



Am I depressed?

Do you ask yourself this question after you've had a down day, felt lonesome, or had a good cry?

By Arlene Lutenneger

As we've aged, most of us have faced significant life changes, such as retirement; a move (either our own or someone close to us); the death of a loved one; or health challenges. Sometimes many of these happen at once, yet each change brings its own unique loss. As many of you know, I lost my husband just over a year ago. Since then I have struggled with periods of deep sadness that often appear out of nowhere. I've discovered that grief is sneaky: it will hijack me even when I'm having a pretty good day. Fortunately, these dark periods come in waves and are mixed in with times of joy, and frankly, relief.

When we retire, we lose our professional identity and the meaning and structure it gave our lives. When our children, close friends or family move away, we lose our role as parent or constant companion. Health issues may also render us less active – a big change for those of us who were independent all of our lives. And if the unspeakable happens – a spouse/partner dies, we become “widowed”, a new definition of who we are now. These changes often lead to a loss of confidence in ourselves both physically and emotionally as we make adjustments in our lives and worry and wait for the next “shoe to drop”.

Professionals use this working definition for clinical depression: a persistent low mood, loss of energy and interest in activities you once enjoyed. *Symptoms may also include feelings of emptiness, irritability, fatigue, changes in weight/appetite, difficulty concentrating, and physical aches and pains* **without a clear cause and lasting for more than two weeks.** Grief often mimics depression, but depression is more constant and pervasive and often not tied to a particular event.

After a deep loss, our task, I think, is to acknowledge the loss, and to find ways to talk about it, either with a trusted friend or professional. Journaling is another healing outlet as it helps order our thoughts and release strong emotions. Distraction can also work. For me, my spiritual community has helped a lot. For you, it might mean taking an art class, traveling, or making new friends. The hard but necessary part is to ask who we are now or want to be and how we can get there. In short, to adjust to this “new normal” by rediscovering or reinventing ourselves.

Generational beliefs complicate the grief process. Many of us who are Baby Boomers or part of the Greatest Generation would rather characterize grief symptoms as health concerns rather than expressing feelings directly

or to ask for help. So we go to the doctor complaining of various health ailments, hoping for a medical treatment to rid ourselves of these uncomfortable symptoms. This process of having our thoughts and feelings show up in our bodies is called somatization and is a normal expression of pent-up emotions. (At this point, I want to emphasize how important it is to seek medical care to rule out any underlying medical conditions.)

But what do we do if the doctor can't find a medical reason for our malaise? The expression that “time heals all wounds” is only partially helpful here. The journey from experiencing a loss to moving toward a new identity is difficult (think one step forward and two steps back as you enter new territory), but very rewarding. You may experience skills you didn't know you had, take up an interest that you left behind many years ago, and make new friends along the way. For me participating in all that the Village offers has helped me to feel more confident and to increase the days that I feel joy!