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THE COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

The cognitive symptoms of depression tend to receive less attention than other symptoms of this difficult illness. Namely, symptoms such as sinking mood, fatigue and loss of interest garner more recognition. Yet cognitive symptoms are quite common. “[They] are actually significantly prominent in depression,” says Deborah Serani, Psy.D, a clinical psychologist and author of the book *Living with Depression*.

And these symptoms are

incredibly debilitating. “In my opinion, when cognitive symptoms of depression hit, they are more of a pressing concern than physical symptoms.”

Cognitive symptoms can interfere with all areas of a person’s life, including work, school and relationships. Problem-solving and higher thinking, according to Serani, are greatly diminished. “This can leave a person feeling helpless and without a plan of action to defeat depression.”

Poor concentration can cause

problems with communication, and indecisiveness may strain relationships, according to William Marchand, M.D., a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Utah School of Medicine and author of the book *Depression and Bipolar Disorder: Your Guide to Recovery*.

The cognitive symptoms of depression also may get confused with other conditions, complicating diagnosis. Here’s a specific list of symptoms along with similar disorders.

“Cognitive symptoms can be

subtle and often go unrecognised,” according to Dr. Marchand. Fortunately, psychotherapy can help individuals become more aware of these symptoms, such as distorted thinking, he said.

Marchand and Serani shared these cognitive symptoms of depression:

- Negative or distorted thinking
- Difficulty concentrating
- Distractibility
- Forgetfulness
- Reduced reaction time
- Memory loss
- Indecisiveness

DISORDERS THAT MIMIC DEPRESSION

“The cognitive aspects of depression usually involve a person’s thinking being sluggish, negative or distorted in quality,” explains Serani. However, there are many other disorders that share these similar symptoms, because they too inhibit cognitive function. Unfortunately, this means the ‘risk for misdiagnosis is high,’ she said.

For instance, Serani mentioned attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (the inattentive type), post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse.

Co-occurring disorders can add to the confusion. “In many cases there are comorbid conditions such as dementia (in elderly individuals), adult ADHD and generalised anxiety disorder, and it can be difficult to sort out which condition is causing the cognitive symptoms,” Marchand said.

It’s critical to receive a proper and comprehensive evaluation to make sure that you have depression or another condition. Again, psychotherapy and medication can improve cognitive symptoms along with other symptoms of depression. Also, there are many strategies people can try on their own to reduce symptoms and feel better.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

“The texture of a depressed person’s brain functioning is that it’s operating in a depleted way,” adds Serani. This depletion leads to a variety of intrusive cognitive symptoms, such as distorted



thinking, poor concentration, distractibility, indecision and forgetfulness. These cognitive symptoms impair all areas of a person’s life, from their work to their relationships.

Fortunately, key strategies can reduce and improve these symptoms. “The most important strategy is definitive treatment for the depression with psychotherapy and medication,” adds Marchand.

Cognitive symptoms can interfere with all areas of a person’s life, including work, school and relationships.

For instance, psychotherapy helps individuals become more aware of their cognitive symptoms, which can be subtle, explains Marchand. It also teaches individuals specific techniques to improve their symptoms. And it helps clients gain a more accurate perspective on their illness.

According to Marchand, “Because of the negative thinking associated with depression, there’s a tendency to interpret symptoms as personal failings rather than as symptoms of an illness. A therapist can help one see things as they are – rather than through the distorting lens of depression.”

In addition to professional treatment, there are many

strategies people can practice to improve cognitive symptoms.

REVISE DISTORTED THOUGHTS

“I think it’s vital to teach any depressed individual how to ‘think happy,’” says Serani. Revising problematic thought patterns is key because they only fuel the fog and despair of depression.

“This approach definitely takes some time, patience and elbow grease, but once [it’s] learned, [it] enhances well-being.”

The first step is to monitor negative thoughts, which can be recorded in a journal. A negative thought is anything such as “I’m a total loser” or “I can’t do anything right,” she said.

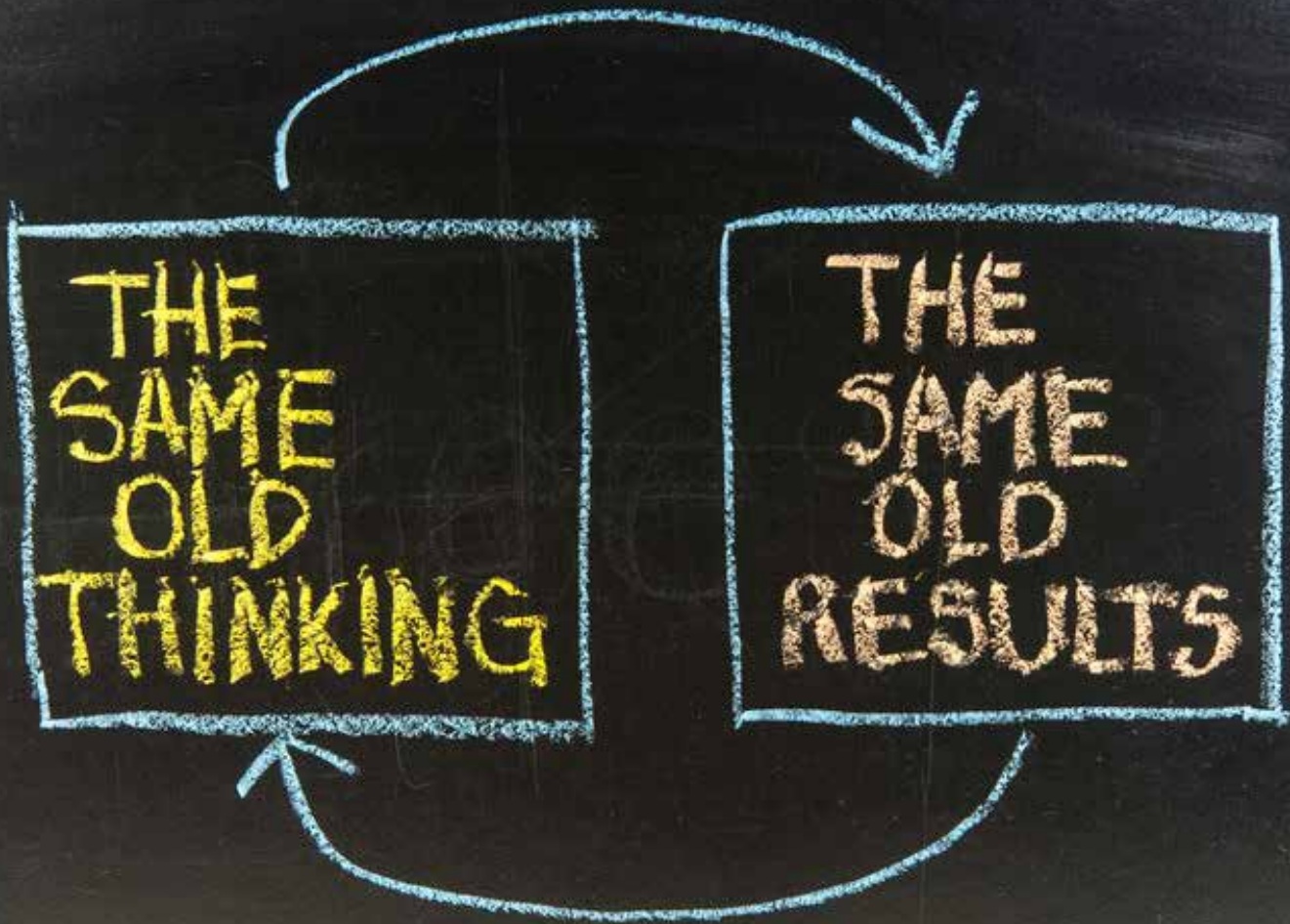
It’s also important to focus on how a negative thought affects mood. By and large, it derails it. “Generally, [negative thoughts] will worsen mood, decrease hope and lower self-esteem.”

Next, to teach the patient to challenge the reality of thought, and replace it with a healthier one. Serani gave the following example: “Am I really a loser? Do I really do everything wrong? Actually, I get a lot of things right in life. So I’m not really a loser.”

Finally, review how each realistic thought affects mood. According to Serani, it “leads to a healthier frame of mind. Now this new, healthy thought replaces the negative one and shifts mood into a less depressive place.”

USING SENSES

“For helping with executive



functioning skills for memory, focus and decision-making, I always recommend using the senses of sight, hearing and touch,” Serani said.

Technology can be especially helpful. For instance, reminders set for taking medication, attending therapy and running errands on a smart phone, computer or tablet.

For those who prefer pen and paper, Serani suggested placing brightly coloured notes with reminders around the home and office. “Using touch to write will track the task more deeply into the memory and the visual cue to ‘see’ the reminder will help keep the focus.”

The sense of touch can also help when making a decision, said Serani, who uses this technique herself, “especially if I’m struggling with a significant melancholic mood.” She suggested a grounding practice, which “helps you be in the moment”: Place a hand on the heart, take a deep, slow breath and ask the question they need to know. “Slowing things down and focusing on a sense of self can better help a person make decisions.”

TAKE SMALL STEPS

“Depression has a way of taxing a person physical[ly], emotional[ly] and intellectual[ly], so taking smaller steps will help keep energy reserves from burning out,” Serani said. Break down longer, more complicated tasks into bite-sized steps. This helps someone “rest, refuel and re-attend [to tasks].”

HAVE A CUSHION

Therese Borchard, a mental health blogger and author of the book *Beyond Blue: Surviving Depression & Anxiety* and *Making the Most of Bad Genes*, also struggles with cognitive symptoms from time to time. Whenever possible, she reduces her workload. “I’ve always prepared for days like that by working a little harder on the days I feel good, so I have a little cushion.”

TAKE BREAKS

Because depression is so taxing on the brain and body, taking breaks can help. When she’s working, Borchard takes breaks every two hours, or “every hour if I’m really struggling.” Breaks might include stretching the body or taking a walk around the block.

BE KIND TO YOURSELF

“One of the most important things is to tell patients not to be too hard on themselves if they still find they’re forgetful, have trouble focusing or making decisions,” Serani said. “Reinforce that they are experiencing a real illness.” Blaming themselves and losing patience only adds “to their already full plate.”

As Borchard noted in this piece on working from home with a mental illness, “When I was in the midst of my most severe depression, I couldn’t write at all. For almost a year...I try to remember that when I have a bad day where my brain feels like silly putty and I’m not able to string two words together. I try to remember that courage isn’t doing a heroic thing, but getting up day after day and trying again.” **MHM**

The article was originally sourced from https://psychcentral.com/lib/strategies-for-improving-the-cognitive-symptoms-of-depression/?li_source=LI&li_medium=popular17

References available upon request