In this chapter we’ll learn...

...what depression is and what we think causes it

...how the depression “Downward Spiral” works and how it can make depression worse

...how negative life events and depression can be related

...how our own relationship with our emotions can make depression worse

...three main ways to deal with negative events

...how depression may be impacting your life and how to start becoming more motivated to treat it

...the components of CBT that are used to treat depression
Everyone feels blue or sad sometimes. In fact, it’s normal to have a bad day every once in a while, shed tears after a sad movie, or feel nervous before a big day and lose sleep. These are common human experiences that are a healthy and normal part of life.

However, when the elements listed above last for days, weeks, or longer, we may be suffering from an episode of Major Depressive Disorder, also called “depression.” A person is typically diagnosed with depression when they experience periods of two weeks or more at a time where they feel low mood, lack of enjoyment or pleasure, poor self-esteem (feelings of worthlessness and/or guilt), changes in sleep and appetite, and social isolation.
What causes depression?

Do I have a “chemical imbalance?”

Doctors and psychologists (as well as therapists, philosophers, and theologians, among others) have been making efforts to understand the underlying causes of depression since ancient times. Since the middle of the 20th century, we have made many important advances in understanding depression, one of which was the discovery that certain important brain chemicals are “out of balance” for those people that are depressed. This led to one very important advance in depression treatment, the advent of antidepressant medications such as Prozac. It was common for patients in the 1980’s to be told that they had a “chemical imbalance” that was causing their depression.

While this is true to some extent, since then we have learned through further research that the “cause” of depression is more complicated, involving many elements, influenced by both “nature” and “nurture.” Some of those factors are listed below.

Nature

Genetics: Inherited vulnerability to physical and/or mental illness.

Chemical imbalance: Imbalance of important brain chemicals called “neurotransmitters.”

Hormones: Imbalances due to puberty, pregnancy/postpartum, menopause, adrenal, thyroid, and pituitary disorders.

and

Nurture

Early life experiences: Patterns of attachment with parents, early life stress, and trauma.

Modeling from important elders/authority figures: Learned behaviors from others in your life that might have been depressed or anxious. Learned thoughts about the world and self.

Major life changes: Moving a lot growing up, stressful jobs, change in health status, divorce, and loss of family members or significant people.
Regardless of the “cause” of depression for you (see the previous section: “What causes depression?”), once it starts, it often causes a “downward spiral” that leads to increasingly bad feelings and further negative events.

For example, isolating socially may cause others to stop reaching out to us and relationships may dissolve. Or, our poor view of ourselves may come across to others as low confidence and people may stop respecting us or treat us poorly.

This cycle may take many forms. Use the next page to better understand your own depression “downward spiral.”
My Depression “Downward Spiral”

List some of the factors in each category below and think about how one factor may influence the others.

Stressors/traumatic events/
life challenges

Long-term stressors in relationships

Negative thoughts about ourselves, others, or the world

Depressive feelings
(low motivation, fatigue, overwhelming sadness or guilt, etc.)

Further negative experiences
/people stop contacting us, we are treated poorly, etc./

Avoidant, passive, or isolative behaviors

Deeper and deeper depression and “giving up?”
There are many causes of depression. One has to do with the ways that difficult life circumstances can lead naturally to feelings of hopelessness. In some situations we may be stuck—it is authentically bad, we don’t have much help from others, we can’t change the painful situation, and it is difficult to accept the situation as it is.

The combination of stressful life events (especially being neglected or harmed by caregivers and other important people)—lack of social support, and inability to influence a situation to change it—leads to an understandable “giving up.” After all, why continue to try to do something if it isn’t working? Our bodies have a protective device that helps us “shut down” and conserve energy when our efforts are continually met with failure. This is especially important in early life relationships where it is necessary for our survival to be protected and loved by caregivers.

Then...

Stressful events (for example: being criticized by important persons over and over) → Little to no help from others to solve problem or get support around the stressor → Effort to fix problem on own with no effect → Strong emotions that cannot be handled on own

“Shutting down” response (body goes into a state of low energy usage/efficiency) → Necessary and adaptive, yet harmful coping behaviors (repetitive behaviors, self-harm, avoidance, etc.) → Self-critical thoughts about our inability to be competent in this “lose-lose” situation

When current experiences remind us of those earlier ones, our bodies go right to all the old patterns and feelings automatically, until we can change our own responses to these “triggers” over time.

Now...

Strong emotions that are similar to those originally experienced → Automatic reliance on repetitive behaviors that worked for us before; effort to fix problem or emotions this way, with or without success

Thoughts about our our incompetence (related to original thoughts of being able to be competent in the earlier “lose-lose” situation.)

“Shutting down” response (body goes into a state of low energy usage/efficiency)
When bad things happened to me...

Use the model from the previous page to understand how events may have shaped your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressful events (for example: being criticized by important persons over and over)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Shutting down” response?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping behaviors?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Then...

| Effort to fix problem (When did it work? When did it not work?) |
| Social support? |
| Strong emotions? |
| Self-critical thoughts? |

Now...

| Current event (that reminds us of past event) |
| Strong emotions that are similar to those originally experienced? |
| Automatic behaviors and efforts to fix situation or emotion? |
| Self-critical thoughts? |
| “Shutting down” response? |
The Internal Cycle

One piece of the “downward spiral” that we can influence is our response to our own internal experiences. Because these internal experiences (emotions, thoughts, and body sensations) are so distressing, we tend to do all we can to keep from experiencing them. This can take many forms. Below are some of the ways that we respond to our own internal experiences.

The problem with this pattern is that our bodies are programmed to give us strong emotions when it perceives something as dangerous. But what if our body perceives our own emotions, thoughts, or sensations as dangerous? It tends to create a “feedback loop” where the body fights itself: it is trying to protect itself from its own protective response. We then get caught in a pattern of trying to fix the feeling, which ultimately just makes it worse and worse, and takes us away from the important things in our lives.

Above is the typical course of emotions when we do not reject internal experiences. They tend to come and go, and return to normal. On the right is the loop that occurs when we reject (consciously or unconsciously) internal experiences. This is common, and it takes time to undo these patterns with CBT practice.

• Efforts to avoid feeling uncomfortable body sensations (avoiding exertion or places these sensations could arise)

• Self-critical thoughts about ourselves or our emotions: “I must be such a wimp for reacting this way.”

• Efforts not to think certain thoughts and guilt/self-criticism about thoughts: “What’s wrong with me for thinking that? I must be a bad person if I have these thoughts.”
Coping with stressful events is hard. All situations and lives are different, so it is very hard to make sweeping statements about how to feel better. However, we know from research that there are options for dealing with negative events that can limit the amount of pain we feel. Below are three options that can help a person cope with a negative event.

**Stressful life event (social rejection, mistreatment, loss, accident, etc.)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option One: Understand the truth</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To the best of our ability, we can understand the detailed truth about a situation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>We may learn that it is not as bad as we thought it was, or we might learn that things really are very challenging and need a solution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We may learn that we feel bad because we lost something, or could lose something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Understanding the truth” is often the first step to making things better. This way we learn what we can control, and what we might have to learn to accept.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option Two: Solve the problem</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Once we understand the truth about a difficult situation, the best thing that we can do is change the situation, if this is possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>However, one primary reason that people end up feeling depressed is that they continue to try to fix a problem that cannot actually be fixed. This reinforces a loop of failure, and teaches a person to feel incompetent. Of course, the only reason they feel incompetent is that the problem can’t be fixed in the first place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Later we’ll talk more about how to strategically solve problems. If problems cannot be solved, we move to the next option: acceptance.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Option Three: Accept what cannot be controlled</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Acceptance” is often though of as “being OK” with bad events. This isn’t entirely true. If we can solve a problem, we should. Acceptance becomes our ally when there is no solution to the problem at hand. This often happens in a “double-bind” or “lose-lose” situation, where no matter what solution you come up with the results seem unacceptable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance can lead to more self-compassion and less depressive symptoms, because we realize that it is not our fault that we are not successful in solving a problem—it’s just an unsolvable problem. Then we can decide what the next “best-case scenario” could be to continue to move toward our aims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When enduring an important loss, sometimes “acceptance” takes the form of grieving what was lost.</td>
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Some people ask themselves “is it worth it to put in some hard work to get my depression under control?” This is a personal choice, and everyone has different reasons for working on their depression. One way to help answer this question is to examine different parts of your life and how the depression impacts them.

First, let’s make a list of the different parts of your life that are important to you. Some examples are below.

**Areas of my life that are important to me are:**

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
6. 
7. 
8. 
9. 

**How important (0-10)**

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
6. 
7. 
8. 
9. 

Sample important life areas:

- Family
- Friends
- Social life
- Work/career
- School
- Leisure
- Hobbies
- Spirituality/religion
- Volunteering/giving back
- Physical health
- Mental health
- Free time
- Others...

**Life area:**

**How depression interferes with my goals in this area:**

__________________________________________________________________________

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Tear out this page and take it with you to remind yourself of the reasons to work actively on your depression.
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Remember to tear out this page after you have filled out the “Depression Inconvenience Review Form” and put it somewhere you can see it easily as you go through your day.
Notes