The Path to an Accurate Depression Diagnosis

by ERIC PATTERSON

Working Towards a Diagnosis of Depression

There is an old joke involving mental health. It states that if you ask 10 psychiatrists a question, you will receive 11 different answers.

In this case, you could substitute therapists, counselors, psychologists, nurse practitioners, and any other mental health worker for psychiatrists. The world of mental health is not black and white — it is not simple and easy.

Instead, the world of mental health is filled with endless shades of gray that serve to confuse and confound the layperson and the professional alike.

Mental health issues and mental health disorders are not easy to identify. They are not easy to diagnose in many cases because the information can be difficult to gather.

Mental health issues are diagnosed based on self-report and professional observation, and both are flawed. Self-report has issues because people are not proficient at objectively monitoring their own thoughts, feelings, behaviors and symptoms.

Professional observation is problematic because the observer is biased by their background, training and other inconsistencies.

If you are interested in learning more about a potential depression diagnosis for yourself or a loved one, you may be discouraged to read this. Don't worry, though. The path to a depression diagnosis can be easily navigated with a little information and perseverance. Here's how:

Avoid the Wrong Information

In the 21st century, a wealth of helpful and accurate information is at your fingertips. Unfortunately, it is overwhelmed by the amount of unhelpful and inaccurate information also available.

To remedy the flood of information, be sure to only seek out reliable sources for data related to mental health and depression. The right information is available. Though it will often appear bland and dull, it is the information you need.

For example, all the material you need regarding depression is found in one simple source: the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, often referred to as the DSM-5. This reference tool created by the American Psychiatric Association contains all the data needed to learn more about the disorder and make the appropriate diagnosis.

The problem is the contents of this guide are not freely available online, and even if they were, it would not be

suitable for someone with no training or experience in the mental health field to venture guesses based on their interpretation.

“Depression” in the DSM-5 could be one of eight separate diagnoses that range on the continuum from mild to severe, persistent to short-term. This is not something that someone should randomly suppose they know.

Focus on Symptoms

So, if you are looking to learn more on your journey towards a depression diagnosis, what is the “right” information? Symptoms.

Symptoms are the smaller aspect of each mental health disorder. The criteria listed in the DSM-5 for each diagnosis is a set of symptoms the person must experience and the timeframe in which they experience them. Overall, depression symptoms relate to:

- Sleep
- Appetite and weight changes
- Energy levels
- Motivation
- Levels of optimism or pessimism
- Feelings of worth or excessive guilt
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Periods of low mood, irritability and anger
- Feelings of either being restless or slowed down
- Change in concentration, attention or decision-making skills

If you are interested in moving towards a depression diagnosis, it will be essential to monitor the symptoms above for a period. Depending on the diagnosis, two weeks might be long enough, but one month of tracking will yield more complete results.

Rather than relying on your memory or perceptions of the situation, track your symptoms with a written log. Track each symptom every day to collect the data.

Lastly, do your best to not interpret the data in any way. Only track and leave the interpretation to the professional. This leaves the data objective and unbiased.

Schedule the Appointment

If you are interested in a diagnosis, you will need an appointment with a mental health professional. These professionals are known by many names including:

- Psychiatrists
- Psychologists
- Counselors
- Therapists
- Social workers
- Nurse practitioners

General practitioners may also have comfort in making diagnoses.

Your appointment will consist of you providing information regarding your presenting problems, chief complaint, mental health history and family medical history. They may ask you to complete a written questionnaire or an inventory related to depression.

Beware of workers who are ready to assign a diagnosis to you after only meeting for a few minutes. The process

routinely takes an hour or more.

Process the Information

Following the appointment, the mental health professional should have a good understanding of your symptoms. Feel free to engage them in a conversation about which, if any, diagnosis is appropriate for you and how they came to that conclusion.

Ask if they have materials related to that specific disorder and if you can discuss the DSM-5 criteria associated. From here, ask for recommendations regarding treatment. A diagnosis is worthless unless there is a treatment plan to follow.

Remember, you have the right to ask questions and be informed of your mental health treatment.

The path to a depression diagnosis may seem like a long and winding road, but this does not have to be the case. As long as you focus on the best symptom information while avoiding the biased opinions of others, you will be well-prepared for your evaluation with a mental health professional.

By asking the right questions and following through with their proposed interpretation, you can get more than a depression diagnosis. You can get the correct depression diagnosis.