

How does your brain make you depressed? Really, it is simplistic to say that depression is out of your control, but there is a recent intriguing study that looks at four constellations of depression symptoms that are identifiable by the circuits in the brain that are over- or under-active. That brain activation correlates to four different patterns of depression;

Low energy, lethargic – underactivity in the reward circuitry and

Ruminative anxious – overactivity in the circuitry connecting the limbic system fear circuitry, the anterior cingulate cortex where we shift thoughts from negative to positive and the analytic part of the prefrontal cortex which is not active enough.

Negative

What does it matter to know this? The first important contribution of this brain science is the way it will affect medication choice and the development of new pharmacological interventions. It is evident that without enough mental or physical energy, it is very difficult to take on the rigors of change. Changing your thoughts on a persistent basis demands a certain degree of energy. This kind of depression then demands the approach of both medication and psychotherapy.

To overcome the ruminative depression is particularly challenging. It comes complete with symptoms of anxiety due to the tendency to ruminate on themes of failure and incompetency, which can raise anxiety as well as diminish self-confidence. Interrupting the ruminative will especially be helped by psychotherapy focusing on the means to interrupt that thought process which, by itself, maintains the depressive emotional state. The most effective style of therapy for this type of depression is cognitive therapy to choose and maintain new thoughts

The negative, hopeless/helpless quality of some depression is most challenging because the belief system is so altered when the emotional brain cannot see any way out of the state. Even imagining a positive outcome is not possible. Of all the types of depression, this over-activity in the limbic system – the emotion-without-cognition part of the brain over-focuses on risk and threat and consequently loses the perspective of possibilities that are joyful or successful. To escape the mire of negativity, medications may be helpful, but practicing mindfulness meditation is one of the most profound ways to get out of over-focus on threat and stay in the moment. Learning to observe without judgment is without a doubt one of the best outcomes of mindfulness practice. It releases the depressed lock on hopelessness. And in meditation the process of developing self-compassion, part and parcel of most meditative practices, moves the depressed meditator to a position of hope. I would like to think that most spiritual practices could achieve that; sadly, I have seen too much of the judgment and condemning side of religious practice as it is given to people and too little of the grace-filled message that I believe is the true heart of most religions.

As science gives us more and more clarity about the possible causes of depression and about the varieties of symptoms, we move closer to understanding the way out.