

Depression and its causes



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I think it is important at this point to examine briefly what is generally understood in psychotherapeutic terms by the word ‘depression’. Melanie Klein (1988) in her object relations theory explains depression as having at its source disturbances in how the baby was allowed to handle its ambivalent feelings towards its mother as it begins to experience her as the provider and yet also the withholder of love. Michael Jacobs (1986) refers to depression as anger turned inwards; Winnicott talks of ‘poor mirroring’ (1991: p112; Frederick Perls (1989) sees depression as being the result of an ‘incomplete gestalt’... the energy is blocked and turned inwards as the person responds to the early negative introjects of a hostile parent. Neo-Reichian therapists see depression as located in the body as well as the head and look at ways of directly contacting early trauma using physiological methods and concepts.

There seems however to be a consensus among the different therapeutic approaches that depression is the result of the need to repress or disassociate from

negative childhood experiences. Low self esteem perpetuates the dejected mood. It's depressing being depressed!

The Humanist view sees all depression as a particular way of responding to stress which varies in its severity depending on the individual's life experiences and that each of us has within us the creative will and ability to change things.

Bioenergetics - The Theory.

In Bioenergetic therapy the basic movement of life is toward pleasure and away from pain; that is the living organism's primary drive. We reach out to embrace and assimilate pleasure and contract and withdraw from pain and hurt. Anxiety is felt when the desired pleasure also contains the possibility of pain. As a protection from this anxiety psychic and somatic defenses are formed that reduce the body's contact with both pain and pleasure.

Character is defined as a fixed pattern of behaviour, the typical way an individual handles his striving for pleasure. It is structured in the body in the form of chronic and generally unconscious muscular tensions that block or limit impulses to reach out. (Lowen: 1994: p,137).

Depression is seen in Bioenergetics as blocked energy. As a response to pain the psyche defends itself in order to survive. As a result the body becomes armoured against hurt by chronic muscular tensions. Lowen called this characterological armouring.

For his theory of character analysis Lowen (1994) defined five character types: schizoid, oral, psychopathic, masochistic, and rigid. Each type demonstrates defensive body armouring that is typical of particular early experiences.

Bowlby (1980) emphasizes the major role early loss and separation play in the aetiology of depression and makes a connection between the symptoms of depression, and the type of loss experienced in childhood. He tells us permanent removal of love or the actual death of a parent predisposes that person to feeling that any current loss is a type of death and therefore to feel desperate and powerless. However loss due to separation has in it the seeds of hope, a feeling that the lost thing may be found and love restored. The associated feeling would be those of longing and searching but also of anger and protest. I would like to make a connection here between these two types of loss and Lowen's schizoid and oral character types as they also seem to be the most inclined to incorporate the defence of depression in their structure.

Schizoid.

Lowen tells us that people with this body pattern have learnt to cope by disassociating from their feelings and their body. Their early experience is one of hostility and rejection from their prime carer this could include an actual death. They may seem awkward and uncomfortable in their body. Their face has a fixed expression and their energy is held inside by extreme, contracted musculature, and has become 'frozen in the core area' (Lowen, 1994 p.152). They are not able to relate easily to others. (Body type: disjointed, and fragmented.)

Oral.

The oral structure demonstrates the individual's need to be supported by others. Their childhood will be marked by deprivation or abandonment. They may have experienced love and warmth but not in a way that has enabled them to construct their own ego strength and feelings self worth, and endlessly seek reassurance: from others. Their energy level is low and flows sluggishly through their permeable boundaries.

The body looks collapsed and gives the impression of needing support. H/she talks easily and needs to be in continual contact with other people. Lowen indicates that because of the low energy level this character structure has a tendency to depression. (Body type: weak and collapsed.)

Psychopathic.

This character has had the early experience of powerful controlling parent and she/he has learnt to deny his or her own needs as the only way of gaining approval. This person may become aggressive and controlling as an adult. Lowen (1994) tells us that this early coping reaction of submission and the resulting approval and closeness it obtained from the parent will become the way this character type develops relationships with others; however once trust is apparently secured the more sadistic and controlling part of the personality is shown. Their survival depends on winning and being in control. (Body type: often rather top heavy).

Masochistic.

This character structure has had the early experience of love being available but only at the cost of suffering and self sacrifice on the part of their parents. The guilt engendered by receiving this often, over powering love has the suffocating effect of taking away the child's right to demonstrate a need without appearing to criticize or reject the parent. In adult life they will be

fearful of change and unable to act freely and spontaneously for fear of hurting others and losing their approval. The resentment and hostility unconsciously felt at the suppression of their needs leaks out in the form of general moaning and complaining to others. They do not have the ego strength to risk changing things themselves. (Body type: dense and highly muscled).

Rigid.

Of all the character types the rigid has usually had the most untrammelled early life. The root of any later problems is to be found in the conflict experienced or the age of three or four between the discovery and desire for genital pleasure and the disapproval or inhibition of this by the parents.

The rejection of the child's stirring for sexual and erotic pleasure was viewed by him as a rejection of his reaching out for love.

(Lowen, 1994:p,169.)

As an adult this person will experience conflict between their emotions and so called rational thought. They will also be inclined to associate loss of freedom with the surrender to love. They have a strong ego, and some awareness of their needs and how to achieve them. (Body type: rather unyielding and stiff).

Lowen is at great pains to emphasize that these are descriptions of defense positions not of an individual's personality and that most of us are made up of a combination of these character structures. However I feel that some of the physical aspects of their structures would seem to be related to inherited factors and not within the person's conscious or unconscious control.