

Severe depression a serious but treatable problem



Photo by Sean Poston

□ Counseling Center dealt with nearly 8,000 University students in some way during 1990-91 school year

By Claudette Peralta
Emerald Contributor

First-year student Chrissy Friedeman describes the dark experience of severe depression.

"It feels like I'm in a black hole," she says. "There isn't any light. I feel powerlessness."

"There is a sense of collapsing, misfiring and exploding. There is no way to do anything differently. It is hard to communicate, to share. No one cares and no one understands."

Experts have shown depression does share certain characteristics with a black hole. Like the black hole, depressed people go through some kind of collapse. They feel an emptiness and a vacuum. Just as no ray of light can escape a black hole, depressed people experience hopelessness and worthlessness.

Black holes can be detected only through their gravitational effects on surrounding matter. In the same way, people around those with depression don't easily understand or detect them unless they're affected by communication or personal-relationship problems.

Friedeman is just one example of depressed students on campus. The University Counseling Center helped 1,470 students in its individual and couples counseling service during the 1990-91 school year. Women comprised 66 percent of those using the service.

In addition, 411 students participated in the center's group counseling, and its outreach activities served another 5,000.

Of all the concerns and symptoms the students brought up, 59.5 percent related to general depression — the second highest problem next to relationships.

"There are a lot of depressed people on campus," said Dr. Wes Morrill, Counseling Services director. Morrill speculated that the economy and the effects of Measure 5 could contribute to additional stress, as University resources reductions, University department closures, and higher-education funding decreases could make college life even more difficult.

"It is a difficult time to be in college," he said, "and the quality of the kinds of social supports students have make a difference."

Morrill said social supports include family, friends, fraternities, sororities, churches, clubs and organizations.

Friedeman said a more-supportive University environment might also help her climb out of the black hole of depression.

"People are afraid of their own depression. They fear vulnerability especially in an intellectual institution," she said.

In one instance, she approached a professor after class and asked him, "How do I study for this class? How do I read this textbook that will be helpful to me?"

The professor looked down at her through his glasses, in a way that seemed condescending to her, and said, "You don't

have to read the book if you don't want to."

Friedeman said she felt humiliated, as though the professor did not care what she did.

On the other end, she broke down in a teaching assistant's office, and the GTF listened to her and was approachable, even though the problem had nothing to do with class work. Friedeman said this made her feel safe.

On the whole, Friedeman finds GTFs more personable than professors and said she would not hesitate to share anything personal with them.

Any event, no matter how trivial, can trigger depression, but psychologists recognize that underlying reasons for depression exist, such as social environment, perceptions and biochemical imbalances.

Friedeman said her depression stems from family problems. Her parents separated when she was young. A few months ago her father died, leaving her nothing. Some members of her family are practicing drug and alcohol addicts, making her wonder each time she goes home if they're in jail or still alive.

At 30, Friedeman is a recovering drug addict herself and is now battling an eating disorder.

Fall term was her first at the University. She was diagnosed with major depression while attending LCC.

Mike Bryant, a doctoral student in clinical psychology, said a person's perception of events causes depression, rather than the events themselves.

"Depressed people have different views of the world from non-depressed people," he said. "Depressives exaggerate events by focusing on the negative and by thinking unrealistically and unproductively."

Some symptoms depressives experience are intense guilt and self-blame, self-hatred, irritable moods, diminished pleasure in all activities, lowered ability to think or concentrate and recurrent thoughts of death, said Nancy Kemp of the University Counseling Center.

"To get a feeling of how down these people are," Kemp said, "almost everyday they have a depressed, down mood, with little interest in things, with insomnia, or sleeping more than usual and with agitation."

"If they're down every day, with no interest, with their sleeping different, eating different, fatigue and inability to think properly, if they have two weeks of this, without going to school, you can imagine how far behind they'd fall," she said.

Learning how to communicate with depressed people is one way of dealing with the delicate and volatile feelings they have, Kemp said. The common response from those around depressed people, she said, is to say, "Just quit thinking about it, start smiling, be happy, quit feeling sorry for yourself."

Kemp said such encouragements may work with people who are experiencing a temporary low mood, but not with people who have a depression disorder.

"With education, someone can recognize whoever is depressed and accompany them or invite them to do things," she said. "Education will also teach supporters to say, 'You're welcome even if you're feeling

Professionals offer advice on bad depression

By Claudia Peralta
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Detecting whether someone suffers from major depression or is just experiencing a low mood is the first step in helping someone cope with depression. Information from the Counseling Center lists some of the symptoms of depression as including:

- Diminished interest or pleasure in almost all activities.
- Significant weight loss or gain without dieting.
- Insomnia or hypersomnia.
- Fatigue and loss of energy.
- Feelings of worthlessness.
- Intense guilt.
- Reduced ability to concentrate.
- Recurrent thoughts of death.

Someone is severely depressed when he or she has an excess of these symptoms and when these symptoms interfere with job performance, social activities or relationships.

Unhappy events, such as the death of a loved one, normally cause depression. Oftentimes, however, there are underlying factors contributing to depression, such as personality, the person's past or family life, the social environment and chemical imbalances in the brain.

When trying to help a depressed friend, the American College Health Association advises speaking candidly with the person and letting him or her know you are concerned and willing to help.


The Counseling Center is also a good resource for anyone who wants help or has friends who need it. All counselors are either qualified psychologists, masters level qualified professional counselors, or doctoral interns working in a supervised capacity. Each counselor adopts a different approach to counseling depending on the problems of the students. Students can use the services free and all client information is confi-

bad," instead of, "You're welcome to come but you gotta be having fun."

Friedeman's black hole has not trapped her completely. She is dating and has a few friends who have supported her through bouts of depression by allowing her to talk and share her feelings with them.

Friedeman also gets support from Narcotics Anonymous. She spends most of her time with them whenever she goes home. Through counseling she says she has learned more about herself, how to cope with her feelings, how to eat right and sleep right.

"We all need help," Kemp said. "We need to be with other people. A lot of people who have gone to counseling and therapy have gone through some really tough periods in their lives and they know what it's like to have someone assist them through it."



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