

Coping with College Series

Depression or Sadness?

By Ronald K. Dow

“That is so depressing.” “Boy, am I depressed?” Depression has become a word that is deeply ingrained in our culture and language. But, what is depression? Is depression merely a severe form of sadness?

First of all, sadness and emotional pain are normal. And the expression of sadness can also be extremely healthy. Yes, healthy. M. Scott Peck wrote in his book, The Road Less Traveled, that the tendency to avoid problems and emotional pain is the primary basis for all human mental illness.

We live in a world and culture that allows us little tolerance for pain in others and especially ourselves. We need to feel better...now. We need to figure it out...now. This is often where depression comes in. As odd as it may seem, depression is not a severe form of sadness. In fact, depression can best be best described as a “lack of sadness.” More specifically, depression is often the absence of all genuine emotion. A person who is depressed often describes his or her experience with phrases like, “nothing matters,” “I just don’t care” or “I feel NOTHING.” This nothing-ness is precisely what distinguishes depression from sadness.

The Pulitzer award-winning writer, William Styron described his personal bout with depression in his book, Darkness Visible. Styron wrote that depression is indeed like a storm, but a storm of murk. To cope with overwhelming emotional pain, the body, literally, “shuts down.” Styron further writes that, “soon evident were the slowed responses, near paralysis, psychic energy throttled back close to zero. Ultimately the body is affected and feels sapped and drained.” Appetite, sleep, energy and motivation are all affected. Although depression may shut out hurtful experiences and numb emotional pain, it also shuts out positive experiences, relationships and emotions. You might avoid the pain, but you can’t feel happiness either.

Depression can be a serious condition and should always be taken seriously. This article is not meant to be a diagnostic checklist. However, if you think you may suffer from depression, you are not alone. Do not suffer in silence. Reach out to friends, professors, your family... Students can, also, find treatment and support through Student Counseling Services.