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*To all the people I've worked with over the years who have taught me so much about the courage it takes to stare down and transcend*

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# Foreword: Trading Illusions for Actions

Depression is not just a feeling. Depression is an action.

That simple insight will strike with a force as you read this book. It is an insight worth preparing for because as it dawns, it initially contains both good news and bad news. The bad news is that the human mind will often turn it into yet another source for blame: “If depression is an action, then I should not be doing it, but apparently I am, so it must be my fault.” No surprise there. Judging and blaming are what our minds often do, particularly when we are depressed. But the actions that lead to depression—the actions that in a deep sense are depression—are nothing to be blamed for. After all, the human mind is far, far too tricky for anyone to untangle from it without help. Depression is not the fault of the depressed.

The empowering news inside this same insight is even more powerful and more sustaining than the illusion of helplessness or the habits of self-blame. As you read this book you will see that there is a concrete, active path forward. You are not a victim of your life. You are not doomed to endless suffering.

As you understand the actions that have kept you entangled, you will begin to see that there is another way. The alternative is not beyond you. It is available, with help to see it, right here, right now.

In this remarkable book, the husband-and-wife team of Kirk Strosahl and Patricia Robinson lay down an innovative, creative, and effective pathway out of depression and into your

life. The book is like turning on a light inside darkened rooms of suffering. With the light comes greater understanding of what is in those rooms, where you are, and what has been in your way. It becomes easier to see how to navigate and how to come out into the warmth and freedom of a life without walls, directed toward your values.

From the first few pages of this book until the very last, the light of awareness that it casts is almost tangible. You can sense the gentleness, strength, and humanity of the people, two of my dearest friends, who have written this book. These authors are humble, centered, compassionate, and wise. They've been there. They are ready to walk you, step by step, through the actions that have created trouble and the actions needed to let go of depressed habits of mind. If you have patience with the process, self-compassion for the pain you are in, and a willingness to face the difficulties and fears of taking a fundamentally different pathway forward, this book can change your life.

I can say that without fear of contradiction, because the scientific evidence showing that the processes this book targets are central to depression has grown exponentially over the last decade. We now know a great deal about how cognitive entanglement works and how to help people become disentangled through mindfulness. We now know a lot about how avoidance of experience works, and how acceptance can dampen down the war within. And we know a lot about how openness to experience can help you get in touch with your values and begin to create a life with your moment-to-moment actions that resonates more with your deepest yearnings for meaning, wholeness, and connection with others.

You do not need to trust me or trust these authors for the

# Introduction

## A Mindful Approach to Depression

*Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt.*

—William Shakespeare

If you are battling depression right now, you are not alone. Depression is one of the most common emotional health issues in contemporary society. A conservative estimate is that 7 percent of the general public suffers from a clinical depression at any moment in time (Kessler et al. 2005). If we factor in depressions that are associated with other common problems such as posttraumatic stress, chronic anxiety, or drug or alcohol dependence, that figure can easily expand to 20 percent. If we further factor in acute depressions triggered by life stresses such as marital problems, parenting issues, money problems, unemployment, unsafe living conditions, and so forth, that figure could go much, much higher!

Depression is so common that it's hard to turn on the TV or browse the Internet without seeing some type of advertisement for a new drug, over-the-counter supplement, or other purported cure for depression. Moreover, news stories tend to sensationalize depression, for example, explaining the tragedy of a suicide by describing the victim's unsuccessful battle against depression. We also receive a grab bag of mixed messages about the causes of depression, ranging from it being heredity to a biological illness to a reaction to life stress or



setbacks to the result of distorted thinking or major shifts in daily behaviors.

We also hear emotional appeals about what life is like when depression is treated successfully—that the formerly depressed person is now in a state of bliss, that his or her relationships have been restored and new ones formed. We see public service and commercial ads wherein a person who used to sit dejectedly with head in hands now walks gleefully with children, spouse, or pets and seems to be absolutely carefree. The message being given is that in order to get your life going again, you first must gain control over your depression.

We believe this portrayal of depression is not only misleading, but it also points depressed people seeking treatment in a direction that is unlikely to be of much lasting help. Depression is a far more complex mental process than these stereotypes suggest; no two depressed people are alike in the life circumstances that surround them or in how depression affects their life. What is needed is a different way of thinking about depression, a way that puts you back in the driver's seat and in control of your own destiny.

## **A New Perspective on Depression**

There are many aspects of modern society that encourage us to live in a mindless kind of way. To keep up with the fast pace of living, our schedules are crammed with responsibilities and duties. We are taught that scheduling “me time” is a form of selfishness. Daily routines are so well practiced that we don't even think about what we're doing much of the time. We spend endless hours living in the past and the future rather than in the

# Part 1

## Preparing for Radical Change

*The unexamined life is not worth living.*

—Plato

The main principle to follow in moving through your depression into a life worth living is to understand that you can only start from where you are, not from where you would like to be. To solve a complicated problem like depression, you must develop a boots-on-the-ground understanding of how your life is working *right now*. This requires you to take an honest look at several factors that might be contributing to your depression. And it compels you to begin thinking about developing new skills that will work better for you.

In part 1 of this book, we'll introduce you to several new ways of thinking about depression from the following viewpoints:

Acceptance and commitment therapy

Mindfulness

Self-compassion

Positive psychology

Clinical neuroscience

# Chapter 1

## New Perspectives on Depression

*We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.*

—Albert Einstein

If you're looking at this self-help book, it's likely that you're struggling with serious issues in your life that you haven't been able to fix. You may be in a bad relationship, maybe even an abusive one. Maybe your job is at a dead end and you haven't mustered the courage to move on to something else because of the risks involved. You may simply be demoralized by the demands of life and the ongoing stress of it all. Perhaps you're trying to care for an aging parent while raising your children and pursuing a career. Perhaps you're having trouble with one or more of your children and can't find the right way to approach it. Or you might not be approaching it at all because you don't like conflict. You may be struggling with chronic health problems with no easy solution.

Perhaps you're fighting a secret or not-so-secret addiction to alcohol, drugs, sex, the Internet, or food—habits that help you escape from and numb personal pain in the short term but lead to more depression in the long run. It may be that you're so busy reliving your past that you've forgotten how to live in the present, or, worse, you're letting your past dictate the present. You may simply be living by the numbers, hoping that life will cut you a better deal if you follow all the rules. You might even



be experiencing a lot of success in your life at the surface level, earning a good salary and having a nice home and lots of “toys” but feel unhappy and out of sorts nevertheless.

At first glance, none of these scenarios seems way out of the ordinary. These types of personal challenges are the bread and butter of everyday living. People fall in and out of love, get divorced, change or lose jobs, and grapple with unwanted events like health problems and the death of loved ones. But people often cope with challenging life moments in ways that don't work that well. There are almost 24 million people dependent on alcohol and other drugs in the United States alone (Grant et al. 2004), roughly 8.6 percent of the entire population. In particular, there has been a virtual nationwide epidemic of narcotic addiction, due in part to the ease with which narcotics can be legally procured. Narcotic overdose deaths are now the leading cause of accidental death in 29 states, surpassing automobile accident fatalities for the number one slot. The current annual rate of onset of mental disorders in the United States is 27 percent (Kessler et al. 2005; SAMHSA 2013), meaning that every year, one in four Americans will experience a serious emotional health problem.

The overall pervasiveness of mental health and substance abuse problems translates into a substantial lifetime risk of depression: approximately 20 percent for women and 10 percent for men (Kessler et al. 2005). This means that, during their lifetimes, one in five women will experience depression, and one in ten men. Do these numbers suggest that something is amiss in our basic human training? Is depression the common cold of modern living? If so, what's the pathogen responsible for this epidemic of suffering?

The purpose of this chapter is to present some new

perspectives on depression that will help you see it in a different, more approachable way. We will examine depression in a way that is quite different from the traditional biomedical approach. First off, we will introduce you to a powerful, evidence-based treatment for depression called *acceptance and commitment therapy* (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson 2011). ACT works to promote the ability to:

Be in the present moment in life

Be accepting of and detached from unwanted, distressing experiences such as painful emotions, intrusive memories, or self-critical thoughts

Act in ways that reflect personal values

Closely tied to ACT, but now a separate field of research in its own right, is the general role of *mindfulness* in the treatment of depression. In the introduction to this book, we mention that mindfulness is not a single skill but rather a group of skills, all of which are included in various ways within the ACT model. Mindfulness training has also been employed with success in other, non-ACT treatments for depression. The bottom line: You *can* reverse your depression if you learn how to apply mindfulness skills in your daily life.

We will also briefly examine the burgeoning field of *affective neuroscience*. In studying the nervous system as a basis for our emotions and mood, this area of science has led to a particular interest in identifying the neural mechanisms of depression, as well as in how mindfulness practice affects those mechanisms.

Another encouraging development in the last couple of years is the emerging role of self-compassion in the treatment of depression. We will examine the concept of self-compassion in

more detail and show why learning to be self-compassionate is so central to moving through depression.

Next, we will look at depression from the perspective of *positive psychology*, a relatively new branch of psychology that studies human resilience and the ways that people create sustainable positive emotional experience in daily living. We now know that engaging in positive, emotionally rewarding behaviors on a daily basis creates a positive-emotion “savings account” that makes people more resilient when they run into life challenges or setbacks that, for some, might be a trigger for a descent into depression (Frederickson and Losada 2005).

Finally, we will examine the highly prevalent, somewhat simplified media account of depression as a genetically transmitted, biological illness that is best treated with antidepressant medications. Adhering to this viewpoint leads some people with depression to conclude that using medication is their only real hope of living a normal life. We will introduce you to an alternative way of thinking about depression: the *biopsychosocial model* (Schotte et al. 2006). This contemporary perspective does more justice to the complex biological, psychological, and social factors that contribute to depression.

After all, if you're going to focus your energy on getting on top of your depression, we want to help you zero in on the strategies that will give you the biggest bang for your buck. We think equipping you with a new, more complete point of view on what depression is—and what it isn't—will make moving through your depression seem eminently more doable. You can thus relax; take a slow, deep breath of fresh air; and attack the problem with a newfound sense of confidence and a clear sense of direction.

## Five Contemporary Perspectives on Depression

In order to understand depression in a new light, it is important to understand both contemporary theories about it and developments from different areas of psychological and brain research. When you combine these different perspectives, what emerges is a kind of user's manual for understanding depression and what to do about it. So let's take a look at depression from the following perspectives, which are the cornerstones of this book:

ACT

Mindfulness

Self-compassion

Positive psychology

Neuroscience

### The ACT Perspective

As we mentioned in the introduction, *acceptance and commitment therapy* (abbreviated and pronounced like the word “act”) has been shown to be an effective treatment for depression in both adults and adolescents (Bohlmeijer et al. 2011; Hayes, Boyd, and Sewell 2011; Blarrina et al. 2016; Zettle and Rains 1989). ACT holds that depression is but one example of how people suffer when they follow culturally instilled rules about the necessity of feeling good as a major sign of health and well-being. From early childhood, we are trained to believe that natural, important human emotions—feeling sad, angry, rejected, grief stricken, lonely, ashamed, or anxious—are threats to our health and well-being. Therefore, they must be controlled or eliminated via any means possible.