

Overwork and underwork; two sides of worthlessness in male depression.

Al commented: "I have never been a guy who can just take time off without feeling wrong and guilty. So I work 80 hours a week. It is killing me, I think, but what in the world would I do with the time if I was not working?" Al represents the kind of depression that hides in overwork and lack of social contact. He feels low self worth and does not believe he is loveable. He is home so rarely that his family vacations without him and he has been known to miss holidays. He is a man who cannot fill his life with meaningful connections, so work becomes the point of his existence. He is one short term illness away from despair. Unable to work, he would succumb to feeling useless or worthless and his depression would well up and swamp him.

Marlin on the other hand was out of work but he was also unwilling to discuss how deeply he feared not getting a job he interviewed for. He had struggled against networking, embarrassed and unwilling to test the strength of friendship among acquaintances he contacted for his job search. Instead, he railed against the rules of unemployment that demanded he had to demonstrate applying for 4 jobs per week. "No one can tell me how to live!" he declared. "I will live on my nest egg until I am out of money rather than knuckle under to the way some agency wants me to conduct my job search." Being out of work was grinding his self-esteem to a fine powder, and depression's hopeless and helpless attitude blocked his job hunting. He became increasingly isolated, avoiding people with whom he did not want to discuss his status and thus limiting his options for receiving help and support. Being angry at least gave him a sense of power.

Both of these men with low self-esteem also reflect the problematic low levels of serotonin common to depressed brains. It results in the persistent negativity and the inflexibility in problem solving that will keep these men stuck in their unfortunate patterns of behavior. Unable to believe in their value, Al and Marlin found ineffective albeit different solutions: Al hiding in his work and Marlin using anger to cover his fear and defend his inflexibility.

What both these men were missing may have been healthy levels of brain chemicals, but they were also missing social involvement that might have reversed the pattern. Being with others in pleasant social contexts, whether family time or friendship, is an automatic lift to the mood and raises energy. Forcing oneself to participate, even though the desire to participate is minimal, can begin to shift intractable behavior. If Al or Marlin had been with people who cared about them, they might have been able to get perspective on their value as well as on their options.

It is true that being depressed makes it very hard to reach out to others. It falls to the therapist to move a client in the direction of identifying and encouraging social options. Any person who lives with the over-worker or stalled job hunter can see that their perspective is narrowed and their self-worth is damaged. Opening it can be accomplished in making small connections, putting a wedge into the wall of disbelief that they are worth more than their work. What gets through? Working from 'the outside in' can help. Urging, encouraging, even insisting on behavior change can change feelings and that can change the brain to a more balanced brain. If a man can insist with himself, fine, and if not, therapist or family member can push some in these directions:

- Insist the man with no worth make a list of people in his life and identify whether they love him (according to what *they* say, not according to whether the depressed man feels loved.) Then review the list daily.
- Insist he participate in a social activity however much the depressed man resists. Follow up with identifying whether it was pleasurable or unpleasurable. (No middle ground).
- Insist that he identifies 3 blessings a day, every day, in writing. And yes, eating popcorn can be a blessing if you like it. No activity is too small to be a blessing. He should read it to himself every day and read the list to someone else once a week.
- Insist that he spends time with family, participating in an activity together. (And everyone sitting in a restaurant looking at their individual handheld devices does not count as together time.)
- Insist that he develops increasing numbers of connections. For example, making a list of people he could socialize with, even if it has been a while, and then call or email or text one person per week to set up a contact, such as golf game, drinks after work, bike ride, meet at the gym, have a lunch, etc.

Always follow up with evaluating how the connection felt. When men are depressed, they are slow to acknowledge that something made them feel good. They do not easily credit the pleasurable aspects of the connection. Depression can lead a man to find any reason other than being a worthwhile human being for why his family and friends agree to be with him. That is why work carries exceptional power to define who they are. While most men strongly connect their value and identity with their work, Al's overwork and Marlin's embarrassment about unemployment directed their mood and behavior. Once Al and Marlin can believe they are not worthless in the eyes of others, they might be more balanced about work and separate their identity from their job status. They may increase their own sense of value and decrease the hold of depression.