Coping with Mild or Moderate Depression… Strategies and Skills

The strategies identified below are useful for mild or moderate depression or while you are deciding if you can change your thinking, mood, behavior and energy on your own. These tools do not replace getting assistance from a counselor or doctor. Remember, depression is not about your will or character, it is a biochemical imbalance. Your life experiences, thinking, eating, exercise, sleep all impact your biochemistry as does medication. If your sleep is out of sync, less than 6 hours a night, and you cannot improve your sleep, contact the Employee Assistance Program at 815-753-9191. Some new research suggests that lack of sufficient sleep (7-8 hours) can induce depression due to how our brains respond to being tired. Insufficient sleep creates is stressful to physical and mental health. Sometimes lack of sleep is due to your depression and medication may be helpful.

If you have suicidal thoughts, go directly to the Ben Gordon Center on 14 Health Services Drive, DeKalb from Monday through Friday between 8 AM – 5 PM and they will see you immediately. In the evening from 5 PM and 8 AM call the emergency hotline at 866-242-0111. On weekends the emergency hotline is available from Friday 5 PM to Monday 8 AM or you can go to the Kishwaukee Hospital emergency room on Sycamore Road (Rt. 23). If you are having any difficulty accessing these service, contact the NIU Employee Assistance Program at 815-753-9191.

Counseling and Medication are both helpful tools. Medications today tend to be cleaner and change your biochemistry just enough that you improve your sleep and your energy. Sometimes an increase in energy and sleep is necessary before you can begin learning the tools you need to manage and deal with your depressive thoughts, mood, and behavior. A counselor may be a very important guide, as you learn new ways to cope with your depression and learn how to accept yourself. Remember, to get the help you need as depression can become major and include suicidal thoughts. To find the resources you need, call the Employee Assistance Program at 815-753-9191. Click on How do I know if I…Am Depressed.

Skills to Help You Become Resistant to Depression

“Don’t Personalize” other people’s behavior or comments about you. When you are young, your survival depends upon how your parents care about you so it is very natural to learn to personalize what other people say and how they respond to you. As adults many, many people continue this habit of personalizing when in reality what others say and do is a projection of their own reality, their own rules and beliefs (Don Miguel Ruiz, The Four Agreements, pages 47-61). Do not take in the opinions and actions of others as the truth about you. You decide if what they are saying describes you. If you are not sure check it out with a few people. The habit of personalizing is so strong that many times, someone does not even have to say anything and you automatically assume you know what the other person’s intention is. You do not know someone’s intentions unless you check it out by asking them about their intentions. Consider the following as you work to not personalize.

♦ Use breathing and mantras to let go of what you have personalized…"It is not about me; it’s about them."
♦ Remember no one can make you feel bad about yourself without your consent. Or as Eleanor Roosevelt said, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”
♦ Draw a circle on your hand or wear a round white paper hole reinforcer on your watch and tell yourself, “I am in charge of what I let in and I am not going to let in anything that disturbs my peace of mind”.

“Don’t Make Assumptions.” The problem with making assumptions and not checking them out with the person is that you begin to believe your assumptions are facts and you act upon these facts. When you personalize these assumptions, you frequently feel hurt and angry. Since your feelings are based on assumptions, you are now living with hurt and anger that you can’t do anything about because it comes from your assumptions about someone.
Accepting yourself, what you like and don’t like, is key to being resistant to depression and being at peace with your life. An important aspect of accepting yourself and your life is accepting your choices and claiming them as choices even if they did not seem like choices at the time. Claiming the choices you have made in your life and accepting them is how you take ownership of your life and become empowered. As everyone grows up, they personalize what others are saying about them and decide if it says something about their worth, likeability, or competence. At some point, you have to decide what you believe about yourself in these areas and throw out the garbage. This is when it is important for you to identify and accept your strengths, weaknesses, worth, competence, and likeability. We all have parts of ourselves that we like and don’t like. We can’t hide what we don’t like, only accept it as part of the full package of who we are. Accepting yourself and owning the parts of yourself that are hard to accept (we all have them), makes it harder for others to push your sensitive buttons. Accepting yourself means that when your buttons are pushed you can acknowledge them, handle the intensity of the feelings triggered and still choose how to respond. This is called being emotionally intelligent: managing your feelings and being appropriate in the moment. If you do not accept yourself, then your self-talk tends to be habitually negative and you see in others what you do not like about yourself, so it becomes harder to accept others and be descriptive with your language. When your self-talk about yourself is very critical and judgmental, your thoughts and feelings about others with similar behaviors will be very critical. It is too easy to personalize when you do not accept yourself, and own what you do not like about yourself. Consider doing a self inventory about what you like about yourself and identify what you need to accept about yourself. Examine your negative beliefs about your worth, your likeability, and your competence. Identify the thoughts and feelings imbedded in these beliefs, and change the thoughts with a mantra. See a counselor for assistance.

“Be impeccable with your word” whether you use it in your self-talk about yourself or are talking about someone else. When you use descriptively language rather than judgmental language you make it easier for yourself and others to listen and learn. Words have the power to create and help others learn and grow, or to damage and hurt others (Don Miguel Ruiz, The Four Agreements, pages 25-46). This involves finding a new descriptive vocabulary without labels or judgmental words.

Become aware of your self-talk and make it neutral/positive. Everyone’s feelings contain thoughts and these thoughts reinforce and feed your feelings. When you are depressed, you may be telling yourself, “Nothing ever works out. I can’t do anything right. I can’t take this anymore.” Be aware of the feeling imbedded in the thought “I can’t do anything right.” Maybe you are afraid you will not be able to do something that is very important to you. If you identify the feeling...I am afraid I can’t do anything right...then you begin to more naturally problem solve and challenge the thought you can’t do anything right. Adding the feeling makes the statement less absolute and therefore, easier to challenge. You probably have favorite Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANT) that you have told yourself over a thousand times. If you had a friend who said such negative things to you, you might decide to get a new friend. It is time to be your own best friend and make what you say to yourself neutral, descriptive, and specific. After you say your new more realistic and neutral/positive thoughts to yourself instead of your automatic negative thoughts, your new thoughts will become more automatic. To change what you say to yourself read Summary of Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANT) and learn to turn your automatic negative thoughts into a mantra. Every thought impacts your biochemistry and therefore how you feel.

Change your self-talk and negative beliefs about yourself and others with a Mantra. A mantra is a way to respond to the automatic negative thoughts that consistently occupy your mind like a hamster running in the wheel. Everyone has favorite things they say to themselves about themselves as they encounter life. Many times you step on a slippery slope down a steep hill with words like “Why...If only...I should have...” A mantra of 1-3 short statements that you say to yourself instead of the negative self-talk keeps you from sliding down the slope. When you make 3 short statements, start with acknowledging your feeling or respond more accurately to the negative statement. I do a lot of things right. I can make a mistake and still be competent. I can deal with this situation.” The last part of the statement is directing your focus to what you can do in the present. As you say your mantra, remember to breathe deeply and exhale slowly.
Get a special notebook and write in longhand about the day’s events and your reactions to them. Writing about your feelings and what is triggering these feelings helps clarify what you are feeling and thinking about a situation. As you read what you have written, you can see if what you are writing is really accurate. You can also discover themes and beliefs about yourself and other people in what you have written. If you notice a negative theme or belief, write out how you want to change those themes or beliefs. Visualize how you will respond to situations differently with your new themes and beliefs. Writing in your own hand is a way of letting go of the thoughts and feelings that you are holding onto. If you don’t have time to journal or wake up in the middle of the night with lots of thoughts running around, write down the thoughts and write down when you will journal about them. Your mind will listen. To change a negative theme or belief, create a mantra.

Related Handouts:
Not Personalizing and The Four Agreements that Help Communication
Emotional Intelligence: What it is and The Tools
Progressive Relaxation
Worksheet for Changing Your Negative Thinking or Automatic Negative Thoughts
Understanding Your “Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTS)”