When Depression Doesn’t Respond to Treatment

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Your Life with Treatment-Resistant Depression

You’ve taken the pills. You’ve sat through the individual therapy, the group therapy, and the family therapy. You’ve even taken yoga classes, but to this point, nothing has worked.

No matter what you do, it seems you can’t change your depression. Over the years, it is unchanged as depression weighs you down and disrupts your life.

The help that you desire may come with a better understanding of treatment-resistant depression and the impact it can have.

Treatment-Resistant Depression Basics

Although depression may only conjure thoughts of one group of symptoms and one condition, the world of mental health is littered with various forms of depression. Despite the many depressive disorders, there is no condition called treatment-resistant depression.

Rather than being a unique condition, treatment-resistant depression is only a label a person or a professional puts on the disorder. The term treatment-resistant depression (TRD) implies that the symptoms do not respond as expected to typical forms of medication or therapy interventions. Despite the best efforts of the clinicians and the client, the depression remains.

So, if TRD is not a diagnosis, what is it? Many times, people with another depressive disorder, called persistent depressive disorder, might show signs of TRD.

What Is Persistent Depressive Disorder?

Persistent depressive disorder is a mental health condition marked by a long duration of a depressed mood, lasting most days for at least two years. People with persistent depressive disorder can experience other symptoms like:

- Appetite or weight changes
- Sleeping changes
- Low energy and high fatigue
- Poor self-esteem
- Low concentration and trouble making choices
- Feeling hopeless and worthless

The depressive episodes linked to other conditions may only last a few weeks, so two years is a very long time for symptoms to remain.

During the time with persistent depressive disorder, treatments may do little to improve symptoms. In this way, persistent depressive disorder will show signs of TRD.

Incorrect or Inadequate Treatments

People who feel like their depression is treatment-resistant may be experiencing an issue with incorrect or inadequate treatments based on an inaccurate diagnosis. In psychology, mental health symptoms from one condition frequently overlap with symptoms from other conditions. These similarities make diagnosis challenging.

If someone receives a diagnosis and begins treatment that is not ideal for their situation, the depression will present as TRD. In reality, the symptoms are not improving because the treatments are not correct.

Some examples of depressive disorders or disorders with symptoms confused for depression are:

- Major depressive disorder
- Bipolar disorder
- Premenstrual dysphoric disorder
- Disruptive mood dysregulation disorder
- Attention-deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Anxiety disorders
- Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Substance use disorders

In some situations, a person treated for depression, who has bipolar disorder, will see symptoms worsen, rather than get better, with certain medications. A person with ADHD or anxiety could display signs of depression, but targeting the depression directly will do little to relieve the symptoms. The clinician needs a proper diagnosis to guide effective treatments.

Substance use disorders are another great example of a condition masquerading as TRD while being something completely different. A person with an alcohol use disorder will regularly feel depressed or irritable, sleepy with low motivation, poor concentration, and worthless.

On the outside, a mental health clinician could easily give a depressive diagnosis, but this label would not properly capture the clinical picture. If the person stopped drinking, their depressive symptoms could alleviate completely, which illustrates the importance of a thorough evaluation and diagnosis.

Tips to Manage Treatment-Resistant Depression

If your depression or the depression of someone you love is treatment-resistant, it can feel like a hopeless situation. Keep faith, though, because there are always ways to improve your mood and well-being.

If you experience TRD, consider:

Setting New Expectations

Of course, everyone wants to feel well and function normally, but for some, it is just not possible. If your depression is treatment-resistant, make the decision to set new expectations for yourself instead of being upset and disappointed continuously.

Start viewing your mood and symptoms as “the new normal” in your life, and never judge your symptoms against someone without depression. You may not be perfect, but you can still accomplish a lot in life and find moments of happiness with TRD.

You are Going Through the Motions

With TRD, you may feel like nothing works, and no matter what you do, your symptoms don’t improve. This view may be accurate to a degree, but imagine how low your mood could be without your best efforts. People with TRD should still go to therapy, experiment with medications, and use healthy coping skills at home. Without going through the motions of treatment, symptoms will worsen.

Stay Hopeful

TRD usually doesn’t last forever. Even if you have been depressed for years, the chance of feeling better always remains. Staying optimistic will help you recognize improvements when they occur.

Conclusion

Treatment-resistant depression is a powerfully negative force, but with proper diagnosis and perseverance, symptoms can improve. Always stay optimistic.