



THINKING TRAPS THAT CAN LEAD TO DEPRESSION

Feeling helpless, hopeless and tending to be pessimistic often lead to the development of depression when negative events happen to predisposed people. What contributes to the development as well as the maintenance of depression is the way in which depressed people think. Aaron Beck, one of the founding fathers of cognitive therapy, found that depressed people are more likely to focus on the negative aspects of a situation, while ignoring the positives. This process of distorting and misinterpreting information is known as cognitive bias.

Some of the main forms of cognitive bias are overgeneralisations, catastrophising and emotional reasoning. A depressed person may make overgeneralisations where they make a sweeping conclusion based on a single incident. For example: "I've failed one test so therefore I'm going to fail all of my exams!" or "One person is upset with me about a comment I made. This means they will never want to speak to me again and I will end up alone without a single friend."

Another way in which depression is maintained is by having a set of beliefs (also called schema) that includes information and ideas about ourselves and the world around us. These beliefs tend to have a negative bias in depressed people, so incoming information and experiences will be negatively interpreted (biased toward negative interpretation). E.g. the waiter didn't respond to me trying to get his attention. It must be because I am unlikeable, a nothing, a horrible person, undeserving of respect.

These beliefs are developed during childhood from a combination of negative experiences, genetic vulnerability to depression, and perhaps modelling the negative way in which a depressed parent views the world. A person with a negative self-schema is likely to interpret information about themselves and the world in a negative way, which leads to cognitive biases, such as those described earlier.

Beck proposed that cognitive biases and negative self schemas maintain what he named the negative triad – a negative and irrational view of ourselves, our future and the world around us. For sufferers of depression, these thoughts occur automatically and are symptoms depressed people experience. These factors also distort whatever happens, maximising the negative and minimising any positives. The negative triad reinforces a pessimistic, hopeless, helpless view of the self ('nobody loves me'), the world ('the world is an unfair place') and the future ('I will always be a disappointment/failure/worthless'). One of the functions of cognitive therapy is to highlight the possibility that there may be other ways of looking at the self or a situation, also pointing out that nothing is permanent or fixed, so there is the possibility of change in the future. The aim is for a realistic view based in fact and evidence, not an artificially optimistic mindset that is extreme and biased in the opposite direction.

Contact the Healthy Company support line for further professional assistance or advice on depression.

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