Understanding and Overcoming Existential Depression

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Unpacking the Meaning of Existential Depression

Depression comes in many different forms, one of which is existential. Existential depression specifies the nature of someone's clinical depression but has many of the same characteristics and symptoms as any other form of depression.

To understand what denotes existential depression, we must first understand what generally constitutes depression.

Understanding Depression

Depression, also known as major depressive disorder, is a mood disorder that causes feelings of persistent sadness and a general loss of interest. This affects people in many ways, including how you think, feel, and behave.

There are common symptoms of depression that occur, no matter what form of depression you might have. These symptoms include:

- Feeling sad, empty or hopeless
- Losing interest in most/all normal daily activities
- Feeling irritable, frustrated or angry
- Trouble thinking, concentrating, remembering and making decisions
- Unexplained physical ailments, like headaches or back pain
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- Having a lack of energy or feeling tired
- Feeling anxious, restless or agitated
- Reduced or increased appetite and weight loss/gain
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Slowed thinking, speaking and body movements
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Depression is persistent, with some or all of these symptoms occurring daily. This can lead to a variety of other emotional or physical problems if left untreated.

What Is Existential Depression?

Existential depression is a specific form of depression, used to describe the nature of the disorder. Specifying a case of depression in this way points to what might be the underlying cause of the disorder itself.

Philosophically speaking, existentialism is the belief that humans are driven to meaning within their lives

internally, through their own choices, desires, and pursuits. This is differentiated from the belief that the meaning of life is derived from an external authority, like a god or deity.

Existentialists believe that humans are free, meaning that we are responsible for our own happiness or misery. It is up to each individual to create the meaning which drives them through life, whether that be family, religion, charity, relationships, or otherwise.

If you are suffering from existential depression, you may end up questioning the meaning of life due to issues surrounding life, death, or freedom.

Depression – of any form – is often characterized by feelings of hopelessness, but with existential depression, that overwhelming sense of hopelessness might stem from the fear that our lives may be meaningless.

Existential Thoughts in Depression

Thoughts and fears concerning the meaning or purpose of life not only occur in cases of existential depression. Many people who have depression face these fears at some point in their lives.

Existential issues are often brought up when exploring psychotherapy options in the treatment of depression. To overcome these feelings of meaninglessness, therapists can often work with you to find what drives you in life.

Finding your passion is an important part of life for many, regardless of your mental health. It is only when it consumes you that it may lead to existential depression.

What Is an Existential Crisis?

An existential crisis may or may not be related to existential depression. If you suddenly find yourself needing answers to life's "big questions," you might find yourself in the midst of an existential crisis.

The crisis involved in searching for these answers lies in your inability to satisfy these big questions.

Would you have a solid answer if someone were to ask you, "What is the meaning of life?" Or would this spark a bit of inner turmoil as you think of the right thing to say?

A lack of answers to such existential questions can trigger an internal conflict, causing frustration and a loss of inner happiness.

An existential crisis could lead to a period of existential depression, should those questions remain unanswered for a long period of time.

What Causes a Crisis?

If you have recently experienced major trauma or loss that triggered deep despair, this may lead to an existential crisis. The common causes of an existential crisis include:

- Death of a loved one
- Guilt
- Facing the reality of one's own death
- Feeling socially unfulfilled
- Dissatisfaction with oneself
- History of bottling up emotions

A significant event or underlying issue like those above may lead to an existential crisis, but there are different ways in which these issues can arise. There are different types of existential crises, which include:

- Crisis of death and mortality
- Crisis of meaning and meaninglessness
- Crisis of freedom and responsibility
- Crisis of isolation and connectedness
- Crisis of emotion, experiences, and embodiment

These crises are differentiated by their root cause, or what is being existentially questioned.

For some, the fear of what comes after death can trigger serious anxiety and lead to an existential crisis. Others may develop overwhelming anxiety over the meaning of life and their choices made within that life. When people drift apart or are separated by death, feelings of deep isolation and loneliness can develop. This leads some people to believe that their lives have become pointless.

Treatment for Existential Depression

Existential depression is often treated with psychotherapy that is focused on helping the person explore the meaning of their life. This therapy may or may not be accompanied by prescription medication.

A psychiatrist, psychologist, or therapist will be able to help you cope with an existential crisis or treat your existential depression with talk therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy. These psychotherapy options are designed to change your patterns of thinking or behavior.

It is important to recognize the difference between existential depression and simply questioning your purpose in life. It is natural to question, but not to obsess.

There are many things that you can do to determine the meaning of your life – if that is important to you. Take steps to live a more meaningful life by pursuing your passions, working with a cause that you care about, or practice being more compassionate.

Explore what is important to you by keeping a gratitude journal, listing everything for which you are grateful. This might prove that your life has more meaning than you think.

However, if your pursuit of the meaning of life has become all-encompassing, reach out to your family doctor or healthcare provider for help in coping with feelings of existential depression.