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## **Dispelling Myths About Depression**

Hi, I'm Desirae Torrens, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist here at Savera.

Today, I'd like to talk about some common myths and misconceptions related to depression. As a clinician, and as someone who has had personal experience with depression, I'm struck by how often I encounter misinformation about this common condition. This can be extremely unhelpful, especially if you're seeking support for yourself or for someone you know, and can worsen feelings of guilt and shame that often accompany depression.

In this video, I'd like to give a clearer idea of what this illness actually is and what it's not. I'd also like to suggest some practical strategies you can use if you or someone you know struggles with depression.

### **MYTH #1: Depression is the same as sadness**

While sadness can be a symptom of depression, sadness itself is an *emotion*.

\*It can be a normal, appropriate response to a specific situation:

- Breaking-up with a romantic partner
- Watching a sad movie or listening to a sad song

We all experience periods of sadness from time to time that can last anywhere from a few minutes to several days, but we're generally able to bounce back from these downtimes without therapeutic intervention.

### **Depression is a Mood Disorder**

Some common symptoms of depression include:

- Loss of interest in work, family or once pleasurable activities
- Feeling "empty", flat or hopeless
- Excessive feelings of guilt
- Difficulties with sleep and appetite
- Chronic fatigue or feeling tired all the time
- Trouble concentrating
- Withdrawal from social interactions

These symptoms can really interfere with how you function and affect how you:

- think
- feel
- act
- how you relate to others



Symptom effects can show up in your:

- work or academic performance
- your relationships
- how you think and feel about yourself

Because depression can alter how you think and behave, it can even lead to thoughts of self-harm, harming others or to suicide.

Certain situations/events can trigger a depressive episode (e.g. grief, trauma), but it's not always caused by a specific event. This is why it can be so hard to pin-point *why* you feel the way you do. Other causes of depression can be:

- Genetic/biological factors (this is especially true in some types of mood disorders, such as Bipolar Disorder)
- Situational/environmental stressors (e.g. financial stress, discrimination, online bullying)
- Medication side effects
- Another underlying medical condition (e.g. thyroid disorder)

Depression usually does not resolve on its own and can last several weeks, months or even years. Episodes can also recur, making it a potentially long-term, chronic illness with debilitating effects.

**MYTH #2: Depression looks the same for everyone, or that it primarily affects women.**

I find depression often linked with the image of a disheveled woman prone to crying spells, easily overwhelmed and huddled in a dark room or in bed.

While depression can sometimes look like this, symptoms can also manifest in a variety of other ways we can easily miss if we're only used to thinking about it in this one way.

For example, in adult men, symptoms can look like:

- Anger, irritability or aggressiveness
- Increased use of alcohol or other substances
- Engaging in high-risk activities
- Being unable to meet the responsibilities of work, caring for family or other important activities

In young children and teens, symptoms can look like:

- Irritability and defiance
- Frequent somatic complaints, such as headaches, stomach aches
- Declining grades
- School avoidance, cutting classes

The fact is that depression is an equal-opportunity offender and anyone can be susceptible.



How symptoms show up can vary greatly with age, gender, culture and intensity (which can range from mild, to moderate to severe).

**MYTH #3: Depression is all in your head. You can just “snap out of it”.**

I find this one especially problematic and invalidating because it implies depression is a *choice* or a matter of *will*.

***NO ONE decides to become depressed.***

The fact is you can't just snap out of depression just like you can't snap out of a cold or a chronic illness.

It's not something that goes away by simply working harder or by being more positive.

Depression can be a serious *illness*.

- It alters *how* your brain and body works
- Can significantly interfere with how you function in different areas of your life.

It's important we don't dismiss the signs as mere laziness, disinterest or lack of will-power, and neglect getting help.

**So what can you do if you or someone you know may be struggling with depression?**

I think the first point to remember is that symptoms can really vary, so there's no “one size fits all” approach to treatment.

Managing this condition often requires a multi-step approach that incorporates a variety of strategies so you can figure out what works best for *you*.

Try to approach your treatment with as much patience and kindness towards yourself as possible. Depression can be a chronic illness and can take some time to get better. So do your best to be consistent with your treatment and not give in to feelings of discouragement if you don't see immediate improvement or if your symptoms return.

Some common strategies that have worked well for my clients and that I've used in my personal experience include:

**\*Reaching out to trusted friends, family or other people with whom you can share what you're going through and who can offer support in a non-judgmental, empathic way.**

**\*Seeking help from a mental health professional or primary care provider.**



-Psychotherapy and medication have been shown to be effective ways of treating depression, especially when used together.

**\*Creating routines and structures that *support* your optimal health and overall functioning.**

-Some basic components of self-care routines include regular exercise, and managing diet, sleep and stress.

**\*Spirituality can be a significant source of strength and resilience.**

-For some people, prayer and worship can be vital lifelines.

-For others, having a strong sense of purpose and meaning in their lives can likewise provide strength and support. Activities like being in nature, channeling their creativity or helping others can help tap into their resiliency.

**\*Finally, certain mindfulness-based practices such as meditation, yoga, mindful movement and compassionate self-inquiry can be powerful tools for working with depression.**

-Used on a regular basis, they can help develop how we pay attention to our thoughts, feelings and behaviors to help reduce emotional reactivity and be more intentional in how we choose to respond.

I want to emphasize that depression is a common, treatable illness that does not need to be suffered in shame or in silence. With consistent management, it is entirely possible to live a healthy, meaningful life.

Perhaps the information offered here can begin to offer some hope and insight for how you or someone you know can get help.