

Your Partner's Depression: Why Get Couple's Counseling For Depression

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

People who suffer from depression may believe that their depression is affecting only themselves. Spouses are often aware of depression in their partners long before the depressed person knows they are depressed. Depression can affect a marriage and a family in many negative ways. Relationship difficulties, in and of themselves, can exacerbate (or lead to) depression in one or both partners. There is often a reciprocal relationship between depression and marital problems.



Some of the symptoms of depression include the following:

- irritability
- fatigue/tired/low energy
- sleep disturbance (difficulty getting to sleep, staying asleep, or sleeping too much)
- loss of interest in things you used to enjoy
- difficulty experiencing joy or inability to have fun
- social isolation and withdrawal
- inability to focus/concentrate/pay attention
- change in appetite and/or weight

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- loss of interest in sex
- suicidal thoughts/statements/attempts

Anxiety and depression often go hand in hand. Some symptoms of anxiety include the following:

- listlessness/restlessness
- worried/anxious/jittery/nervous feelings
- feelings of foreboding
- unable to relax
- sense of dread
- excessive worry that feels uncontrollable, that persists over time, and can be debilitating
- inability to tolerate uncertainty/need to be in control



Depression usually involves a negative mindset that includes a) negative thoughts about self, b) negative thoughts about the future, c) negative thoughts about others. When you are depressed, it can “feel like” you have always been depressed, and that you always will be depressed. These negative thoughts color just about everything that happens during your day. Depression can have a detrimental effect on self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence. Feelings of worthlessness and helplessness often accompany depression.

So how does depression affect relationships? Depression undermines the ability to communicate, to give and to receive, and to engage in joint activities (tasks and leisure). The depressed person is often irritable and may exhibit temper. The depressed person, perhaps in an attempt to make sense of his/her condition, writes a lot of “mini-theories” about why they may be “feeling” depressed/helpless/angry. The spouse often gets blamed for the depressed person’s depression. The spouse probably takes these blaming “mini-theories” quite personally and may develop their own “mini-theories” about why the depressed person is behaving so badly. Attempts to problem solve can easily degenerate into blaming, arguing, and a pattern of “demanding” - “withdrawing”, which further damages an already frayed relationship.

Couples counseling can help a family dealing with depression to understand the nature of depression, how it may be manifested in symptoms, how it can be treated, and how the power of the relationship can be harnessed to reduce or eliminate depression. Marriage counseling can provide a safe environment to broach difficult subjects and to help couples re-engage in open conversations about the depression and about any other issues that may be impacting not only the depression, but the marriage.

Ongoing depression can lead to a realistic fear that the relationship won't make it. Couples counseling can help in stabilizing the relationship and prevent a further erosion of emotional closeness.

As partners practice new skills they will become more aware, not only of their own needs, but of their partner's needs. Understanding of each other and patterns of behavior can lead to each partner's identification of his/her own contributions to marital difficulties. With this process of self-discovery and other-discovery, they can begin to work together to resolve problems and negotiate for change. Self defeating interaction patterns can be replaced by healthy new

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communication and problem solving patterns. Positive new patterns can assist with personal wellbeing and relationship satisfaction.

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“The Honey Jar” is a conversation starter for couples. It consists of 250 sentence stems, each on serving as an open-ended prompt to generate discussion. The Honey Jar is more than a jar of sentence stems. The Honey Jar was field tested by real couples for therapeutic value. It can assist couples in restoring a sense of-self confidence in re-establishing their connection and commitment. As couples use their time, attention, and willingness to take risks with each other a close loving connection can re-emerge.

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