Handling Social Situations When Struggling With Depression

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Socializing and Depression

Lack of socialization and depression often go together. If you are keeping mostly to yourself and not interacting with others, the isolation may worsen depressive symptoms.

Therefore, managing depression requires some socialization each day, regardless of how small or simple it is.

What Are the Mental Health Benefits of Socializing and Why Is It Important to Socialize?

Human beings are social at their very core, and a lack of socialization can lead to psychological problems, including depression and anxiety. Research shows people who socialize often are less likely to suffer from depression.

Socialization is so important that solitary confinement has been used as a form of torture or punishment. Anyone who is separated from others is likely to become depressed.

When it comes down to it, connecting with others makes life more meaningful. It also helps you to feel less alone.

Socializing with others offers you an opportunity to focus on something other than your problems. Being able to forget makes you feel happier and emotionally better.

Anytime you felt better after talking to a friend or loved one; you quickly realize how powerful and beneficial socialization is. In fact, something as simple as a short phone call or a quick ten-minute coffee break with a friend can significantly and positively affect your mood.

Depression, Social Withdrawal and Isolation

When people socially withdraw, they start to avoid people they love and activities they used to enjoy doing. This can progress to social isolation, to the point where they want to be alone often and continually avoid contact with family and friends.

Depression makes you want to spend time alone and makes socializing feel exhausting and overwhelming. Sadly, the more you isolate yourself, the more depressed you become.

You also start to feel loved ones don’t understand you and that makes you want to be alone even more.

Social withdrawal and isolation are telltale signs of depression. Both worsen feelings of low self-worth and further intensify depression.

What the Research Tells Us

Research from the journal, *Mind, Mood & Memory* finds that connecting with others helps to improve your mood and fight off depression.

When it comes to actual forms of socialization, face-to-face interaction is much more beneficial than phone calls, texts and/or emails to your mental health, this according to research reported in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

Researchers from the University of Dublin, Ireland, have also confirmed a connection between socialization and reduction of depressive symptoms. In fact, conventional treatment for depression is often supplemented by social support and interaction.

The Irish study looked at over 100 adults receiving conventional mental health treatment, who were given social support activities as part of their treatment plan over a period of nine months. These were people who, at the beginning of the study, had little social interaction.

By the end of the study, all the participants reported feeling better, feeling more confident and experiencing fewer depressive symptoms. The study found normal social activities, such as engaging in conversation or meeting a friend for coffee, were helpless in managing loneliness and anxiety.

Socializing Can Be Discouraging

Depressed people are often told to get out there, meet people, and socialize. While this is good advice, people with depression can find socialization discouraging, and the disease is to blame.

Researchers from the University of Michigan Medical School, Stony Brook University and the University of Illinois at Chicago determined to find out what negative effects socialization has on depression. What they found is sometimes social experiences weren't helpful in resolving depression, and bad experiences had more power over good ones.

The research team set up an online dating scenario involving 17 depressed people who were not treating and 18 people who were not depressed. Each participant picked online profiles they found most romantically appealing.

The researchers, using PET scans, then scanned the brains of some participants who were told that their picks did not return interest. Even though the participants knew the scenario was faked, their brain scans revealed real hurt feelings, and this was especially significant amongst those who were depressed.

How to Cope in Social Situations

Emotional connections will always be important in managing depression. But socialization boils down to spending time with people that care about you and doing the things that you enjoy.

While socialization can feel burdensome when you are depressed, there are ways to cope with social situations and stay connected with the people you love by using the coping skills listed below.

Relaxation Breathing

Breathing exercises can help you in social situations when it feels like you would rather be anywhere but where you are right now. If practice relaxation breathing daily, it will be second nature when you are in a situation where you feel anxious or overwhelmed.

Relaxation breathing exercises help relax muscle tension and quiet your body's internal responses. They include relaxation activities, such as deep breathing, imaginary, and meditation.

Keep an Option Mind

Bleak thoughts undermine you and worsen feelings of depression and anxiety when you are around others. It might help to be realistic about the situation in front of you.

Understand what you are feeling is depression related, and it has nothing to do with you or the people around you. And yes, everyone seems so much happier than you are at the moment, but what you see usually isn't reality; after all, we are all doing the best that we can.

Distract Yourself

Rather than focusing your attention on what your mind is currently feeling – anxious, sad, angry, etc., focus on the conversations and happenings around you. Look around and see what others are doing or talk to someone you know –anything to take the focus off your emotions.

Start Small

Group settings can seem very stressful when you are depressed. It can help to focus on conversations with one or two people you know well, rather than participating in a group conversation.

This way you will be engaged, distracted, and not feel lonely. And remember, you don't need to spend the entire time talking; it is okay to be a good listener.

Remember to Breathe

This idea is little different than deep breathing to promote relaxation. Just focusing on your regular breathing – getting enough air, but not too much – to help you cope at the moment.

If things get too overwhelming, you can excuse yourself. Go outside and get some fresh air or find a quiet place to reflect, think and be alone for a little bit.

The Takeaway

For people with depression, it is a good idea to take advantage of the favorable benefits socialization and social interaction offered. Both can help make depression easier to treat and deal with.

Granted, social situations aren't the easiest for people with depression, and it is only natural to want to avoid these and isolate yourself. And, while you can enjoy your solitude, it is detrimental to your emotional health if you are doing it too often, especially if you are depressed.

Active coping and social support from friends and loved ones are protective factors against depression and are also an important part of treating depression.

Keep in mind, however, that the quality of relationships determines the benefits you will receive from socializing. The deeper, more meaningful ones are the ones that will provide you the most benefit.

Last, regardless of how you go about connecting and socializing, remember to do it in ways that you find enjoyable so that you can continue to participate and socialize.