Why There Is More Than Just One Definition for Depression

by LANA BARHUM

How Do You Define Depression?

Depression is not just a blue mood. It involves persistent sadness and lack of interest in life and activities once found pleasurable.

For most of us who have experienced depression, we know that depression can shatter you emotionally, mentally, and even physically.

But being depressed isn't a sign of weakness or a character flaw or a lack of will. It is a medical condition and nothing to be ashamed of.

The Medical Definition of Depression

Depression is an illness affecting both your body and mood. Depressive feelings and thoughts affect the way a person eats, sleeps and feels about life.

People who are depressed cannot just snap out of it. In fact, without treatment, depressive symptoms can linger for months and even years.

The signs and symptoms of depression include:

- Loss of interest in activities you once found enjoyable, including sex
- Lack of emotion/emotional numbness
- Loss of appetite and weight loss or overeating and weight gain.
- Persistent, sad mood
- Anxiety
- Hopelessness and pessimism
- Social withdrawal
- Extreme fatigue and low energy
- Sleep disturbances, including insomnia and oversleeping
- Trouble concentrating and making decisions
- Forgetfulness
- Restlessness and irritability
- Physical symptoms, including headaches, digestive problems or chronic pain that doesn't respond to treatment.

Depression carries a high risk of suicide. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there were almost 43,000 suicides in the United States in 2014, making suicide the 10th leading cause of death in the USA.

Your doctor can diagnose depression by asking specific questions about the symptoms you have experienced. He or she may perform lab tests to confirm that another medical condition isn't causing your depressive symptoms.

Explaining Depression

Most people experience sadness or a depressed mood every once in a while. These feelings are normal when life pulls us down with losses or struggles.

But when that sadness includes feeling helpless, worthless and hopeless, and lasts for days or weeks and affects many aspects of your life, chances are you are struggling with more than sadness.

People attempt to explain or define what their depression feels like, but depression is difficult to describe, which explains why it can be misunderstood.

It has taken me a lot of years to learn to articulate the best way to describe how I feel when the depressive feelings take over. I have continually searched for the words to match what I am feeling, but it doesn't ever seem that I can offer a definition that embodies the true meaning of depression.

I cannot speak for the millions of others out there who live with depression, but I use my own experience to define depression in the way it affects me as I try to live my life, focus on my family and on my job.

Depression Is a Never-Ending Mountain

In my life, depression has been a recurrent visitor, and often times, it feels like I am climbing a never-ending mountain. It seems like I can never reach the top and there is no finish line; the mountain just keeps getting higher.

That mountain has the ability to change shape, day-by-day, week-by-week or month-by-month. Having lived with depression for much of my adult life, I find that mountain takes whatever form it pleases, based on what it is currently happening in my life.

Some days, that mountain is easy to climb and other days, it feels like I am climbing through rough terrain, complete with snow, wind and ice. As I am trying to get through the worst parts, it seems like there is no end in sight, but without warning, the weather clears, the sun comes out and climb gets easier again.

The problem is the cycle of depression continues over and over. Either, I am climbing upwards and making strides, or I am struggling to keep afloat and to keep moving forward.

That mountain has no peak, and because I have climbed it for so long, I know I will never reach the top. I just try to find peace in the moments where the sun shines brightly, and the sky is a brighter blue.

Sometimes, I can keep going and climbing without struggling too much, and other times, it takes everything I have to keep going. I worry I might fall and just keep falling because the depression becomes relentless, never lifting or letting go.

A Much Bigger Picture

I know it is hard for people who have ever been experienced it to understand that depression is something that changes you, and you are never the same after you have struggled with it.

Because depression tends to return, what I have described is just a small part of a much bigger definition of what depression is – at least, for me.

Depression has so many layers, many of which are never deciphered or resolved, and are different for each

person. After all these years, I am still searching for answers and when I finally think I have figured it out, my experience, feelings and definition of depression change.

Every time it sneaks up, after I think it is all getting better, it always feels as if I am suffocating, scared and lonely. There are the times where I have to remind myself depression isn't who I am– maybe just, sometimes, a small part.

Depression isn't any of us, and we are all works in progress and the depression is just a setback that tries to hold us back from the lives we want and need.

It is also important for people who have never been depressed to understand that it takes all your willpower to fight against depression and win. And sometimes, the depression comes back, and all you can do just is keep fighting a good fight; the rest is out of your hands.