Maintaining a Relationship Despite Depression

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Depression and Relationships

When depression and relationships clash, it inflates all of your negatives while diminishing your positives. Essentially, the good gets bad and the bad gets worse. Depression does this by changing how you see the world and those around you. Over time, you begin thinking that the people in your life are not as supportive, fun or loving as they once were.
This is an illusion, though. The people around you do not change. The world around you does not change. You change. Seeing this difference is hugely important in your quest to limit the negative impact of depression.

People who do not see depression for the trick that it is will report less satisfying relationships. Perhaps, they will be more suspicious of their loved ones or simply believe that they no longer care. Depression strives for you to become isolated and weary of those around you. Once you are alone, depression has control.

Working to never surrender your control to depression is a challenging task. At moments, it will seem the better choice is to succumb and admit defeat, but if depression is part of your relationship, fight back. Your spouse or significant other can be the best ally in the war against depression. Use them. Utilize their skills, perspectives and influence.

Subtracting the Bad

Relationships impacted by depression will begin developing unwanted patterns. A simple request is met with a harsh response. A good deed goes ignored without reinforcement. If left to fester, these instances transition into habits that become more frequent and intense. They will transform and generalize until they permeate every aspect of the relationship. If you and your spouse have fights that start with one topic and end many topics later, or if you cannot remember why you are upset, this might be you.

If caught early, these trends can be more quickly undone by you and your partner. Acting fast limits the damage. Here's how:

- **Build acknowledgement.** Understanding the role that depression plays in your relationship is essential. Developing a solid foundation of information allows you to recognize your relationship objectively. This is necessary because relationships, by nature, carry a lot of emotional weight that distort your judgment. Retrace history to see what attracted you to your spouse in the first place or when depression first appeared. Was it the good times you had together and the commonalities you have? Or was it that he seemed a bit depressed and you thought you could help? Was it that you were a bit depressed and needed some help? Symptoms change in relationships as people change in relationships. Along the way, ask yourself what your relationship would look like without depression. It is possible that depression was once expected or even beneficial in the relationship.
- **Seek therapy.** If depression is making your relationship less desirable, seek therapy. Therapy will be beneficial for each of you regardless of which one has depressive symptoms. Having depression means

having a distorted view of the world and a therapist can help find balance and positives. Having a partner with depression will increase your stress, frustration and feelings of hopelessness, and a psychotherapist will provide useful coping skills and a sounding board to take out your anger or sadness. Couples therapy will teach appropriate conflict-resolution skills and allow grievances to be aired.

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Adding the Positives

Too often in relationships, people will become stuck on “changing the bad”. They create fantasies like “If only he took out the trash, everything would be okay” or “If only she was tidier, I would be happy”.

Working to reduce the unwanted actions of the other person only serves to make them feel inferior and useless. Additionally, it can make you look like a bully or nag. Instead, focus on adding good experiences and feelings into the relationship. Here’s how:

- **Be kind.** This may seem obvious or overly simple, but its power cannot be overstated. When relationships go bad, people get mean to each other. When someone is being mean to you, you want to be mean back to them. No one is interested in improving the relationship as you each try to “win”. When you are trying to win, everyone loses. Kindness means being patient, understanding and seeing your partner in a positive, hopeful way. Kindness means addressing issues as a team working to find solutions together. Kindness means biting your tongue rather saying something hurtful and substituting a compliment in its place. If you can speak and behave kindly to your partner, your thoughts will follow.
- **Be assertive.** Finger-pointing and blaming have no place in a healthy relationship. Being assertive is the decision to value the perspective of the other person while politely voicing your own point-of-view. The best way to practice assertive communication is with “I messages”. An “I message” begins with you stating your feelings, why you feel that way and what your spouse can do to help you. “I feel upset when you look at the TV when I’m speaking to you. I would appreciate your attention in the future”. Listening is the other half of assertive communication gives your partner your full attention when they are speaking. Repeat what they say and seek clarification when needed. Remember, being assertive does not force the other person to do the same but it really increases the likelihood of a productive conversation.

- **Have fun together.** Don’t wait until the relationship is improved to make plans together. It could be a lack of plans that is making the relationship poor. Find activities that you are both interested in completing. Work hard to go beneath the surface to more options – giving up and claiming that there is no common ground hurts you both. At the same time, make an effort to expand your comfort zone to include more activities your partner enjoys and encourage them to return the favor. Depression may make you feel that no activity sounds enjoyable or nothing will help the relationship. Acknowledge the source of the negativity. If depression encourages you to do something, do the opposite. It will be a better choice most of the time.

Next page: adding the positives continued and knowing when enough is enough.

- **Have fun outside of the relationship.** Absence does make the heart grow fonder. Being around your partner all the time puts increased pressure on the relationship. Without separation and unique experiences, you may run out of topics of conversation. This causes the rut you are in to deepen. Social diversification is the ability to have many different social outlets. Otherwise, all of your eggs will be in one basket and depression puts holes in that basket. Going for a walk alone or spending time with friends or family will enable you to return to the relationship with some distance between you. You will have new information and experiences to communicate to each other.

When Enough Is Enough

Many times, a relationship is stronger than depression. Other times, the relationship cannot withstand the stress and weight of depression. It is a necessity that you begin to consider what you will not tolerate in a relationship before you are in that situation. Depression makes us hurt the ones around us in many ways. If you are hurting or being hurt, know your limits and decide when to leave.

Depression will want to keep you in relationships without chance of success. This way you remain depressed. Take an honest look at how the relationship works and if the poor relationship is the cause rather than the effect of the depression. If this is true, your depression or the depression of your partner will not have an opportunity to improve as long as the relationship continues. A sacrifice must be made.

Walking away from someone with depression does not make you cold-hearted or a terrible person. It only makes you someone that can look objectively at the situation. Ending a poor relationship is not a failure. The only failure is staying in a relationship that has no hope of being happy, satisfying or loving.

Conclusion

Relationships are hard enough. Building trust, maintaining trust and weathering the storm of daily stressors is a troublesome path to follow for couples without depression. Being in a relationship where one or both people have depression presents a uniquely difficult challenge. If you work to decrease the bad, increase the good and know when to walk away, having a good relationship with depression is possible.