bodies instead withdraw and shut down. In some ways, this is a healthy and useful. The problem arises when we get stuck in that position and cannot get back up.

As humans, it is crucial that we can move between these states to make sure we complete everything we need to do, protect ourselves, interact with each other, and enjoy life. But when we get stuck and it starts to impact our work, studies, relationships, or ourselves, then it is no longer adaptive to shut down and we need some help to unstick ourselves.

The meaning of depression

Here at Pocket Family, we see depression as something understandable. We've never worked with anyone with depression where we haven't been able to understand together why they feel the way they do, and why it has manifested at such a time. It almost always has developed in response to a difficult experience. For adults, this could be as a result of grief, a redundancy, financial pressure, the end of a relationship, prolonged stress, and the list goes on. For children, it can be the result of going through puberty, grief, trauma, moving away to university or dealing with a peer issue.

[We discuss what it means to have grief or loss [here](#) if you're interested.]

Moreover, two individuals can go through the same experience but one may feel fine following the incident, while the other may develop depression. This is because of the personal significance or meaning of that event. For example, although two teenagers may be bullied, they may have different reactions. For one teenager, who may have grown up in a loving household where they were cherished and made to feel capable, wanted and loved, the impact may be vastly different to a teenager who may have grown up in a home characterised by hardship. Maybe their parents separated. Maybe they had one particularly critical parent. Or maybe they weren't always made to feel wanted by one or both of their parents. For this teenager, the bullying may confirm their earlier negative feelings of seeing themselves as somehow defective or not good enough, and this can lead to depression for them, whilst not for the other.

And so, it is clear how we interpret events depends on both our prior experience, but equally, on our current coping strategies and resources. If you're dealing with a loss or redundancy, and you have a lot of financial and social support, you may be able to manage these hardships. It is a lot easier to support ourselves when we feel supported by others. However, if you're dealing with a redundancy without any help at all, facing financial struggles alone, then the demands may be too much to shoulder. The demands outweigh

outweigh your resources, possibly tipping you over into the shutdown, retreat state, until the danger has passed.

It is therefore a combination of the negative meaning we associate with the event as well as our capacity to deal with such hardship, that influences the ways in which we address the difficulty.

What does this mean for our children?

The Polyvagal theory suggests that we absorb all these danger cues from our surroundings. These don't have to be massive life changing events, but they can be the accumulation of small negative cues that signify something isn't quite right. Particularly for young people, they may not be in any direct danger but there are lots of cues, particularly at the moment, that suggest things are a little tricky. This can be a lack of routine, not seeing friends, or parents just generally getting a little more stressed. These are enough to signal to the body that things are not okay out there, and the body should do something about it, whether it's fight-flight or a complete shutdown.

There are multiple ways to help. This doesn't have to be just therapy. When a child, or anyone really, is in a dark place, the most important thing to do is to meet that person where they are. Gently and gradually provide them with connections, routines, and cues of safety whether that's food, smells, exercise, or gentle social connection to signal to their bodies that they are safe. Starting to talk, quietly and gently, and gradually building up can be effective. Try to increase their energy levels ever so slightly. This could be a small walk. Introduce things that will make their bodies feel good like music or sports. Equally, don't expect too much. These should be small steps to begin with.

Only once their energy levels are higher, should you begin to talk about why they may be feeling this way. Often, we see young people struggle at points of transition; when they move to secondary school or begin university. These can be massive jumps for young people, and they feel ill-equipped to deal with them. It's possible that they don't have strong social networks or may no longer want to rely on their parents. This leaves them with a support gap which can make everything seem overwhelming. For these young people, it could simply be a matter of teaching them how to cope and who they can turn to for help, when they need it.

A client of mine recently coined a phrase I would like to share with you:

Dare to care

Can you dare to care? Can you create the energy you need to care about life?

Please go to our website www.pocketfamilypsychologist.com for additional family resources.

Last piece of advice...

If you or anyone else you know is struggling with depression, we at Pocket Family, are always here to help.

We know there can be lots of questions from, when do we get help? When do we deal with this as a family? In part, this depends on safety. If you can no longer keep someone safe, then you absolutely need to seek out professional help.

It's also important to think about what has triggered this person to feel the way they do? How has this impacted on the rest of the family? And does this mean the family may not be able to help as they ordinarily would? We talk about family consultations and what they are **here**, if you're interested in finding out more.

At times, outside help can be really effective. Sometimes as a parent, we may say the same thing over and over again but it doesn't seem to go in. Then the same thing said by an outsider, who is not caught up in an important relationship with the young person, can land better, be easier to take onboard. Outside people can also feel less embarrassing.

We should remember, however, that as parents, there is a lot we can do. Consistency, routine, being open, accepting, curious and showing signs of safety can all be effective in alleviating a young person's pain.



Other resources

There are some other resources that you may find useful:

- The British Psychological Society released a document last year on understanding depression, you can see it **here**.
- The mental health charities, MIND and [timetochange.org](https://www.timetochange.org) have some great support for young people and adults with lots of first-person accounts on dealing with depression.
- MeeTwo is a peer-support free app for teenagers that provides a safe and secure forum to discuss any issues affecting their lives while receiving expert advice
- MindEd for Families is a website offering support and advice for parents with children with mental health difficulties.

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