Managing Depression: Problem Areas and Solutions

Loss of Interest in Pleasurable and Fun Activities

Problem
People who experience depression often find themselves not enjoying activities they previously enjoyed. Not only do they miss out on positive experiences by not participating in enjoyable activities, but also the people around them associated with such activities may also suffer.

Solution
The following points provide some general guidelines for increasing the amount of pleasurable activity you experience.

• Make a list of activities you find (or used to find) enjoyable. Make sure you write down as many activities as you can. Remember to list both very enjoyable activities and also those activities, which are only marginally enjoyable.

• Plan schedules of activities each day to include enjoyable activities. Try to increase the amount of time each day available for positive activities.

• After an activity, really think about the aspects of it that were enjoyable. Talk to others about activities they enjoy and reflect on positive experiences.

• Remember that during a depressive episode things may not seem as enjoyable as they were previously. Focus on the positive, no matter how small, and remember that as you recover, the level of enjoyment you will experience will only increase.

Changes in Sleeping Patterns

Problem
Changes in sleeping patterns (both excessive sleeping and insomnia) are also common in individuals experiencing a depressive episode. Inappropriate sleeping patterns can exacerbate difficulties with mood and make routine interpersonal communication and daily activities seem excessively difficult and frustrating.

Solution
Regular, healthy sleeping patterns are a critical part of recovery from depression. Listed below are a few key points to assist you in establishing healthy sleeping patterns.

• Make sure you get up at roughly the same time every morning regardless of how tired you feel.

• Avoid sleeping during the day or taking naps in the early evening before bedtime.

• Reduce tea and coffee intake to a maximum of 4 cups per day and do not have any tea or coffee after 3 or 4 p.m.

• When you are awake at night do not lie in bed trying to sleep for more than 30 minutes at a time. Get up and go to another room and engage in a relaxing activity such as reading, listening to music, or a relaxation exercise until you feel sleepy – then return to bed and sleep.

Worrying and Negative Thinking

Problem
Worrying – or excessive rumination on possible future negative events and negative thinking about yourself, your circumstances and your future, are frequently occurring types of negative thinking patterns people with depression experience. Worrying and negative thinking are unhealthy in that they reduce a person's ability to focus on recovery and tend to increase the vulnerability to other unhealthy emotions and behaviours.
Solution
Changing negative thinking patterns and reducing worry is not as easy as it may seem. This is an area where people often require the assistance of a psychologist or other mental health professional. Below are some helpful suggestions to get you started in learning to control worry and reduce negative thinking.

• When worrying about a problem find a piece of paper and write down exactly what the problem is. If there is more than one problem, write down each one individually. Once you have written each problem down, then systematically go through a problem solving exercise to address each one and examine all the possible outcomes (both positive and negative) and their likelihood.

• When dealing with negative thinking patterns take time to think about how realistic negative thoughts are. Try to explore alternate thoughts and explanations for circumstances. Keep a record of thoughts and possible alternative more helpful ways of thinking.

• Avoid excessively discussing negative thoughts and feelings. When discussing things with colleagues, family or friends, try to focus on positive aspects of situations. Negative thinking and dwelling on negative topics will not help you feel good.

• Keep yourself busy and your mind focused on tasks. Avoid unstructured time where your mind may wander and dwell on negative themes.

• Try to think positively. There are many things you can do to address the cognitive (thinking) component of depression. Some of these include: make a list of your skills, talents, and achievements; try to identify the three most beautiful things in your environment; reminisce about a time when you were really happy, successful, or content;

• Keep a journal of your thoughts, identify negative and unhelpful thoughts, and try to correct them (see below).

• Do not make any major life decisions, such as quitting your job or getting married or separated while depressed. Remember, you may not be seeing yourself, the world, or the future in a clear way when you are depressed.

Irritability, Agitation and Fatigue

Problem
Irritability, agitation and fatigue are common experiences among people with depression. Sometimes people feel frustrated with their rate or recovery or the level of support available, and annoyed that they don’t feel like they have the energy to do anything any more. Sometimes people find themselves getting more easily upset with those around them. Irritability, agitation and fatigue are often compounded by changes in sleeping patterns and other symptoms associated with depression such as negative thinking.

Solution
Being irritable or agitated is a normal part of depression and it is important that others around us who provide support are aware of this so that they can be more patient and understanding rather than annoyed and unsupportive. Below are some tips to help you deal with feelings of irritability and agitation.

• Make sure you take the time to educate and advise key support people (such as close friends, family and colleagues) of what you are going through, and help them to understand that if you appear somewhat irritable or agitated it is not because you are unhappy with them, but rather because you are currently recovering from depression. Also take the time to thank them for their support, and provide any further feedback on how they can best continue support you.

• When you are feeling irritable or agitated, stop and settle yourself down. Ask yourself what is driving your emotions. If it is negative thinking, then use strategies outlined previously to tackle negative thoughts. If you are tired – pace out your workload to allow for this. If you feel unmotivated – try and incorporate some enjoyable activities into your schedule.

• Practice regular relaxation activities and organise regular times to talk with a support person such as an APS Psychologist about how you are coping and implementing new coping skills. By taking time
out to relax regularly, and to communicate with supportive people you greatly reduce the impact of potentially irritating and frustrating experiences.

Be as active as possible despite fatigue. Try to schedule activities to fill up the spare hours of the day. Activities may include exercise, social interaction, or even routine household chores. If activity seems impossible, try to force yourself to do three things each day - it could be getting out of bed, getting changed out of your pajamas, and brushing your hair. Even the smallest amount of activity is better than no activity at all.

References


Further Information

The Australian Psychological Society 1800 333 497

Websites

www.wfmh.org
www.bluepages.anu.edu.au
www.depressionalliance.org www.moodgym.anu.edu.au
www.mentalhelp.net
www.mhsourse.com
www.mental-health-matters.com
www.mental-health-matters.com
www.beyondblue.org.au
www.Ybblue.org.au
Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The RMIT Counselling Service can be contacted at 9925-4365 between 9am and 5pm.