

A Reflection on Depression

Today I want to answer a question from one of my students, which I think is a great and important question because it comes up quite a bit. She says, "I was listening to a podcast the other day, and you said that we are 100% responsible for how we see the world. I'm a little confused. I get what you're saying about training our mind and giving meaning to what's happening in our life. But I was curious how you would respond to absolute misery and real adversities. I have depression, and a lot of my friends do. We've been working hard on validating our emotions. So the idea of focusing only on the positive in every situation sounds invalidating, almost like avoiding reality. I wonder if you mean that there are things that cause suffering, but we can still be resilient enough not to label it negative. Like everything is just what it is, completely neutral, and even if it causes pain, we don't have to be carried away by it and see the world as negative because of it. I have this confusion because, growing up, my family invalidated my depression by constantly telling me to look on the bright side of life. Could you clarify how to take 100% responsibility for our worldview without invalidation or avoidance, and how to ensure we don't individualize too much and ignore our role as members of society?"

This is such a great question. One of the things that causes a lot of problems is the tendency to think, "I just need to be really positive and all of this darkness will go away." But that's not the case. Depression, like the kind you and your friends are experiencing, is something I know well. When I was younger, I suffered greatly from depression, probably from my early teens through my twenties, to the point of a major crisis where I tried to take my own life. I had to ask myself, "How is it that I'm struggling so much?" Those feelings of darkness, grief, sadness, and depression were valid, and I want to say to you that your feelings are completely valid.

The difference is that being happy doesn't mean pushing away negative emotions. In fact, it's the opposite. Research shows that when people push away negative emotions, especially those suffering from depression, they experience a higher resurgence of depression. Those who look at and deal with negative emotions by facing them are actually more able to overcome their depression. I found this research fascinating because, for me, the most important thing wasn't to look on the bright side. That doesn't work, because it's a lie we tell ourselves. When we're suffering from depression and say, "I just have to look at everything positively," it creates a kind of conflict in our mind. The mind says, "Wait a second, there's a lot here crying out to be heard, and you're just going to put it in a box and tell me it can't be heard?"

What happens when we do that? Grief, sadness, anger, anxiety—whatever we're running from—only becomes louder until we look at, deal with, and address it. Depression often involves emotional stagnation. Our emotions aren't passing through us normally; they're trapped. When we grow up in families where negative emotions are denied, we learn that negative emotions are problematic, that we can't hold them, that others don't want to hold them, and that everyone wants us to get rid of them so they can feel good about life.

The exact opposite is what we need. We need to look at the negative emotions within our depression, where they're coming from, and what they're trying to tell us. The most important

thing is to look at them without the story. If anger arises, we typically say, "I'm angry because this person did this to me," and then we're caught up in the story of the anger. Instead, look at the anger without the story. Something very different happens—the emotion begins to get heard. We see the color, shape, and location of the emotion in our body. A powerful approach is to have a conversation with this emotion: "What is it you want to tell me?" But leave the story aside and see the emotion for what it is.

Happiness doesn't come from denying negative emotions; it comes from understanding that we don't have to live in denial or overemphasize the negative. People often go to extremes, either denying all negativity or focusing solely on positivity, or looking at the world only through a lens of negativity. We tend to focus one way. But what if we could see things as a whole? What if we could see ourselves as having both darkness and light? What if we saw both in situations as well? Imbalance keeps us from seeing the world authentically.

I want you to validate your pain, but not take it so seriously. Validate your joy, but don't take it so seriously either. It's all transient. All emotions and thoughts are transient. If we're stuck in darkness, it can help to examine the habits of our mind. We may be stuck in darkness without realizing there's light. To find the light, we must go through the darkness and recognize it for what it is.

To handle the darkness, we need to plant seeds of joy and resilience, which we can build through gratitude practices. These practices are like planting flowers that grow strong enough to give us resilience. When we're suffering from depression, it's important to start bringing in light, even if it feels like there's only darkness. Slowly, we build up the strength to look at the darkness when the time is right, ideally with a professional or therapist.

My depression was rooted in habitual thought patterns, and I only know this because I've been through it. I know the darkness well, but I also know there's a way through. It's not as serious as it seems because thoughts and emotions are transient, and we need to keep them moving. When I say we're 100% responsible for how we see the world, an untrained mind may have the tendency to be stuck in dark places. But we can shift it by learning to time, train, and get to know our mind. We can build a loving relationship with ourselves and our mind.

A mind stuck in depression is out of control, just like a mind that bypasses negativity. Both are habitual patterns where we're not in charge anymore; our habits are. We have to shift the habits of the mind.

I know that depression is incredibly difficult. But I want to give you hope because it's there. Happiness is a habit, and by getting to know our mind, we can see where it goes and start to change its patterns. If your mind keeps going to dark places, start listening to those emotions without resisting or indulging in the story. Look directly at the emotion.

I hope this answers the question. I encourage you to share this with anyone suffering from depression because it may bring hope. I know those dark moments well, and I've managed to

turn my life around to a place of consistent happiness. It's possible, and I hope this helps as a piece of the puzzle.

Stay kind. Don't forget, The Happiness Baseline is where I teach many of these strategies. Go gently in the world.