

Mindfulness Practices for Healing Depression

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Healing from depression is a journey that involves using physical, psychological, and spiritual methods. The physical may involve medications and exercise, the psychological mindfulness and therapy, and the spiritual faith and meditation. This article offers some tools on healing the psychological and spiritual aspects depression.

In healing my own depression, and in helping others heal from depression as a therapist and spiritual teacher, I have found three particular areas that can help you address the psychological and spiritual components of depression. These three areas include Awareness, Choices, and True Nature (ACT). Awareness of your triggers sets the groundwork for disengaging from depression; making new choices furthers this process; and reorienting to true nature begins a new way of life.

AWARENESS

Awareness is the first step to unhooking from depression. You can't let go of something unless you have an awareness of it to begin with. Focused awareness is also mindfulness or knowing/paying attention in a non-judgmental way. Mindfulness can be applied to several aspects of depression.

Awareness of the depressed mind itself.

The first, and most essential practice, is to be aware of the depressed mind itself. Depression is like wearing dark glasses. During these times, mental noting of the depressed view is invaluable. Without mindfulness, you will get sucked into the depressed viewpoint, and begin to think it's who you are or the way the world is. Remind yourself frequently, "this is the depressed mind" or "this is the lens of depression," and put a moratorium on believing or acting upon any negative thoughts. Research shows that labeling thoughts can activate the brain's hippocampus and allow you to be more resilient under stress. Also, for the moments that you are labeling the depression you are not caught in it. The awareness that witnesses the depression is not part of it, and this reprieve can be the first foothold in disengaging from depression.

Awareness of thoughts that fuel depression.

It's also useful to bring mindfulness to specific thought patterns that fuel the depressed mind. A period of depression can begin with a thought as simple as "I made a mistake," which then turns into "I always make mistakes," which then turns into "I'm a failure," which then turns into "I might as well not be alive." People without depression can stop with the "I made a mistake" thought and say, "Okay no big deal, start over again, you're human." But for someone with depression, a simple thought like "I made a mistake," can lead down a rabbit hole of despair. One error is just one error. It is not a reason to question your whole existence. This is generalizing and universalizing.

For this reason, it's important to notice some patterns of thought which fuel depression such as, all-or-nothing thinking, generalizing, universalizing, black and white thinking, doom and gloom scenarios, creating a catastrophe, and obsessive doubt. When you are caught in depressed thoughts, ask yourself; "Am I taking one instance and generalizing it into a pattern for the future? Am I thinking in black-and-white or all-or-nothing terms? Am I using the words "all" or "never?" Am I catastrophizing? Am I creating a doom-and-gloom picture?" If the answer is "Yes," then use mindfulness and gently say, "Oh, this is creating a catastrophe," or "This is generalizing." For instance, when one young woman was applying for graduate schools she found herself thinking, "If I can't get into Harvard or a top notch school, then no one will ever grant me the credibility I deserve, and my life will be ruined." When she labeled this as "all or nothing thinking," it kept her from being seduced into a depressed mindstate.

Self-hatred is the main fuel for depression, so it's important to label "self hatred thoughts" when they arise. Even if you have a running commentary of self-hatred thoughts throughout the day, they don't have to be believed, and can be left alone. Try bringing a neutral, curious, or even bemused mindfulness to this endless commentary. In reality there is nothing true about self-hatred. The mind that criticizes you is the *same mind* as the one it is criticizing.

Perfectionism is also a fuel for depression. When you inevitably can't do things perfectly, then the opposite extreme takes over of hopelessness, shame, and not good enough. Try labeling the habit of "perfectionism" throughout the day. See if you can let go of this desire to be perfect (or it's opposite of being a hopeless failure), and *just be a garden-variety human being* with both mistakes and successes.

Leaving thoughts alone.

Mindfulness practice is not about trying to stop negative thinking. True mindfulness is about learning *to leave your thoughts alone*. Depression will decrease on its own if you don't cling to your thoughts. What if you couldn't believe any of your depressed thoughts? Healing happens when you stop either pushing away or indulging in your thoughts and you simply *let them be*. Sometimes when I am barraged by negative thoughts, especially ones that pick on me, I try and counter them with, "So what? So what if I didn't do things perfectly. It's not 9-1-1." Notice when you are velcroed to a thought, such as self-hatred or doom and gloom, and practice leaving it alone.

Knowing your depression triggers.

Another area where awareness is important is with your triggers for depression. Are there certain life situations where depression often occurs, such as when you feel tired, overwhelmed, or lonely? Knowing your depression triggers can help you work with them. For example, if you realize that evenings or being alone aggravates your depression, you can proactively schedule phone calls to friends at that time. In this regard, it's good to put a moratorium on any beliefs that occur in the middle of the night (especially those fears that wake you at 3am). My strategy is "hands off" of all depressed or fearful thoughts from midnight until 6am. If those same thoughts are still around in the middle of the next day, then I take a look at them then.

What need is the depression serving?

The final aspect of awareness of depression is to see what need your depression is meeting. We all have basic needs for safety, security, autonomy, connection, love, belonging, and self esteem. Is your depression meeting one of these needs? Or you might ask, “What is the benefit of my depression?” If you look below the depression, to what’s deeper, you might find the original reason the depression began. For instance, my depression started as a way to stay safe. It was my foxhole to retreat to away from my father’s violence and my mother’s illness. And paradoxically, below my self-hatred, was a voice of love and concern (fostered by the misguided belief that being hard on myself would help me). If you trace the origin of your depression back, you might find some kindness or protection at its core. Can you offer appreciation to this protection, and then be willing to meet this need with some other choices besides depression?

CHOICES

Making new choices is the second part of disengaging from depression. New choices are not positive affirmations. They are the willingness to move the focus off of depression and onto what else is true.

Choose what is really true.

One of the best choices to make for healing depression is to question negative thoughts. Depression is a form of civil war where the mind turns against itself. The mind unabashedly lies, deceives and exaggerates in this civil war; therefore, it’s important to have a tool to uncover its deception. When you have a negative thought, ask yourself, “Is this *really* true? Is it true 100% of the time?” If it isn’t *really* true, then why believe it? For example, is the thought “I’m a failure,” really true? Has it been true, every moment of your life? Were you a failure when you were sleeping? Were you a failure when you were drinking a glass of water? And, if “I’m a failure” is not really true, then why bother with this thought? Inquiry keeps your thinking *honest*. Remember negative thoughts have a black and white, all or never quality, and if you question them with loving awareness, they will fall apart.

Choose the present moment.

Negativity, worry, fear, and anxiety can be significantly reduced if you steadfastly focus on the present moment. Depression gets a lot of mileage from the past or the future. When you feel depressed, notice if you are dwelling in the past, or worried about the future. One wise friend said to me, “fear needs a future.” If you are lost in the future (or past) ask yourself, “Am I okay now?” I’ve never yet found a moment where the answer wasn’t “Yes.” If I have to, I ask myself this question, “Am I okay now?” repeatedly. Do this one moment at a time, or even one-half moment at a time, as needed.

Choose kindness.

Loving-kindness is a form of mindfulness where you chose to talk to yourself like a good friend would talk to you. Even though your first response in a situation might be your old standby of, "I'm such an idiot," or "Why did I do that, *again!*" you can notice this, and make your second response, "Well, that wasn't perfect, but it's okay," or "I'm doing the best I can." It's strengthening a friendly way of speaking to yourself with compassion. Even if you can only offset your drill sergeant voice with compassion once in a while, this will begin to condition a habit of kindness to yourself.

Loving-kindness can also be done as a formal practice. I do it daily on my commute to work. I turn off the radio and cell phone and do loving-kindness prayers for others and myself the whole trip. Some examples of the loving-kindness prayer for yourself: 1) "May I be happy, May I be peaceful, May I be safe, May I be free of suffering." and/or 2) "May I love myself completely, just as I am." A brain research scientist also told me that putting loving-kindness phrases to a melody makes them more effective, so I do this too.

Choose neutral and pleasant moments.

Because depression is often a fairly chronic condition, it can seem like there is nothing else but depression. The Buddha taught that in each moment there are three feeling states possible; pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. With depression, there is a tendency to be hyper-focused on the unpleasant. Making new choices is noticing that in a day there are also many moments which are neutral or pleasant. Neutral moments might be when you put on your shoes, or when you turn the key in your car. Pleasant moments might be when you feel the warmth of your shower, when you eat something tasty, or when you lie down at night. The depressed mind misses these times. See if you can notice a neutral or pleasant moment today.

If you have a meditation practice, it is important that you learn how not to get engulfed in depressed thoughts during your meditation. For this reason, it's important to find a neutral or safe place in your body, and focus on this periodically, or exclusively. During your meditation session, scan your body. Is there a place that feels neutral or safe? Use this as your neutral anchor. This might be your breath, or the bottoms of your feet, the palms of your hands, the hair on your head, or the center of your body. Pick one place, and during your sitting, if the feelings of depression begin to increase, switch to this neutral anchor as the object of your awareness. Stay with the anchor as long as you need to. If this doesn't work, it's okay to stop meditating. You don't want to continue meditating if you are conditioning your mind to be more depressed. This wouldn't be skillful means.

Choose gratitude and service

Daily gratitudes are also a way to work with the depressed mind because you can't feel both gratitude and depression in the same mind moment. Try writing down three gratitudes a day. For instance, just for today I noticed gratitude for: the mailman, dental floss, clean air to breathe, and a phone call from a friend. Your gratitude list can be as endless as there are things happening in a day. I even formed an email gratitude group

with a couple of friends and every few days we write our gratitudes to each other. It's very connecting to see what my friends come up with and reminds me of new things to be grateful for every day.

A small act of daily service is also a good antidote for depression. This service can be as simple as telling a friend what you appreciate about them, letting someone get in front of you in line, picking up a piece of trash, or watering a dying plant. Then, when depression arises in the day, you can reflect on this small act of service and it will bring some buoyancy to your mind.

TRUE NATURE

The last part of disengaging from depression is orienting to your true nature. True nature is also sometimes referred to as original nature, the unborn, the unconditioned, presence, awakens, higher self, or God-consciousness. Orienting to true nature can happen through meditation, prayer, silence and other spiritual practices. Being aware of true nature, on a daily basis through a spiritual practice, is a way to stay spiritually fit. When you are spiritually fit it becomes harder for depression to take hold.

Although practices that engage true nature aren't a substitute for the actual experience itself, a practice can help you to recognize, remember, and reorient to who you truly are. True nature is something that is already here and is uncovered. The idea is not to try to create a particular experience, but instead to remember *what has always been here in you, all along*.

Willingness to turn back towards

You might remember that there was a time in your life when you consciously decided to turn away from away from life. Something happened, a trauma, a hurt (perhaps one thing or a series of things) and you stopped trusting in life. Reorienting to true nature is a willingness to turn back towards who you were, and what you have always been, before you disconnected from life.

As someone with depression, unknowingly you may have developed a habit of orienting to and believing in the depression above everything else. Are you willing to have faith in something else? Are you willing to imagine that true nature can help you? Be willing to ask for help from your true nature or the dharma every day. This could be in the form of a mantra or a prayer for a few minutes at the beginning of the day or throughout the day. If you are open to discovering whether there is something greater than the depression, this willingness can show you what is true.

Meditations

Any basic meditation practice that allows you to sit quietly and listen can lead you to your true nature. Additionally, I have found the following practices can help access true nature:

Center of the wheel

The center of the wheel is an image that can be useful when there are a lot of thoughts or busyness. Picture a wheel that is turning quickly. The outside of the wheel (your thoughts and actions) might be spinning very fast, but what is happening at the very center of the wheel? The axis on which a wheel turns is completely still and stopped. This stillness is always here. Where is your “center of the wheel” in your body right now? Can you feel it? Oftentimes people notice it in their belly or solar plexus area. It’s a quiet feeling, at the center of your body. It is a stopped feeling. There is something in you that is stopped and still no matter what you are doing. Can you have a sense of this?

Inquiry into true nature

Inquiry is also a useful practice for uncovering true nature. With the questions below, you are not trying to find a specific answer with your mind. Instead, the questions are meant to create a sort of free fall into “I don’t know.” From there you can then listen and feel the answer from your body, neck-down. You can pick a question and use it on a daily or weekly basis, reflecting and feeling what is true at deeper levels.

- 1) **“What can I trust?”** What can you trust no matter what? If everything were to fall apart in the world and your life, what could you ultimately trust? Feel this answer in your body.
- 2) **What is it that doesn’t come and go?** Thoughts, feelings, experiences all come and go, arise and pass away. What is it that doesn’t come and go? From what do all feelings and thoughts arise out of and pass away into? Can you sense what this is?
- 3) **What is looking out of my eyes right now?** What is the looking itself, that is independent of your personal story? Everyone has this same thing looking out of his or her eyes right now. Feel what this is.
- 4) **Who am I, really?** What is deeper than who you think you are? Who are you that isn’t about your gender, your roles in life, your age, your emotions, or your views and opinions? Who are you without any of this? What is beyond all the stories of “you?”

Where is it now?

Once you have a sense of how true nature can feel and where to find it in your body, it can be helpful to check in with it everyday to strengthen your experience of it. Even if your experience is indistinct, it can still be helpful to practice noticing true nature. Sometimes I say to myself throughout the day “Where is it now?” Zen master Bankei said, “Unborn Buddha nature is always happening.” Look and see for yourself. True nature is always here, while you are driving, standing, talking, or moving about. Yes, depressed thoughts and bodily sensations might be here, but *what else* is happening? It doesn’t take 45 minutes of sitting daily to contact your true nature. You can feel it right here, right now.

As another way of strengthening a connection to true nature, I try to bookend my day (the very first thing in the morning and the last thing at night) by meditating with the feeling of the center of the wheel or “what doesn’t come or go.” I rest in this stillness for a few minutes in the morning and the evening. I find having this daily bookend is better than starting or ending the day with depression thoughts. Eventually this focus on true nature leaves less and less room for depression to arise.

If you don’t understand true nature yet, don’t worry. Try to use the practices of awareness, mindfulness and new choices. Pay attention to your physical, psychological and spiritual well-being. Eventually your sincere efforts will lead to a new relationship with depression, and a new way of life.