

Live like a S.H.A.R.K.

Depression Recovery

by Mark Beard, LPC, NCC

Depression is a common ailment noticed more during the winter months, perhaps because of the gloominess of winter and reduced hours of sunshine. Just the same, people of all ages experience depression year-round. Unfortunately, many of them will have struggled for years before seeking help. Misunderstandings about depression that stigmatize individuals who admit to being depressed are being “just lazy” or as having a negative attitude or they just need to “cheer up.” None of these are true.

Depression is not an attitude; it is a physical ailment that can greatly affect one’s attitude. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, symptoms include:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, or pessimism
- Irritability
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities
- Decreased energy or fatigue
- Moving or talking more slowly
- Feeling restless or having trouble sitting still
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Difficulty sleeping, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight changes
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
- Aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems without a clear physical cause and/or that do not ease even with treatment

Not all of these symptoms have to be present for a person to be depressed. For example, many people who have depression never experience a desire to harm themselves. Depression can also be at a mild, moderate or severe level. Some levels of depression require medical treatment and some do not. See a qualified professional.

Those dealing with depression usually have the tendency to withdraw, isolate and become inactive. Having suffered from depression myself in years past, I’m well aware of how enthusiasm runs low. Commitment can waiver. Isolating feels natural. These and many other temptations can lead a person to give in to the darkness of depression.

One day when thinking on this issue, I thought about sharks needing to constantly move to stay alive. As it turns out, the shark needs to keep oxygen-rich water constantly flowing over the gills. My analogy for those battling depression is to be like a shark. Keep moving. To become motionless threatens our survival.



To illustrate my point and to give some concrete steps to take, let’s use the acronym, S.H.A.R.K.

Set a pace of life you can maintain. Often, I encounter people suffering with depression who have overextended themselves in both time and commitments to others. These are often the people who also do not feel they are depressed, but rationalize their feelings as being ill-tempered or stressed because of their busy pace of life. Reasonable expectations for activity, productivity and socialization each day are essential to dealing with depression. Instead of trying to reach big goals, focus on developing consistency in activity and productivity throughout each week.

Hold to your purpose. For the person working to recover from depression, it is important to remember to stay focused on achieving your goal of feeling better emotionally and physically. Trying to set your mind on achieving too many additional goals can increase your difficulty. Simplifying your life and narrowing your focus to what is really important can yield better results. Your purpose is to move forward in life productively—not to impress or please others. Becoming physically and emotionally healthy is essential to beating depression. Simple actions can help. For instance, in spite of the desire to isolate oneself, resolve to stay in touch and active with supportive individuals or social groups. Have as much “fun” as possible. Talk with your doctor about an exercise plan. Eat healthy and work to improve your sleep quality.

Alternate between tasks. Motivation can run low when one is depressed. Life can easily feel like a rut. While maintaining a routine can be helpful, most people need more than one task or activity in which they can invest themselves. When energy runs low for one, switch to the other and vice versa. Alternating between defined and prioritized tasks—not purposes—provides variety. A variety of experiences each day will help one stay out of a “rut.” In each day, plan to include a mix of tasks, enjoyment, and exercise.

Reward yourself. Periodic times of enjoyment, even in a busy hectic life, are necessary for good mental health. As long as the reward is physically and emotionally healthy, take time to indulge yourself. Of course, this excludes excessive eating, alcohol use or other substance abuse or behaviors that can become addictive. Reward yourself in a healthy way for your healthy behavior by getting a massage, having a meal at your favorite restaurant, going to a movie with a friend, take a day off work to go do something you enjoy. Celebrate your progress, speak positively to and about yourself and stay away from negative people.

Keep moving. There doesn’t have to be monumental progress every day, but there needs to be progress or sustained effort. During times when we are tempted to become inactive, I often suggest that people resort to using an egg timer or a timer on your phone to create active time periods which have a clear beginning and end.

The idea is to designate a beginning and an end to activities we have low enthusiasm for, such as cleaning house, doing paperwork, and other necessary chores and commitments. For example, set a timer for 20 minutes and do whatever needs to be done nonstop for 20 minutes. At the end of the 20 minutes you can stop. If a person does this three-times-a-day, they will have at least one hour of productivity per day. Obviously that 20-minute period of time can be repeated throughout the day as many times as you wish.

There are many resources as well as medication that is not addictive and can’t be abused. Medication is not always required; nonetheless, an acceptance of what you are experiencing will be required before the healing can begin. Let today be the day your healing begins!

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