

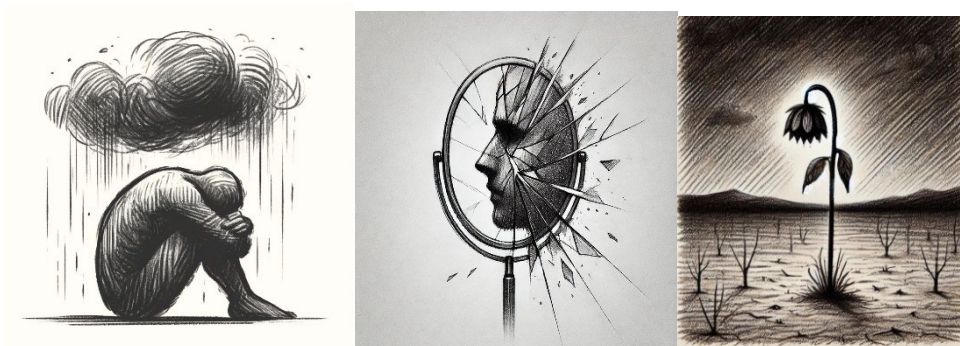


Exploring Depression and Coexisting Issues

Clinician/Group leader: *Keep in mind, there is a lot of material here so you may want to break this up into more than one session, or use only select parts of the activity based on the group's motivation level and needs*

Icebreaker Activity: "Deep in Depression"

Whether you have experienced depression or not (or perhaps you may not be sure), as an icebreaker draw any picture that comes to mind under this theme. Be creative. Discuss and explain pics as a group. No judgement - this is not an art contest but about self-expression.



Depression Overview (*With Discussion Points and Questions in Italics*)

- **What is Depression?**
 - ✓ Depression, also known as major depressive disorder (MDD), is a mental health condition that affects a person's thoughts, feelings, behavior, and overall well-being. It's more than just a bad mood or passing sadness - it's a persistent and deep feeling of sadness or emptiness that can affect a person's daily functioning. Depression can make even simple tasks feel overwhelming and impact the ability to engage in work, social activities, and relationships.
 - ☐ ***Have you ever experienced prolonged feelings of sadness or emptiness that have affected your daily life?***
- **Symptoms of Depression – (*Review and discuss symptoms below that you may have experienced*)**
 - ✓ **Emotional Symptoms:**
 - ☐ **Persistent sadness or emptiness:** A person with depression may feel like they're trapped in a dark emotional space and unable to escape it.
 - ☐ **Loss of interest or pleasure:** Activities that used to be enjoyable may no longer bring any satisfaction, a phenomenon known as anhedonia.
 - ☐ **Feelings of guilt or worthlessness:** Some people with depression may feel like they are a burden to others or not good enough.
 - ☐ **Hopelessness or helplessness:** The belief that things will never improve, and that nothing can be done to change the situation.



✓ **Physical Symptoms:**

- ☐ **Fatigue or lack of energy:** Even the thought of getting out of bed can seem like too much effort.
- ☐ **Changes in sleep patterns:** Depression can lead to insomnia (difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep) or hypersomnia (sleeping too much).
- ☐ **Changes in appetite or weight:** Some people may lose their appetite and weight, while others may experience emotional eating and gain weight.
- ☐ **Physical aches and pains:** Depression can manifest in physical symptoms such as headaches, back pain, or digestive issues, which have no clear physical cause.

✓ **Cognitive Symptoms:**

- ☐ **Difficulty concentrating:** Depression can make it hard to focus, remember details, or make decisions.
- ☐ **Negative thinking patterns:** A person with depression might experience constant self-criticism, doubts about their abilities, and pessimism about the future.

- **Causes and Risk Factors:** Depression doesn't have a single cause, and it's important to understand that it's not a sign of personal weakness or a character flaw. Several factors can contribute to the development of depression:
 - ☐ **Genetics:** There is evidence that depression can run in families, suggesting that genetics may play a role in vulnerability. However, not everyone with a family history of depression will develop it. – ***Do you have depression (diagnosed or undiagnosed) in your family history?***
 - ☐ **Trauma and Stress:** Major life changes, such as losing a loved one, going through a divorce, experiencing abuse, or even significant life transitions (e.g., changing jobs or moving), can trigger depression, especially if there's an accumulation of stress over time. ***Do you have a history of trauma or prolonged stress?***
 - ☐ **Chronic Illness:** Medical conditions like heart disease, cancer, diabetes, or chronic pain can increase the risk of depression, either due to the physical effects of the illness or as a result of the emotional toll of managing a long-term condition. ***Do you have a chronic illness or other condition that may be impacting your emotions or moods?***
 - ☐ **Substance Use:** Alcohol or drug abuse can contribute to depression, and depression itself can increase the likelihood of substance use as people may try to self-medicate to cope with their feelings. ***Why do you think substance use and depression can be linked?***
 - ☐ **Other Risk Factors – These may be difficult to identify without professional help:**
 - **Chemical Imbalances or Hormonal Changes:** Depression is often linked to changes in brain chemicals such as serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine. These chemicals regulate mood, energy, and emotional stability. Also, imbalances in hormones, especially during pregnancy, postpartum, menopause, or thyroid dysfunction, can contribute to depression. ***Could this be a factor for you?***



- **The Cycle of Depression:**

- ✓ Depression often perpetuates itself in a cycle. For example, someone who is feeling hopeless may withdraw from social activities, leading to isolation and even more negative thoughts. This isolation can prevent them from seeking help or engaging in positive coping strategies, which in turn worsens the depression. Understanding the cyclical nature of depression can help us to recognize that we don't need to "snap out of it" on our own; rather, intervention and support are key. ***Does this make sense? Have you or someone you know ever been in this cycle?***

- **Treatment Options – (Where applicable, discuss any you have tried or may want or need to try)**

- ✓ **Lifestyle Changes:** Regular physical activity, a balanced diet, getting enough sleep, and managing stress through mindfulness and relaxation techniques can all help improve mental health and alleviate symptoms of depression.
- ✓ **Therapy:** Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is one of the most commonly recommended therapies for treating depression. It helps individuals recognize and change negative thought patterns and behaviors. There are other types of therapy as well but that may help with skill building, emotion-regulation, distress tolerance, and increasing resilience
- ✓ **Medication:** Antidepressant medications, such as SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors), are commonly prescribed to help regulate the brain chemicals that affect mood. It's important to remember that medication is not a quick fix and often needs to be combined with therapy and lifestyle changes for optimal results. There are other medications and medical treatments that may be worth discussing with an appropriate medical practitioner.

Insightful Exploration Activity: "Inside My Mind – Exploring Thought Patterns"

These questions are designed to promote reflection on our current emotional state and how our thoughts may be affecting our feelings. *For people in the group who do not feel they have issues with depression, use your experience and knowledge of what you know about depression to try to participate.*

1. **How do you feel when you experience depression?**
(Describe physical sensations, emotions, or thoughts during depressive episodes.)
2. **What do you tell yourself when you're feeling down?**
(Is there a pattern to your thinking? E.g., self-criticism, hopelessness, or guilt?)
3. **Do you notice specific triggers or situations that seem to make depression worse?**
(This could include certain environments, people, memories, or events.)
4. **When you're in a depressive state, what kind of thoughts do you have about yourself and the future?** (Use insight to explore negative thought cycles and challenge self-defeating narratives.)
5. **What activities or people help lift your mood, even if just a little?**
(Identify potential solutions, coping mechanisms and support systems that can be helpful.)



Coping Skills Activity: "Building My Depression Toolbox" - Below is a list of coping skills that can help manage depressive symptoms. Think about which ones resonate with you and check off which ones you want to add to your "Depression Toolbox". Also be sure to ask about any that you would like to learn more about

In the Moment Coping Skills - These are quick, immediate strategies that can help you feel better or regain control in moments of distress, anxiety, or low mood.

- ☐ **Mindful Breathing:** Quick practice to calm the mind. Proven to calm the nervous system
- ☐ **Talk to Someone:** Immediate support and connection. Process emotions. Reduce isolation
- ☐ **Journal:** Release emotions and clarify thoughts in the moment. Clears the mind. Builds insight.
- ☐ **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Immediate release of tension and calming.
- ☐ **Listen to Music:** A quick mood booster. A healthy escape.
- ☐ **Grounding Exercises:** Helps refocus and reduce overwhelming emotions.
- ☐ **Breathing Techniques:** A quick way to reduce stress and regain calm.
- ☐ **Healthy Escapes/Distracton:** Short-term respite to recharge and manage overwhelming feelings.
- ☐ **Spend Time with Animals:** Provides comfort and calm in moments of need.

Long-Term Coping Skills – Keep in mind these skills also have short term benefits but overall, these skills may require consistent practice to effectively manage depression, improve overall mental health, and build resilience.

- ☐ **Physical Exercise:** Long-term improvements in mood and energy. Natural endorphin boost
- ☐ **Practice Gratitude:** Regular habit that shifts overall mindset.
- ☐ **Get Enough Sleep:** Consistent good sleep habits for overall mental well-being.
- ☐ **Break Tasks into Small Steps:** Requires practice to avoid feeling overwhelmed.
- ☐ **Set Realistic Goals:** Focuses on growth and motivation over time. Goal attainment improves mood
- ☐ **Practice Self-Compassion:** Requires ongoing self-kindness and regular use.
- ☐ **Engage in a Hobby:** Helps foster long-term joy and fulfillment.
- ☐ **Limit Social Media Use:** Long-term improvement in self-esteem and mental well-being.
- ☐ **Mindful Emotion Regulation:** Regular practice leads to learning to keep emotions under control.
- ☐ **Art or Creative Expression:** Ongoing practice that nurtures self-expression and healing.
- ☐ **Eat a Balanced Diet:** Consistently good nutrition for long-term mental and physical health.
- ☐ **Use Positive Affirmations:** Regular practice to reinforce strengths and self-confidence.
- ☐ **Volunteer or Help Others:** Build long-term connections and purpose. Helping others takes focus off self
- ☐ **Relaxation Routines:** Consistent practice of scheduling relaxation into the day enhances well-being.
- ☐ **Behavioral Techniques:** Avoid triggers and identify positive rewards
- ☐ **Manage Associations:** Stay away from negative people and situations as much as possible
- ☐ **Self-care Routines:** Can be an immediate mood-lifter and also part of long-term mental health
- ☐ **Seek Professional Help:** Immediate support during crisis and long-term benefits from therapy.
- ☐ **Spend Time Outdoors:** Instant mood improvement with long-term well-being benefits.
- ☐ **Challenge Negative Thoughts:** In the moment helps with reframing, long-term can change overall thinking
- ☐ **Take Breaks:** Short-term relief and part of building sustainable habits for self-care if done correctly.
- ☐ **Spirituality- Seeking Meaning and Purpose** – Meaning, purpose, belonging, connection all build resilience
- ☐ **Develop Distress Tolerance** – Learning to "sit with" discomfort without resorting to harmful practices
- ☐ **Learn to cope with Trauma** – Trauma can be a recurring trigger so short- and long-term coping is essential
- ☐ **Other** – *Discuss other skills not listed that have worked for you*



Additional Info - Coexisting Issues: The Relationship Between Depression and Substance Use

Depression and substance use may go hand in hand. Some individuals with depression turn to alcohol or drugs as a way to **self-medicate**, seeking relief from the emotional pain, numbness, or lack of motivation that accompanies depression. This coping mechanism, though temporary, often worsens the overall condition.

Self-Medication and Depression:

Self-medication refers to the use of substances to relieve the symptoms of mental health conditions like depression. While it may provide short-term relief or a temporary escape, it can lead to further emotional and physical issues, such as increased depression, anxiety, or addiction.

Substances such as alcohol, marijuana, stimulants, or opioids might be used as a way to temporarily numb feelings or improve mood, but these substances can ultimately exacerbate the symptoms of depression, leading to a vicious cycle that becomes difficult to break.

The problem with self-medication is that quite often, a person may use substances to self-medicate and not realize that self-medication is taking place. A person may rationalize to avoid this reality. See examples below:

- *“I just use substances for fun, that’s it”*
- *“Substance use helps me relax but there is no serious issue like depression”*

Substance use can start out as fun or relaxing but over time in some cases it can become a form of self-medication. Because of this gradual process it may take time to recognize the pattern of self-medication. Sometimes people do not realize until later in life that all along they were self-medicating depression. *(However, it must be noted that not all substance use is self-medication and not everyone who has a problem with substance use is depressed but often self-medication is more common than some may realize)*

The Vicious Cycle:

Substance use may initially feel like it helps with negative feelings and depression (e.g., it may provide temporary feelings of euphoria or numbness), but eventually, it worsens depression by impacting brain chemistry, sleep, decision-making, behavior, and overall well-being. The worsening depression might prompt even more substance use, deepening the cycle.

Breaking the Pattern of Self-Medication: Breaking the cycle of self-medication involves recognizing the role substances play in coping with depression and learning healthier ways to manage emotions. Also, as substance use increases, consequences may result which can increase depression. With the right support and coping skills, individuals can learn to break this pattern and build a more sustainable path to recovery.

Key Strategies for Breaking the Cycle: Use the same coping skills and strategies on the previous page. Developing and practicing a healthy lifestyle with positive goals, skills, and supports can break the cycle of self-medication. Learning to replace the practice of turning to substances for relief by developing healthy alternatives is an essential part of this process. Support is key and professional help may be needed

Closing Discussion Questions

What do you think about self-medication? (Do you think this may have been an issue for you?)

Going forward: Everyone needs positive coping skills and supports. Whether depression is an issue for you, or not: What takeaways do you have from this discussion and what positive things can you improve on?