

Depression Dis- Ables

Many of the smartest, most talented people I have treated in my career were not feeling smart or talented when we met. Gifted, successful people do not see their abilities when they are depressed. Just this week I sat with a successful salesman who described with sadness and frustration his inability to do the things that would make him feel more energetic and proud of himself. He *knows* he would feel better if he even called current customers, but he does not feel able to muster the energy to do it. He *knows* he would feel better if he went out with his wife this weekend but he does not feel able to be in a good mood. He *knows* he would feel better if he went to his fantasy football kickoff party but does not feel able to converse with so many people.

Like many with depression, he does not want to be so isolated and lethargic, yet he cannot seem to make himself move. And, like many, he blames himself for this. He sees the mess he is in and believes he should be **able** to see a way out of the mess, yet he cannot think of what to do first. But he blamed himself less when he learned how depression dis-ables his problem-solving skills.

The tragic irony of depression is that the disorder itself prevents you from seeing how to get out of it. This inability to see solutions does not reflect your will power or smarts or being a good person. This is a brain-based issue. The theory is that low serotonin levels in the brain create depression symptoms and make it hard to find a way to resolve them. Low serotonin, in its effects in different parts of the brain, makes you less able:

1 – to see the good things in your world. You will see unfairness much more.

2 – to be optimistic about outcomes. Pessimism rules.

3 – to see options for solving your problems. You will feel more helpless.

In other words, no matter how able you are, depression dis-ables you. You not only see life as more unfair and your problems as insurmountable, you also feel less able to cope with whatever you are facing.

But knowing this sense of dis-ability is a symptom, not a reflection of reality, you may still be stuck. If you cannot see options, you cannot see options. Much in the same way as if you have a cataract on your eye; the world looks dim and dull, and you logically know that your cataract may be changing your vision, but you see what you see through the dulling lens. You cannot see it differently until the cataract is removed. Then you may say “OH! Now I know what I was missing,” but you cannot know that until light comes through a clear lens.

This is why you need outside help when you feel depressed. You need the input of someone who understands that your view of life is colored by your depression. The positive news is that while depression dis-ables your view of the world and your belief in yourself, making small steps will raise energy, motivation and optimism the will enable you to do more. Another person can help you figure out steps to follow: Steps that are not too big to manage with your lowered energy and pessimism but are effective to raise your energy enough to make more steps possible.

So, talk to your “visionary” – a therapist or good friend – about what you might do today to feel a little better. See yourself through their eyes – and take in their encouragement and belief in your ability to do a small thing. And I specifically mean small, because for this to work, the steps you take can’t require too much energy at first: walk that dog an extra five minutes, call one friend to ask how she is, stop comparing yourself to others. These and many other small steps can make big changes happen.

How can small steps change anything? Again, this is brain-based. When you accomplish something, no matter how small, your brain recognizes the positive movement and generates good feelings, raising your energy and motivation. So, every time you make a small step successfully, your ability to do more grows. The biggest obstacle to feeling able again is believing small steps matter. Your helper can point out that depression dis-ables and remind you that starting small is enough. Small successes create the brain activity that prompts you to more. A step at a time, you become able once again.