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Spirituality of Depression

Marc-Alain Descamps

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Depression is an increasingly widespread disease. For instance, over three million people are affected in France, and use of antidepressants is widespread. In Europe, it is estimated that some 20% of the population is or will be affected. In fact, depression is no longer considered as an individual disease but rather as a “disease of civilization.” After plague and leprosy, it was tuberculosis, then in the 19th century hysteria, and finally, in the 20th century, depression.

Yet this disease is still poorly understood and various categories need to be differentiated. Here I will refer to the subjects I have dealt with as a psychotherapist.

What Is Depression?

The word depression clearly involves various meanings and is therefore ambiguous. To start with, we have hidden depression and masked depression. There are so many persons who, plucking up courage, manage to function and face their obligations as they can, although at the cost of immense suffering. They actually have a depression and are not aware of it. The condition is not even admitted by their family and other relations, who at first refer to fatigue, then speak of laziness and ask them to make an effort and not to let go.

Depression is taboo, a disease of which one does not speak, of which to be ashamed. One may eventually ask a psychiatrist to prescribe antidepressants, then very soon stop taking them because of their undesirable secondary effects.

Three categories can be differentiated.

1. Reversible Depression

Among the depressions that are easier to deal with are the occupational forms, such as breakdown and burnout. Their effects are frequently not generalised and remain restricted to the occupational domain.

In breakdown, an active person suddenly loses all motivation and no longer trusts in what he or she does. And one can understand how depression has become a disease of civilisation as a result of the generalised need to push one's performance to the limit. Everyone has to work to the maximum at an impossible pace—from the worker seeing after the passing objects on the assembly line, up to the manager who is always pressed to give more results. Pressure and stress increase to the point where one collapses into a nervous breakdown.

The same is true of those who are devoted to good will, humanitarian activities, charities, or the like: the demands and the weariness are such that, in a matter of some three to four years, one is eventually exhausted, burnt out. And so it happens that, after recovery, one needs to get oriented toward something else.

2. Reactive Depression

In the case of a depression induced by some cause and at an initial stage, it is much easier to get over it with the help of a psychotherapist. But whatever the cause may be (divorce, abandonment, unemployment, death, departure of a child or a parent, aggression, fire, flood, and so forth), this may just prove the breaking element of a depression that had long been latent. Recovery may then not be as fast as one would have wished and may require a deeper analysis.

3. Depression of Identity

The more serious depressions lead to a complete giving up: nothing has any taste and all activity is stopped. Suffering and despair are at their maximum and the trouble may even involve self-identity.

The condition may be very precocious. For instance, anaclitic depression can appear in a newborn when sharply removed from her or his mother after a normal relationship, and resulting in a break of communication and sometimes in a refusal of life. Such a

depressive nucleus can subsist throughout life and constitute the “fundamental defect.”

How to Get Out of a Depression

We need to make a distinction between losing the will to act and losing the will to live. In many cases, I have found in my practice that what was needed was to start all over again, to start from the beginning of life. One needs to go back to the original nursing infant that was hurt. One can start by touching the body, which proves and facilitates the process of embodiment, with massages and stroking, particularly if that was missing in childhood. It then becomes possible again to walk, to swim, and run and breathe. One can then awaken taste through the pleasures of food and drinking. Odors and perfumes are also something archaic which reconnect us to the scents of the earth. Then follows the awakening of libido.

Beauty is extremely powerful, for it is the sign of the eternal. If one can take pleasure again in music, painting, or dancing, this is a way out of depression. To be able to recognise beauty restores the pleasure of life. Gazing at the sky, the trees, the rocks, and the birds allows one to take part in the awakening of life.

Changing the sense of time is essential, since depression is accompanied by a depreciation of time. Depressed people live in a time that is gloomy, monotonous, void, and terribly sullen. To live every minute as if it were the last allows one to grasp the luck of living, and understand that time implies not only the end, but also the gift of the instant to come.

The Benefits of Depression

In the end, I find it is also possible to speak of the benefits of depression, since not everything is negative. This great suffering, this total despair, can produce something good.

Such positive potential has been noted by some, including Stanislav Grof in his notion of the spiritual emergency (Grof & Grof, 1990). Something gets started which must not be opposed or stopped. A transformative process is at work and at the beginning requires a new start: this is the cleaning aspect of depression.

The storm or hurricane can then generate something good, because a place has been made for reconstruction. To get into a depression is to refuse a way of life that, suddenly or little by little, has become

unbearable and even not liveable. This creative process only needs to be prolonged and favoured in order for the depression to be overcome and the person get to something new.

But one needs not hurry, and instead can wait for time to complete its work, and a new way of seeing things to develop. Which things? The world and its destiny, to start with, but then especially oneself. Depression can give birth to a new being, and therefore it can be considered as the price to pay to be able to change.

Everyone wants to avoid depression or quickly get out of it, but what if depression were to be a chance for some?

References

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