

## **Notes From *Breaking the Patterns of Depression* by Michael Yapko, Ph.D.**

Breaking the patterns of depression involves learning specific skills to re-establish control over your life, address your life questions, make good decisions, and redefine your expectations for yourself. Instead of thinking of depression as an "illness," see it as a valuable call to examine how your expectations, thoughts, feelings, relationships, and all other aspects of experience when you drift off course can lead you to erroneously believe you'll never have a happy or fulfilling life.

People who sink into clinical depression are often missing information or skills that could help prevent depression; they become absorbed in ways of being (thinking, feeling, doing) and lose sight of the fact that much of life experience is a product of personal beliefs. Depression involves an intricate set of projections about yourself, life, the universe, *everything* – the way you interpret the meaning of things that are ambiguous or unclear.

You may know of the Rorschach Inkblot Test. People will "see" all kinds of meanings in the inkblot through their projections about it – whenever you encounter an ambiguous stimulus, you inevitably interpret it from your own perspective. Life is the most ambiguous stimulus any person ever faces. *Life doesn't have an objective or assigned meaning. We give it meaning by our individual values, beliefs, relationships, careers, hobbies, and other life experiences.* The tendency of depressed people to interpret life experiences negatively helps fuel the negative expectation that when life is going badly, it will *always* go badly. Few experiences, good or bad, are enduring. When you know that, hopefulness can start to take the place of hopelessness.

When you're depressed, almost everything is overwhelming. Simple tasks seem difficult, difficult tasks seem impossible, and the energy to deal with much of anything—easy or hard—is missing. Your future can be much better than you've ever experienced before. But you need a realistic plan to make it happen! This book is a serious manual for building the life skills that can make your depression go away.

### **Chapter One – *Depression: A Growing Problem***

- Depression is a **complex disorder** with no single cause or defining characteristic.
- Depression is an **ambiguous stimulus** that invites all kinds of approaches to solutions. Learn what works for you as an individual.
- **Anyone can become depressed**, though women are more likely to be diagnosed as depressed than men and adolescents are the fastest growing age group affected.
- Depression is more accurately considered a disorder than a disease – you are someone who has not been taught to develop the **specific ways of thinking, feeling, or behaving** that insulate you against life's difficulties. You *can* learn now.
- The most prominent psychological models emphasize **specific skills** that **will be valuable** tools for managing life without depression.

## Chapter Two – *Less Analysis, More Action*

- Depression can be **tricky to diagnose** because it may differ from person to person. *You* have to judge how you're feeling about yourself and your life.
- A lot is known about what it takes to help depression, so **you can afford to be optimistic**.
- Effective treatment may include antidepressant **medication, therapy, or a combination**. Therapy is at least as effective as medication in producing successful results, and even more effective in reducing the likelihood of relapses. **Taking medication only is not necessarily the best** choice.
- Cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal psychotherapies are known to be effective. Their common denominators are a focus on **(a) process (patterns), (b) solutions, (c) the future, and (d) skill-building**.

## Chapter Three – *Dimensions and Symptoms of Depression*

- **Physical disorders can produce symptoms** of depression. Consult a physician to rule these out.
- Stress is a common denominator of depression – learn to recognize when you're becoming stressed and **take steps to reduce your stress** level *before* it becomes debilitating.
- Depression has many different forms and causes. **Don't waste** valuable time looking for the cause or comparing yourself to others.
- Not all of your symptoms are in conscious awareness. It's important to **recognize as many of the ways as possible that depression affects you**, in order to intervene as comprehensively as you can.
- The cognitive, behavioral, and relational dimensions appear to be the most significant in influencing the course of depression. **Learning to think clearly and behave and relate to others effectively are critical** to minimizing your depression.
- Focusing on the past is far less important than making changes in those patterns for the future. **Spend time on the past only to recognize those patterns so you can improve your tomorrows**.

## Chapter Four – *Patterns of Depression*

- **Lifestyle patterns** can lead you to manage life situations well or put you at risk for depression. New skills can help you face difficult situations that repeat themselves.
- **What you didn't learn before, you can learn now**.
- Your value system leads you to seek out or to avoid specific experiences that shape your views. **Your values** aren't right or wrong; the issue is how they affect your choices and whether the results **enhance or diminish your quality of life**.
- **Your value system creates vulnerabilities** that represent risks for depression. For example, if you value work above all else, you are at greatest risk when you can't work. By recognizing your vulnerabilities, you can take preventive steps (e.g. preparing emotionally for retirement).
- **Your thinking style** dictates the range and quality of your perceptions and may be described as abstract, concrete, global, or detailed. Each influences how you perceive and respond to life experiences.
- **Attributional style** concerns your explanations of life events that may work for or against you. Do you see bad times as caused by you or by others? Are they temporary or permanent? Do they affect your whole life or just part of it?

- **Attentional style** is what determines your ability to concentrate on and absorb meaningful ideas. **Focusing and relaxation skills are valuable tools** for building this ability.
- **Self-awareness and self-acceptance** are necessary for you to place yourself in situations that bring out the best in you. The trait one person criticizes you for is a trait someone else will appreciate.
- Depression can lead to **selective perceptions that amplify the negative**. It's important to start amplifying the positive in your awareness. Even when your first perception of something is negative, push yourself to comment on at least a couple of its positive aspects.
- **Perceptions regarding "control"** dictate whether you see yourself as a victim or master of experience. Being a victim is a reliable path to depression. So is trying to control the uncontrollable.
- **Temporal orientation** – Strive to focus on creating a positive future and to avoid rehashing the past.
- **Compartmentalizing** is necessary if you are to effectively address different areas of your life without letting one interfere with another.
- Any imbalanced (extreme) pattern puts you at risk for depression. **The goal is to achieve balance** by developing each part of yourself more fully.

### Chapter Five – *Beyond One Day At A Time*

- **Expectancy** refers to your perceptions about the future in general and *your* future in particular. *Whether* you think about the future and *how* you think about it will help determine the likelihood of your recovery from depression.
- The inability to **anticipate realistic consequences** for proposed actions and the tendency to follow immediate impulses can lead to hurtful—and depressing—circumstances. You have to resist the tug of your feelings when it's clear they're pulling you in a destructive direction. Developing the skill to think ahead realistically requires patience and perseverance.
- What is your purpose in life? What are your life goals? The importance cannot be overstated of having **goals that are short-term, intermediate, and long-term**. Learn to think about how the actions you take now either fit with or are at odds with your goals. **Realistic attitudes toward both hopefulness and hopelessness** will provide the necessary balance.

### Chapter Six – *Life: It's All In The Interpretation*

- People have a **need for meaning**, for understanding. This **leads you to interpret** why things in life happen the way they do.
- **When facing an ambiguous situation you project meaning** according to your background or frame of reference. These explanations are arbitrary, based on your personal history and range of experiences, but play a huge role in how you feel.
- **Ambiguous situations represent potential risk factors** for depression if interpreted negatively.
- It's important to respond as well as possible to **objective evidence** so you don't respond solely on the basis of your feelings. **You have choices** about *whether* and *how* to respond.
- Learn to **regulate your actions according to the results you want** and *not* simply according to how you feel. Your feelings matter, but they can also get in the way of reaching your greater goals.
- **Explanations or attributions** for experience can be described as **internal or external, stable or unstable, global or specific**. Learn to recognize and correct them if necessary. Depressed people most frequently make internal, stable, and global attributions for negative events. Optimistic people

tend to make external, unstable, and specific attributions for negative events. Push yourself to form conclusions most likely to help, not hurt.

## Chapter Seven – *How You Think And What You Think*

- What you think and how you think play the biggest role in creating and maintaining depression. There are common and easily identified **cognitive distortions or errors in thinking that create and maintain depression**. By understanding **you can't accept whatever floats through your mind** as valid, you can be more selective about what to respond to within yourself.
- **All-or-none (dichotomous) thinking** is the tendency to make unrealistic and extreme interpretations of your experience (e.g., "I must be an idiot, because I got a C on the test").
- **Overgeneralization** is the use of one experience to represent an entire class of experiences (e.g., "You just can't trust anyone in a position of authority").
- The **"mental filter"** is a distorted perception where you focus on one aspect of experience to the exclusion of other important details (e.g., "Sure, he was sick, but I know he canceled the date because he didn't want to see me").
- **Disqualifying the positive** is the tendency to reject or devalue positive input from others (e.g., "I did a lousy job – some of the evaluations only said 'good', not 'excellent'").
- **Jumping to conclusions** involves taking a small piece of information and padding it out with your subjective thoughts, and reaching a conclusion not justified by the facts (e.g., "He didn't return the call because he doesn't want to face the situation").
- **Magnification or minimization** involves exaggerating negative things or minimizing positive things (e.g., "My car broke down. I'll *never* get ahead financially," or "Sure, I got a promotion, but I still have to work in a dingy office").
- **Emotional reasoning** is the use of your feelings as the sole basis for interpreting experience (e.g., "I feel no one likes me, so why is this person being nice to me?").
- **"Should" statements** reflect patterns of overresponsibility, leading to guilt, shame, and self-criticism. Learning to define clearly what your responsibilities are can help you feel less burdened by others' expectations.
- **Labeling and mislabeling** refer to the tendency to label an experience and then respond to the label instead of to the experience (e.g., "He's very controlling").
- **Personalization** means taking personally things that are not at all personal. Strive to find reasons for things that happen that *don't* put you at the center.
- Depression can distort your perceptions, and distorted perceptions can cause depression. **The goal is to be as clear and objective about things as possible.**
- Belief systems are patterned ways of thinking that may help you organize your perceptions, but when they're inaccurate representations of reality, they may lead to depression. There are few, if any, beliefs that hold true in all circumstances. **The goal is to respond to each situation effectively on its own merits.** Learn to recognize where a principle does or does not apply, and then find a suitable one for the context at hand.
- **Learning to monitor and correct your own thoughts and beliefs is essential to break the patterns of depression and prevent future episodes.** You are not your thoughts; you are not your feelings; you are not your behavior; you are not your past; you are not *any* one part. You must recognize the limitations of human feelings and perceptions and learn to choose when to "go with them" and when to "put them on hold". This is the essence of **emotional intelligence**.

## Chapter Eight – *Guilt And Responsibility: Is It You? Or Isn't It?*

- **Excessive or inappropriate guilt** is a common feature of clinical depression. Becoming clear you may be responsible *to* others, not *for* them, can reduce guilt. When someone lays a "guilt trip" on you, recognize it's manipulation; if it's inappropriate, hand it back, saying, "You can try to make me feel guilty, but the answer is still no. It's *your* responsibility, not mine."
- **How reactive you are to others' expectations or judgments** is determined by your degree of need for their acceptance. If you feel so "needy" of others' approbation that you will please them to your own detriment, you're in a relationship trap that can prevent you from feeling valued as an equal.
- "**Cognitive dissonance**" is a term describing the need to maintain stability in your beliefs by rejecting conflicting ideas. This mechanism can maintain depression through the rationalizations you concoct about why you have to keep things the way they are, even when you're unhappy with them.
- There's a substantial difference between "being selfish" and "being able to take care of yourself." It's important to have good relationships that involve give-and-take, but **you have to know yourself well enough to create positive, self-nurturing conditions and to avoid "giving until it hurts."**
- **Distortions of the issue of responsibility** can lead you to avoid responsibility you should accept, or to accept responsibility you shouldn't. Situation by situation, you have to read where the responsibility rests—with you, with others, or shared among you.
- **Developing clarity about exactly what you're responsible for** is necessary if you are to manage guilt appropriately and reduce this hurtful aspect of depression. If you didn't say it or do it, you're not responsible for it. If you didn't choose it, agree to it, or commit to it, you're not responsible for it. If you didn't cause it to happen directly or indirectly, you're not responsible for it. If you did, you are!
- There are common **patterns associated with underresponsibility**. Among these are the lack of self-expression, negation of feelings, withdrawal, and the tendency to blame others for one's own problems. You can't pretend you don't exist or that you don't influence others. You do. Since your influence on others is inevitable, your integrity depends on your influencing them positively.
- **Perfectionism** can be a product of either over- or underresponsibility. You can't be perfect even if you want to be, but you could be *really* good. Define success in realistic terms, taking human factors into account. The laws of human nature *do* apply to you, believe it or not.
- Learning to **accept the inevitability of mistakes** and how to correct for them is necessary for a healthy self-esteem. Nobody likes to screw up, but you must be sure not to go global ("I'm so dumb") but rather to identify what went wrong so that you can prevent a recurrence.

## Chapter Nine – *The Victim Mentality*

- People have a basic need to feel in control of life situations, including control of other people. **Depression is often closely associated with errors in judgment about control issues, usually not controlling things that could be controlled, or trying to control things that cannot be controlled.**
- Your perceptions about controllability are **dependent in part on your experience**. The hazard is when you react to situations now as if they are the same as they were in the past. Time for an update!
- People can conclude they're helpless when they've tried to something in one situation and failed, and then overgeneralized the failure to unrelated situations. This is known as "**the illusion of helplessness**." Don't just take things as if there's nothing you can do to improve your circumstances.

No one's life is totally beyond the influence of the person who owns that life. Even when you can't change external circumstances, you *can* change your reaction to those circumstances.

- An "**illusion of control**" exists when you believe you can control the outcome of a situation that is objectively beyond your influence. You won't always be able to change the world, but you can certainly do a lot to keep your little corner of it tidy.

### Chapter Ten – *Boundaries, Boundaries, Boundaries*

- The ability to **recognize differences between similar people or situations** is a vital skill to master so you can respond appropriately to present conditions without constant reference to the past.
- **Boundaries separate elements of experience.** They define what's appropriate behavior for your particular role. Boundaries also define what is and is not acceptable in others' behavior toward you. You have to define your roles and what you will and won't do. Self-esteem rises when you can regularly walk away from a situation and think, "I like what I did there."
- **Responding globally indicates a lack of clear boundaries. So does an inability to set effective limits.** The more you respond to "trees" and not "forests," the more choices you'll have about what to accept or reject in your relationships with others.
- **You are made up of many different "parts", each potentially valuable** in some context. Good boundaries prevent you from defining yourself solely in terms of any one part. For example, your feelings are important, but you are more than your feelings. When people get wrapped up in a "part" that is inappropriate for a given circumstance, they mishandle things and suffer the consequences. One of those consequences may be depression.
- **Other people will routinely test your boundaries** in their efforts to get from you what they'd like. That's normal behavior. **It's *your* job to identify and resist manipulative tactics** (such as intimidation or guilt), and **maintain the integrity of your personal boundaries.**

### Chapter Eleven – *Love That Hurts, Love That Heals: Relationships And Depression*

- **Healthy relationships don't just happen**—they require such specific skills as setting clear boundaries, having realistic expectations, self-awareness, assertiveness, skills in assessing others realistically, sharing control, being realistic about responsibility, good problem-solving capabilities, and consistency.
- Unless relationship skills are practiced, they will decline in effectiveness. Take deliberate steps to put yourself in social situations where you can **develop and hone your skills.** If you want to have decent relationships with others, you'll have to leave the comfort and safety of your home.
- Caring about another person means being willing to protect that person's sense of personal security. **Trust and depth can evolve only in an atmosphere of safety.** You can't say or do anything you feel like saying or doing when you have influence with someone else. If you draw someone into a relationship with you, **you have an obligation to treat that person respectfully.**
- While it's important to have expectations of the way others will relate to you, it is also **important to determine whether they have the abilities to live up to your expectations.** The reverse is true as well. Never ask someone for something they don't have!
- **It is your responsibility to educate others about the best way to relate to you.** They're not mind readers. Communicating clearly about what you want guarantees nothing, but it certainly provides knowledge others can choose to make good use of.

- **Do not assess others solely in terms of how they make you feel.** Instead, learn how this person deals with such issues as control, responsibility, problem-solving, communication, and consistency.
- **It takes time to get to know someone well.** Reduce your sense of urgency to get attached to others and try to be more objective.
- In general, like attracts like. Therefore, **attaching yourself to another depressed person** and building a relationship on negativity may initially feel comfortable, but **eventually may prove to be the equivalent of deciding to stay in a rut and just redecorating it.**
- **Self-disclosure is an art.** In general, do not share sensitive information until you have a pretty good idea of how the other person will respond to it.
- **Setting limits is one of the most important mechanisms** for building strong and healthy relationships.
- All **people**, to one degree or another, **use tactics of manipulation** (such as guilt and intimidation) to get the things they want. Your job is to **keep your self-protection in mind** as you deal with those tactics.
- The **anger** commonly found in depressed people **often arises from the perception of being victimized.** Anger can dissipate when you effectively enforce the limits that you set on others, thereby preventing further victimization.
- Learning to tolerate others' **feedback is necessary** in order to set limits that are effective. When you can **put the good of the relationship ahead of your feelings**, you can learn to appreciate the other's honesty.
- **Relationships are just one part of your life.** Do not make your entire self-image dependent on your relationships with others. You can't control other people or how they choose to relate to you.

### Chapter Twelve – *Navigating The Therapy World*

- If you've read this book carefully and actively experimented with its ideas and exercises, and your depression continues, this is *not* a sign you're hopeless, but that it would be wise to seek the help of a professional.
- **The mental health profession knows a great deal about depression and its effective treatment.** The success rate for people receiving treatment is high.
- If you've seen a therapist in the past and were disappointed, you're not alone. However, be careful not to overgeneralize. Use the knowledge you've gained from this book **to find a competent professional** who can help you get the job done:
  - It's reasonable to ask for specific information from potential therapists about how they would approach the treatment of your depression.
  - You can ask the average length of treatment, the fee per session, whether any health insurance you have will cover the costs, how your progress in therapy will be evaluated, the frequency of sessions, and the general availability of the therapist for regular appointments.
  - During your first appointment you can expect to describe your experience of depression, including your symptoms, your ideas of what your depression is about, the things you have already tried, and so forth. You should also get an idea from the therapist's responses whether he or she will be able to **provide you with support, feedback, direction, structured learning activities, and other key ingredients of successful therapy.**
  - A therapeutic relationship is a special type of relationship, but it follows many of the principles of other positive and healthy relationships. A good therapist is, in most ways, an educator and *not* a substitute parent. **It is important to have within the therapy relationship the same**

- expectations of acceptance and respect that you want in any relationship.** That why it's imperative that you be clear about setting limits.
- If you find your response is negative, it is not only desirable but *necessary* for you to **interview more therapists**. You must definitely have the feeling the therapist is on your side, especially when dealing with tough issues.
  - Remember that therapy is not something done *to* you. **You can take an active role** in shaping the direction of treatment, even though you may not know what things you need to learn or how to best learn them.

### **Chapter Thirteen – *Getting On With Your Life***

- **Do not dwell on the past.** Making changes *now* so things will be better from now on.
- **Do not compare yourself to others.** Identify the specific experiences and skills *you* need in order to move forward with *your* life.
- **Do not create and dwell on negative possibilities.** While it can be good to anticipate potential snags in your plans, the larger picture should be what you can do that is useful. Your goals help define your character, the purpose of your life, and they fuel the optimism of what the "good life" can be for you.
- **Do not leave important things unsaid or undefined.** It's necessary to make the abstract more concrete and the global more clearly defined in the course of day-to-day life. If you don't know *how* to do something, learn it.
- **Do not reject basic parts of yourself.** Rather than trying to "get rid of" parts of yourself that you have labeled "bad," it is far more advantageous to acknowledge and accept the presence of those parts, and discover in what circumstances they can actually work to your advantage. For example, anger is a basic and necessary emotion; throwing tantrums, however, is not an effective way to express anger.
- **Do not ignore your own needs.** Other people matter, but you're in no position to help if you don't take good care of yourself first.
- **Do not ignore reality** in order to blindly follow your own wishes and desires. A little "impulse control" can go a long way.
- **Do not give up.** If you try to do something and fail, don't give up, and don't just do the same thing harder. *Do something else!* If you do not know what to do, find someone who can show you how. *If you fail, it is not a reflection of your capability as much as it is a statement of how you went about doing it.*
- **Do not leave time unstructured.** Actively structure your daily experience to bring out your best. Build your schedule to include a balance of work with play, time with others with time alone, physical rest with physical exertion, and so forth.
- **Do not stop working on improving yourself** when your depression lifts. Continually monitor your attributions, thoughts, relationships, and perceptions of control and responsibility—this is your best means to prevent recurrences.
- **Key things to do:**
  - Manage stress effectively, think ahead, be able to relax, step outside the immediacy of the situation.
  - Practice effective problem-solving skills.
  - Maintain self-awareness and learn to like what you see.
  - Whenever possible, build your life around factors within your control. Bring people into your life who enhance you, who evoke the parts of you that you really like. You deserve good people in your life who can appreciate you!