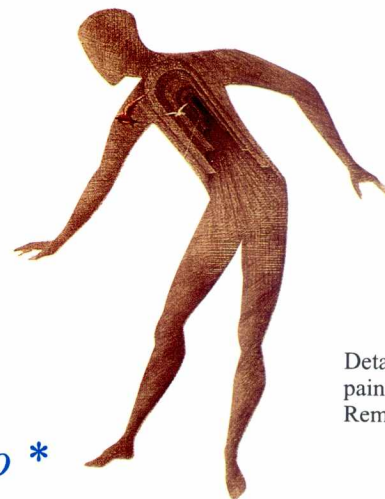


Depression, the illness that overwhelms us

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Detail from painting by Remedios Varo.

The increasing importance of leisure time, society's growing dependence on technology, the ever more competitive nature of modern life, the transformation of moral values and resulting instability—these are some of the reasons why depression is on the rise worldwide, especially in the developed countries.

In the United States, for example, clinical depression attacks 15 million people each year, according to National Institute of Health reports. Because of the magnitude of the problem, a conference designated as the National Day for the Recognition of Depression was held in the U.S. on October 8, 1992.

At this meeting, psychiatrists and other mental-health professionals agreed to work on a voluntary basis towards discovering some of the millions of cases of undiagnosed depression, and a toll-free phone number was established to provide assistance to depressed individuals.

This has made it possible to save the lives of people with strong self-destructive tendencies who require immediate hospitalization.

Psychiatrists and public-health experts from Duke University estimate that losses due to acute depression alone reached 16.3 billion dollars in 1986 in the United States.

But lesser degrees of depression are much more common, and as a result more costly, because people suffering from depression lose more days from work than those with heart disease.

This mental-health problem is complicated by society's attitude toward the illness. Less than fifty percent of Americans consider depression to be a health problem, and more than two out of five believe it is a form of personal weakness. Consequently, many depressed people do not seek specialized medical treatment which could help them resolve their problems.

Clinical depression is an illness which causes long-lasting changes in mood, behavior and emotions, interfering with and disorganizing an individual's work and family life.

Depression can affect people of any age, without regard to religion, race or social status, although—as with heart disease or alcoholism—some people are more predisposed to depression than others.

Depression is almost always manifested between the ages of 24 and 44. Studies by the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health show that women are two times more prone to suffer clinical depression than men.

The possibility that depression will develop in an individual is present when there is a family history of the

illness. However, not all genetically susceptible people will go on to develop the disease.

People suffering from major depression frequently exhibit a pattern of neurochemical imbalance, but there are other factors which can initiate depression as well.

A person's psychological make-up plays an important role. Prone to this disorder are those who have a low level of self-esteem, are continually self-critical, have a pessimistic world outlook, or let their problems overwhelm them.

An important loss, chronic illness, a troubled relationship, financial problems or any undesirable change in one's way of life may also provoke a depressive episode. A combination of genetic, psychological and environmental factors is generally found to cause the illness.

The principal symptoms of depression are:

- A persistent state of sadness, anxiety or feeling of emptiness.
- Sensations of desperation and pessimism.
- Feelings of guilt, uselessness, inability.
- The loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities the individual previously enjoyed, including sex.
- Insomnia, very early rising or excessive sleeping.

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- Appetite disorders and weight changes.
- Loss of energy; fatigue or weakness.
- Thoughts related to death or suicide; suicide attempts.
- Malaise, irritability.
- Difficulty in concentrating, remembering and decision-making.
- Persistent physical symptoms which are unresponsive to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders and chronic pain.

Not all of these symptoms need be present for a diagnosis of depression to be made. Doctors and mental-health specialists consider symptoms' persistence to be the key factor.

While the majority of depressed people improve by themselves over a period of several weeks or months, early diagnosis and treatment can

reduce the duration and intensity of depression.

Treatment may also help reduce the chances that depression will recur. This may involve the use of various anti-depressant medications—which are non-addictive and do not affect behavior—as well as individual psychotherapy.

Some people experience relief through psychotherapy, some through the use of anti-depressants, and others through a combined treatment—in other words, the use of medication in order to achieve relatively rapid symptomatic relief and psychotherapy in order to learn how to confront the problems of life.

Depressive disorders cause people to feel worn out, useless, crippled and hopeless. These negative thoughts and feelings can make some people give up entirely.

It is important to recognize that these negative ideas are part of depression itself, and that they will disappear to the degree that treatment is effective. In the meantime, the depressed individual should:

- Avoid setting him or herself difficult goals or taking on large responsibilities.
- Divide large tasks into small parts, setting priorities and doing what is feasible.
- Not expect too much of him or herself, since this may increase feelings of failure.
- Try to be with other people.
- Participate in activities which make him or her feel better, but without overdoing it or getting upset if there is no immediate improvement in mood. Feeling better takes time.
- Not make important life decisions such as changing jobs, getting married or divorced without consulting other people who know the individual well and can give a more objective opinion on the situation. In any case it is prudent to postpone major



Remedios Varo, *Woman Coming Out of the Psychoanalyst's Office*, 1960.

decisions until the depression has diminished.

- Reject negative thoughts.

As in the case of other illnesses, family and friends play an important role, as they are the first to note signs that the depressed individual is improving or getting worse. Care must be taken that the depressed person not attempt suicide as an escape from their suffering. Research shows that 15 percent of people suffering from acute depression end up committing suicide.

The most important elements in helping a depressed person are seeing that they receive adequate treatment, providing them with moral support and company, and stressing that with time and help they will be able to overcome their illness **M**



Remedios Varo, *Insomnia*, 1947.