Processing Feedback and Criticism Despite Depression

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Accepting Criticism With Depression

Many people with depression struggle to accept compliments. The feeling that the “spotlight” is on them makes them feel uncomfortable and anxious. They typically work to deny or talk themselves out of accepting the compliment by making excuses about the intentions of the person giving the compliment. Accepting compliments just does not fit the perception that people with depression have of themselves.

On the other hand, there is something that people with depression are very willing to accept: criticism. The problem comes when you look at the impact that complaints, critiques and criticisms have on your psychological well-being. Negative feedback can fuel depression by lowering self-esteem, motivation, energy and mood. Criticism can worsen depression and depression makes the criticism feel more intense and frequent.

The only way to avoid criticism is to end contact with the outside world and this is problematic. The goal is for you to accept a complaint and turn it into something helpful and useful. If you can grow and learn from the information, the harmful critique becomes constructive criticism. Accepting criticism is similar to accepting compliments. Here’s how:

- **Pay attention.** If you are busy or distracted, there is a greater probability of misunderstanding what someone else is trying to communicate. Stop whatever you are doing, turn towards the other person and make good eye contact. So many perceived criticisms are simple misinterpretations of what someone said or how they said it. Using good listening skills ensures that you get the information as intended.
- **Slow down.** Jumping to negative conclusions happens often because depression sees this as an opportunity to make you more depressed. Acknowledging that you are likely to jump to these conclusions gives you the chance to combat it. If the negative comment is written in the form of a letter, email, text or instant message, take time to ponder. If it is verbal, find an assertive method to stall. Saying “I want to talk more about this. Is there a good time to talk later?” gives you time. There are no bonus points for responding quickly especially since first reactions can be more harmful.

- **Consider the source.** Is your friend sarcastic? Does your brother make bad jokes? Is your mother in a bad mood? Find reasons and explanations to justify the negative feedback. People are emotional and it is possible that their comment was triggered by something with them rather than something with you. Tone is very difficult to interpret in any form of written text and depression works to distort verbal communication to sound more damaging.
- **Accept and respond.** There is a high likelihood that your reaction to hearing a complaint is to feel sad. Finding a way to change your self-talk from negative to positive is hugely valuable. Saying “That was nice that they are trying to help me” or “Everyone is entitled to an opinion” is a way for you to reframe the comment into something useful. Use it as motivation to improve what was critiqued or to prove that person wrong.

Conclusion

Receiving and accepting criticism is something that everyone encounters. Depression makes finding the balance between overreacting and underreacting to these statements a challenging chore. Following the tips above will keep you on the high wire rather than falling into the net below.