

Jon Dillow Counseling

Counseling, Coaching, and Seminars

Depression - A blocked goal

Depression is a complex emotional state that can have many causes. Symptoms of depression include: feelings of hopelessness, loss of interest in normally healthy/enjoyable activities, decrease in appetite, fatigue, sleep disturbances, feelings of sadness, and suicidal thoughts.

If you or someone you love is struggling with depression, the good news is, depression can be treated. These symptoms will pass. It is a process and not always a quick one. But help is available. Along the way, if thoughts of suicide become prominent get help. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or 911.

One way to conceptualize depression is as a blocked goal. A depressed person has something they want or need in life, at times desperately. They often unconsciously have set a goal of receiving this but in repeated attempts find themselves coming up short. Over time this can lead to a sense of discouragement and hopelessness that can manifest as depression.

Identifying what these blocked goals are can help a person understand their depression and chart a path forward.

For example, a person's goal might be to gain a sense of significance and worth. They strive to achieve this through their performance at work. Always going above and beyond in their job, they receive praise and promotions. These give them a sense of significance for a time, but it doesn't last long. After months or even years of chasing a sense of worth they grow discouraged that they'll ever achieve their goal. They begin to believe they'll never feel worthy (blocked goal) and depression begins to set in.

Understanding the blocked goal allows them to reevaluate both the goal and how they are pursuing it. Two questions are helpful: (1) Is this goal healthy/unhealthy and (2) Am I pursuing this goal in a healthy and productive way.

In this example the goal, gaining a sense of worth/significance is a good and healthy goal. Pursuing the goal primarily through their achievement at work isn't bringing about lasting results. A healthy response is to consider alternative ways to gain a sense of worth and significance. This might include: asking a spouse, close friend, or family to talk about why they believe the person is significant to them, exploring other activities that can engender a sense of worth, or evaluating what is valuable and worthy about them that doesn't involve their performance.

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How to identify and address a blocked goal: The following set of questions can help you understand what the blocked goal may be in your life. Writing out your answers in a journal is often most helpful. Realize these goals are often emotional and abstract. Don't be surprised if it takes some digging to get at the root of what your after. If you get stuck, its ok. This is where a trusted friend or counselor can help you gain insight.

1. What are some of the things you want most in life? Simply list out the first 5 to 10 items that come to mind.
2. As you look at the list, which of these feels most important to you right now?
3. Why do you want this? For example, one person might say, "I want to be financially independent." Asking the question "Why do you want to be financially independent?" helps them dig deeper. It could be that financial independence helps them feel secure or that having wealth gives them a sense of worth/importance. Often you'll need to ask "Why" several times to get down to the real goal. Another way to ask this question is, "If you had this what would it give you?"
4. If you're not receiving/achieving this important goal what could be some other ways to pursue it?