Are You Depressed?

by Dr. Andrew T. Brady

A few months ago I was talking with a patient – let's call him John – who told me he had suffered with depression for several years. He was being treated with antidepressants, which made him feel better, but he still felt depressed. He also mentioned that he was experiencing sexual dysfunction, which worsened his depression, and had thoughts of hurting himself – both of which are side effects to his medication. The doctor he was seeing wanted to increase the dose of his antidepressant and give him another medication to help make it more effective.

Dr. Andrew T. Brady
Chiropractic Physician

I asked John if he knew why he was depressed. He told me that he just thought it was a chemical imbalance within his brain. I asked him if he knew why there might be a chemical imbalance within his brain. He said he didn't know. As I started to ask him some specific and deeper questions about his past, it became very clear why he was depressed. Three years ago, John was laid off from a job he loved, got divorced, stopped exercising, gained 40 pounds and lost a dear friend – all within a year's time.

People who suffer with depression often live, dwell and focus on negative past events they've experienced. In John's case, he was constantly thinking about all those negative things and was blaming himself, which led to daily negative self-talk over the course of many years.

There have been numerous studies published in the scientific literature that show negative self-talk and depressing thoughts decrease the blood flow and activity of the midbrain, which is where tons of dopamine (feel good) producing cells are located. If this happens for a period of time, it will actually shrink that area of the brain. If this is true, depression does not cause depressing thoughts; depressing thoughts over a period of time causes depression.

Now how can a pill fix that? It can't, which is why John still suffered with depression even though he was giving his body "feel good" pills. He was not addressing the cause. The good news is that these effects are reversible! Daily gratitude exercises, loving more, exercising and daily positive self-talk have all been shown to increase blood flow to the midbrain and reverse depression. After just six months of doing this, John no longer suffers with depression.

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9630 Ravenna Rd. Suite 100
Twinsburg, OH 44087
330-405-2751
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