

## **SEMINAR, 26.09.2009**

### **GETTING THROUGH DEPRESSION: STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING A HEALTHY MIND**

According to the World Health Organisation, about 121 million people worldwide suffer from depression, and the problem is on increase. The WHO predicts that by 2020 it will be the second leading cause of health problems worldwide.

Psychiatrists and psychologists have long differentiated between two basic types of depression, **the endogenous** and **exogenous** forms. The basis for this differentiation lies in the recognition that the principal cause of the depression is in some cases a physical predisposition (endogenous), which is absent in other cases. This suggests that endogenous depression is caused by chemical disturbances in the brain and that a deficiency of certain neurotransmitters might be the decisive factor. Neurotransmitters relay information from cell to cell. The production of these messenger chemicals is light dependent and only commences fully in daylight. This is why the characteristic symptom of endogenous depression is a “morning low”. There is evidence of a hereditary disposition to this disorder. Therefore significant improvements are achieved by adequate therapies operating on the physical level. These include the use of psychiatric medications such as anti-depressants, which must be adjusted to the particular personal situation of the patient. Other successful methods include light therapy and sleep management. Treatment should not be confined to just medication, but most necessarily include lifestyle adjustment.

On the other hand, exogenous (or “reactive”) depressions have no physical cause, but rather have a specific origin to which the patient reacts, such as personal failure, the loss of a loved one or other apparent blows of fate. In such cases it is primarily the soul that is affected, which is why psychiatric drugs are of little value. Here it is a case of examining the background to find why a person is resigned to fate, is giving up on life’s struggle, no longer sees a future and lacks strength to live rather than merely exist. Treatment for this type of depression demands a different approach.

My clinical experience from treating patients with depression has shown that the best treatment approach to managing depression is a holistic approach that combines medication, psychotherapy, nutrition, physical training and lifestyle adjustment. It is also important not to forget the spiritual dimension since exogenous depression cannot be treated with medication alone. It is important to note that even symptoms of endogenous depression, which is initially treated on the physical level, require in every case the specific support of the spiritual in order to achieve lasting results.

In view of the very short time (20 minutes) allocated to this presentation, I have been asked to restrict my presentation to practical, everyday lifestyle tips and activities that can be of help in preventing or treating depression. To this end, I will concentrate on the

importance of nutrition, sleep and physical training in alleviating endogenous, physiological basis of depression

**1. Make sure you have a balanced nutrition, essential minerals and vitamins. Especially the following:**

**a) Folic Acid** (Folsyre på Norsk)

Folic acid, also called folate (Folsyre på norsk), is a B vitamin that is often deficient in people who are depressed. Certain drugs such as aspirin and birth control pills may lead to deficiency of folate in the body. Researchers at Harvard University have found that depressed people with low folate levels don't respond as well to antidepressants, and taking folic acid in supplement form can improve the effectiveness of antidepressants. Folate is found in green leafy vegetables, other vegetables, fruit, beans, and fortified grains. Besides food, folic acid is also available as a supplement or as part of a B-complex vitamin.

**b) Vitamin B6**

Vitamin B6 is needed to produce the mood-enhancing neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine. Although deficiency of vitamin B6 is rare, a borderline deficiency may occur in people taking oral contraceptives, hormone replacement therapy, and drugs for tuberculosis. Vitamin B-complex which can be bought in a pharmacy (apotek) without doctor's prescription contains both folic acid and vitamin B.

**C) Omega-3 fatty acids**

Make sure you take your Tran everyday or alternatively eat foods containing proper fatty acids from nuts and fish such as macrel or herring. Studies have linked depression with low dietary intake of omega-3 fatty acids. Studies also suggest that omega-3's together with antidepressants may be more effective than antidepressants alone.

Omega-3 fatty acids are a type of good fat needed for normal brain function. Our bodies can't make omega-3s on their own, so we must obtain them through our diet.

**d) Magnesium**

It is very important that you have enough Magnesium in your daily diet. Like vitamin B6, magnesium is needed for serotonin production. Stress depletes magnesium. Good sources of magnesium are legumes, nuts, whole grains and green vegetables.

**e) Tryptophan**

Tryptophan is a protein that converts into serotonin in the body. As mentioned earlier, both serotonin and dopamine are essential for maintaining good mood and fighting depression. Banana and Turkey are good sources of Tryptophan.

**2. Get enough Sleep**

Sleep is essential to rejuvenating the body and the mind. Proper sleep hygiene is therefore an important aspect of depression management, treatment and prevention. The recommended average night sleep for an adult is about 8 hours daily. Many depressed patients either oversleep or under sleep. Going to bed too late at night and waking up too late during the day may disrupt the normal circadian rhythm of the body and help

maintain the depressive condition. It is important to note that what is most important is getting enough quality REM sleep.

### **3. Limit alcohol intake**

Although more common among men than women, *alcohol and substance abuse* or dependence may occur at the same time as depression. Alcohol is a depressant and as such, it can help delay recovery from depression. It is therefore recommended that people suffering from depression should abstain from excessive intake of alcohol.

### **4 Engage in some physical training and social network**

The reasons for the escalation of depressive illness may be attributed to the predominance of passivity. Finding and engaging in physical training such as taking a walk in the wood, aerobic training, dancing etc. is also part of lifestyle approach to depression management. The important thing here is systematic training with variations in the type and the intensity of training. For example, it is better to train 3-5 times a week for 20 minutes a day than to train 2 times a week at 2 hours per day.

## **STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING A HEALTHY MIND**

What constitutes psychological health and well-being? What does it mean to live a fulfilling existence? Questions such as these transcend the traditional boundaries of psychology, yet these same questions expose fundamentally personal and spiritual expressions about our human quest for meaning and the importance that meaning, values and beliefs play in how we define ourselves as human beings and the extent to which we define ourselves as psychologically healthy and productive. With these large questions in mind, I would like to talk about strategies for achieving a healthy mind.

### **1. Finding and engaging in a purposeful, joyful activity**

A healthy mind is one who is constantly engaged in some joyful activity. Empty sleep and dullness are not living. Research on happiness has shown that it is a by-product of a purposeful activity, rather than a hedonistic living. Finding and engaging in a work that you love, that engages your talents and skills is a key to achieving a healthy mind. Research in psychology has shown that self-actualized individuals are involved in work they love.

### **2. Living out authentically.**

Psychologists talk about congruence and dissonance. Congruence in a simple everyday language means harmony while dissonance refers to chaos or conflict. A healthy mind is a harmonious mind, an authentic person in which there is harmony between his values and actions. If there is too much conflict between a person's values and actions, this will create tension and stress leading to *cognitive dissonance* i.e mental conflict and distress.

To live in concordance with ones inner convictions and higher spiritual values is very important for achieving a healthy mind.

### **3. Having a dynamic rather than a static approach to life**

Human existence is not static, it has movement and purpose. Motion is a necessary law of living and an imperative for achieving a healthy mind. We must always strive for higher, meaningful goals. Research in longevity and geriatric medicine has shown that old people who are actively engaged in activities are healthier than others who are inactive.

### **4. Making decisions and taking responsibility for your actions.**

Decisions, choice and responsibility are all fundamental aspects of psychological growth and development. Many people are frozen by fear: fear of failure, fear of ridicule, fear of making mistake, fear of being different, and fear of sticking out your head. There cannot be growth without venturing (Nothing venture nothing wins). There is no meaningful achievement without some failures and mistakes. The tragedy is not making mistakes, but not learning and growing from them. A healthy mind is not incapacitated by mistakes, but s/he uses the mistakes as a stepping stone to higher achievements.

Decisions, choice and responsibility are all fundamental aspects of psychological growth and development. A healthy mind is an alert mind, conscious of the law of cause-effect, of sowing and reaping, of action and reaction.

### **5. Courage: Taking Risks and overcoming fear of growth**

A universal aspect of human nature is the impulse to grow, to enhance and actualize oneself. Any restriction on this impulse to growth will impact negatively on the emotional and psychological well-being of the individual. We each are called to a particular task for which our nature fits us. To turn away from it, fear it, become half-hearted, or ambivalent about it are all neurotic reactions in the classic sense. These breed anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms.

Your thoughts, words and actions are as fruitful as the seeds a farmer sows on a fertile soil. We are all concerned about eating balanced diet containing proper amount of all the essential minerals and vitamins for the proper functioning of the body. But most people forget that to achieve a healthy mind, we must also strive to keep our thoughts pure and healthy. Negative destructive thoughts of hatred, envy, fear, anger, etc are detrimental to the mind while thoughts of love, joy, peace, harmony are uplifting. In fact there are now a lot of research going on both in physics, psychology and medicine on the power of thoughts as energy. (For example, David Hawkings wrote a doctorate – PhD disertatation in medicine at Harvard University about the power of thought – which he refers to as the levels of consciousness.)

Psychological growth, health and development are contingent upon a person`s participation in, engagement with, and response to the world. It requires the individual to think, feel, react and participate both subjectively and beyond their subjectivity by

transcending, reaching beyond creatively through faith, hope, possibility, decision and action. President Obama`s slogan: “Yes we can” is a good example.