How a Creative Mindset Could be Compatible With a Depressive Mindset

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Are Depression and Creativity Related?

Many famous creative minds have been plagued with depression, from writers like Ernest Hemmingway and Kurt Vonnegut to comic actors like as Ellen DeGeneres and Robin Williams. Although it's unfair to say that depression fosters creative talent (or vice versa), there does seem to be an undeniable connection.

In fact, psychologists have found that the creative mindset is quite compatible with the depressive mindset – for better or worse. But once you understand how your creativity can work against you and your depression, you'll stand a better chance of getting it to work for you, and maybe even develop a healthy new skill set.

The Link between Creativity and Depression

There's no easy way to explain the number of creative minds that have been affected by depression, but psychologists point out that those who dwell on thoughts and ideas often experience deeper depression. In fact, there are convincing theories that creativity and depression can feed each other, especially when it comes to the creative thinking process – or its suppression:

- **Holding back creative urges can foster depression.** Many famous female artists, writers and performers have experienced various mood disorders, but then there are plenty of women who have become depressed in the opposite circumstances. Studies have shown that young girls expressing independent thoughts frequently suffer from criticism and discouragement, and it's no surprise that creativity will suffer in those cases. Psychologists point out that extreme stress, neurotic behavior, substance abuse and depression are all common manifestations when creativity is suppressed.
- **Ruminating on thoughts can sustain depression.** Creative people tend to think more, and think more about their thoughts. In fact, creative minds spend a good deal of their time making sense of their thoughts, working out their ideas, and connecting their small experiences to better understand their life. In turn, the emotional dips are much more difficult to overcome: instead of replacing negative thoughts with a welcome distraction, creative minds are more likely to go over and over the feeling or event in their head. This can result in a loop of sadness, anxiety or feelings of failure.

- **Perfectionism and ambition can benefit from depression.** Depression can also feed creativity. In many cases, the creative drive to build on your ideas, do better, and accomplish more is naturally motivated by depression. Evolutionary psychology suggests that by keeping you focused on where you can improve – and why you should – depressive symptoms can lead you to become a stronger, more effective individual. So, the good news is that those creative minds that can overcome the initial emotional turmoil will probably emerge with a more positive, proactive, and inspired attitude.

Although there may be a silver lining, taking advantage of the depression-creativity connection isn't easy. Simply concentrating on being creative – or worse, minimalizing your depression symptoms by chalking them up to a

“creative personality” – can be stressful, and even dangerous.

Be sure to devote time to treating your depression, which means working with your doctor and therapist to find the best medication or therapeutic technique for you. In many cases, the right outlet can help you focus your creative energy in healthy and healing ways.

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How Creativity Can Help Depression

Creative expression as a form of therapy has a lot going for it. First, anyone can do it, whenever and however they like. It’s also cheap, non-invasive and productive. In fact, whether or not you consider yourself to be creative, you can certainly channel your suffering into a helpful learning experience, as long as you keep some important aspects in mind:

- **Art therapy can help to define the problem**. Visual art, like painting, drawing or sculpting, can help you figure out the root of your problem at any given moment. Some experts describe creating art as taking a snapshot: once you produce an image to express yourself, it’s there for you to revisit whenever you need to compare, remember or explain things in the future. A visible, permanent record is an excellent learning tool.
- **Creative therapy as a complementary treatment**. Although some people make amazing gains with visual, music, or dance therapy, it’s not a first line treatment for depression. In many, if not most cases, medication and psychotherapy play very important roles in controlling your mood and balancing your brain chemistry to keep depression symptoms at bay. Instead of looking for a replacement, find an art therapy that you enjoy enough to do regularly, and use it as a time to both unwind and explore your symptoms.
- **Open minded expression will help the most**. Perhaps the most important aspect of art therapy is freedom and acceptance. The point is to express and explore, not perfect: the less you judge yourself, the farther you can go with your art. In fact, you don’t have to share your artwork with anyone else – you can work individually with a therapist, and store your work in your own, private space.

Fear of failure can be difficult to overcome, so don’t pledge to learn and master one specific art. Instead, try painting, dance, acting, woodworking, quilting, photography, or any of the hundreds of accessible art forms out there to find what fits best with your lifestyle and personality.

Believe in Your Creativity

If you find that your imagination is exacerbating your depression, remember that you’re not alone. The key is to focus on *creating* with your creativity, rather than allowing it to eat away at your emotions. You may struggle through lots of lows and highs, but the better you can appreciate the upswings of your creative work, the better you can face the difficult emotions and dark corners of your depression.