



IN SIGHT

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Issue No. 37

JANUARY 2000

THE WEIGHT OF DEPRESSION

Depression – like diabetes and heart disease – is an illness. It can be triggered by a chemical imbalance or deficiency in the body, by events or life stresses, or by a combination of the two. Depression involves both a negative mood state and physical changes that persist over time and can lead to suicide. It is an illness that will affect one in five people sometime during their lifetimes.

WHAT DOES IT REALLY FEEL LIKE WHEN YOU ARE DEPRESSED?

Understanding and recognizing depression are the first two steps to healthy recovery. Here are some signs to watch for:

- Things just seem “off” or “wrong.”
- You don’t feel hopeful or happy about anything in your life.
- You cry a lot, either at nothing or at something that normally would be insignificant.
- You feel that you are moving and thinking in slow motion.
- Getting up in the morning requires a lot of effort.
- Carrying on a normal conversation is a struggle. You can’t seem to express yourself.
- Smiling feels stiff and awkward – as if your smile muscles are frozen.
- You feel that there’s a glass wall between you and the rest of the world.
- You are forgetful and find it very difficult to concentrate on anything.
- You are often anxious and worried.
- You have recurring thoughts of death and/or suicidal impulses.
- You have a feeling of impending doom.
- In your perception the world is always cloudy and gray – even on sunny days.
- You feel that you are drowning or suffocating.

- You are agitated, jumpy, and anxious much of the time.
- Your senses seem dulled: food tastes bland and uninteresting, and music doesn’t seem to affect you.
- Incessantly and uncontrollably, you review the memory of every failure – every bad or uncomfortable experience, interview, or date.¹

WOMEN AND DEPRESSION

Twice as many women as men suffer from depression, and a majority of those women are 25 to 44 and married. In fact, one in four women can expect to develop clinical depression during her lifetime. Depression is the number one cause of disability in women, with 15% of all those suffering from severe depression eventually committing suicide.

Why is the percentage of women so high? The answers can be found in several arenas:

- **Biology** – Puberty, childbirth, menstruation, menopause, and hormonal changes can play a part in depression.
- **Abuse** – Women and girls are much more likely than men to be raped and physically, mentally, or sexually abused. These abuses can lead to low self-esteem, self-blame, shame, and feelings of helplessness that can cause or exacerbate depression.
- **Societal Roles** – Some studies show that women have been conditioned to have a low sense of self-worth and competency: to consider their physical or mental capabilities inadequate. These feelings may be reinforced in the workplace in the form of lower pay, discrimination, or lack of respect.
- **Expectations** – For some women, trying to balance the demands of work with the demands of family is a huge stressor that can lead to feelings of inadequacy, helplessness, and eventually depression.

DEPRESSION AND THE LAW

According to a 1990 Johns Hopkins University study, lawyers ranked number one on the list of occupations associated with depression. "The major theory to explain why occupations might cause depression is stress – the discrepancy between the demands of a situation and the capacity of the individual or group to deal with it comfortably."²

According to Dr. Rebecca Nerison of the Washington Lawyers Assistance Program,³ four factors contribute to depression in the legal profession:

1. **The adversarial nature of the profession.** The argumentative nature of our profession contributes to family breakups and overall distancing from friends and family. This isolation may send some lawyers on the road to depression.
2. **The level of objectivity needed to represent clients.** Zealous representation of clients and constant demands to be objective and "leave personal feelings out of it" cause lawyers to distance themselves from their true feelings. Often, this distancing spills over into personal lives, leaving lawyers alienated and uncomfortable communicating in their personal lives.
3. **The hierarchical nature of the profession.** Starting in law school, lawyers are taught to compete, strive to be the best, and meet high standards so they can get high-paying jobs. Those who reach the big firms are then pressured to meet high billable hour demands and strive to work ever faster and harder. Those who don't "measure up" may feel like failures and believe that they will never succeed.
4. **Disillusionment with the profession.** Often young lawyers set out to help change the world, only to find that their jobs don't let them do that. Sometimes, more experienced lawyers feel that practicing is not as fun as it used to be. Job environments have become stressful, and lawyers who come from the "never let 'em see you sweat" school have nowhere to vent their difficulties and dissatisfaction.

CONFRONTING DEPRESSION

What can you do when depression strikes? First, learn to recognize its signs in ourselves and

others. Second, learn self-care in order to prevent stress, burnout, and depression. Third, learn how to approach those we believe are suffering from depression and learn about healthy treatment options. After all, depression *can* be treated with medication and therapy.

If you or a colleague is suffering from depression, call the OAAP at 503-226-1057.

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1 From www.wingofmadness.com, which features articles, essays and information about depression.

2 Occupations and the Prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder, *Journal of Occupational Medicine/Vol.32 no.11*, William W. Eaton, Ph.D.

3 ABA Bar Leader March/April 1998.