

Depression Reconsidered: the Well-Spoken, Neurotic Conflicts, and Desire

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Depression has long been considered one of the most frequently occurring psychopathological diagnoses, and it is widely recognized as a clinical syndrome (encompassing certain characteristic symptoms) by clinicians, researchers, and the general public. (In fact, in the DSM-5 depression is not one disorder but rather a cluster of related disorders, the depressive disorders, which are all supposedly different syndromes based on differences such as meeting a specified minimal number of symptoms in a category and the duration and severity of the suffering (APA, 2013).) As one of the main types of so-called “mood disorders”, however, it may instead be seen as a diagnosis based on a reification of a flat or sad affect. From a psychoanalytic perspective, a depressed affect and complaints which correspond with it (e.g., difficulty sleeping or excessive self-recrimination) merely describe someone’s suffering and a cannot be said to have a “real” or material existence that somehow causes and explains its own existence (Vanheule, 2017). Neither is altered brain chemistry, such as a decrease in serotonin and norepinephrine, a cause, but instead is yet another form of description.

Diagnosis, for Lacan, is not based on descriptions of this or that maladaptive pattern of feeling, thinking and/or behaving, but instead is structural in nature. As such, depression is not a discrete diagnosis but rather a way of naming the surface features of suffering (Leader, 2008) that could be experienced by someone with any of Lacan’s three main diagnostic categories of neurosis, perversion, and psychosis. These structures are based on certain characteristic ways of situating oneself in relation to the lack in the Other (for further explication see, for example, Fink, 1997). This article will consider several ways of understanding the phenomenon of depression in neurotic individuals from a Lacanian perspective. First to be explored is Lacan’s claim in *Television* (1974/1990) that depression is the result of a moral fault. Second to be discussed is how depression often serves to cover over a conflict which has been repressed. Third, depression can be indicative of someone having given up on her or his desire. Clinical vignettes will assist in demonstrating these arguments.

Depression as a Moral Failing: As Seen on Television

Like any form of suffering available to lived experience, a depressed mood—whether sadness or “flatness”—can, especially in our society, be taken as the manifestation of a glitch in one’s neurological system. As such, depression is a meaningless annoyance which warrants pharmacological or psychological treatment that targets the surface symptoms and attempts to eradicate them as soon as possible. In Seminar XI (Lacan, 1973/1998), Lacan speaks of an initial status of the analysand in treatment characterized by a will not to know or a passion for ignorance. From this position, the analysand asks the analyst to fix the problem, to eradicate the suffering and return her or him to a former state of enjoyment, but without the patient having to do the work of exploring the unconscious. A New Yorker cartoon humorously depicts the everyday reality of a passion for ignorance: a wife and husband are sitting on opposite ends of a couch and the wife has presumably just asked her husband to tell her what he is thinking. He responds, “How should I know what I’m thinking? I’m not a mind reader” (Sipress, 2020). In

the cartoon scenario, the complexity of neither conscious nor unconscious mental life is given its due. The analysis can only be said to have properly begun when this passion for ignorance is at least partially overcome by a superseding desire to know about the workings of one's own unconscious. For instance, the analysand might begin to see dreams as meaningful or wonder why, despite being well-prepared for giving presentations at work, s/he always manages to forget some crucial piece of information.

In *Television*, Lacan said that depression is a “moral failing” or a “moral weakness, which is, ultimately, located only in relation to thought, that is, in the duty to be Well-spoken, to find one's way in dealing with the unconscious” (1974/1990, p. 22). As such, the ethical duty of the Well-spoken is to overcome the passion for ignorance and to engage in the talking cure. To do so requires not just to speak but to be well-spoken, that is, to explore manifestations of the unconscious and to radically put oneself and one's symptoms into question. It follows that in some cases, depression dissipates once the analysand is able to take up the ethical call to articulate her- or himself in relation to life issues and manifestations of the unconscious. In these instances, insofar as the analysand continues beyond the falling away of the depression—often for years—with her or his treatment, we can see clearly that depression is not the sum total of the problems from which the analysand suffers. The analysand at this point formulates more specific complaints about life and about her- or himself which drive the analytic work forward.

For example, a middle-aged man sought treatment for what he had self-diagnosed as ADHD and depression. He listed the symptoms he was experiencing that corresponded with the symptoms he had read about online, including depressed mood, difficulty making decisions and concentrating, and feeling excessively guilty. He had never been to see a therapist before, and imagined that he might learn some skills from me that would help him feel as happy as he felt was befitting of a man in his life situation. After all, he had a good job, a family, and a hobby, so what more could he ask for? Perhaps, he thought, I might refer him to a psychiatrist and he could receive medication. After just a handful of sessions, to his surprise, what he had experienced as his depression and ADHD all but disappeared. Instead, he realized that he was experiencing significant ambivalence in several key areas of his life. To mention just one, his elderly father was increasingly unwell, and yet he had been avoiding visiting his father and even speaking to him on the phone despite his best-laid plans to do so. He began to realize that he had used his depressed mood and accompanying bodily lethargy as an excuse not to visit his father, and that his self-recriminations for being a bad son were in part tied to hateful thoughts about his father—thoughts which he knew he would have to face if he were to be face to face with his father. Avoiding contact with his father was also an indirect way of expressing his hatred. In sum, the clearing up of this man's depression went hand in hand with his seeing meaning in his depression and recognizing an unconscious conflict that he would spend the next stage of treatment resolving. He had shifted from a passion not to know, from wanting to be patched up and sent back to his life as it was, to following the ethics of the Well-spoken.

Depression as Hiding a Neurotic Conflict

Emotions can be deceptive. In Freud's article “The Unconscious” (1915/1957), he said that when an idea is repressed and causes symptomatic effects, the affect associated with the

ideational representative either continues to exist in its current form—although often it is displaced—or it is transformed into another affect. In other words, the formation of a neurotic conflict can result in a depressed mood. The depressed mood is therefore not the correct area of focus for clinical attention; uncovering the conflict that it conceals is where attention should be turned.

As Carol Owens and I have argued in our recent book, *Psychoanalysing Ambivalence with Freud and Lacan: On and off the Couch* (Routledge, 2019), ambivalence, about loved ones, for instance, is often poorly tolerated in our culture. In such conflicts, our hateful thoughts about a loved one are repressed, and the affect associated with it—hatred—is frequently transformed into a depressed affect (although it can also transform into anxiety or another affect). Depression, with its frequent companion of superegoic self-recriminations or “low self-esteem”, can thus sometimes be seen as hatred for an other turned around on the self. Indeed, in *Civilization and its Discontents* (Freud, 1930/1961), Freud underlined that when aggressive thoughts are repressed, the superego responds by turning them against the individual in the form of guilt (p. 139).

A depressed obsessional neurotic patient with a characteristic complaint that it was “too late” (Lacan, 1958-1959/2019) for him to train for and obtain a successful job and to start a family was in a relationship with an older woman past childbearing age and had been underemployed during the early months of the analysis. After much self-doubt and procrastination, he finally applied for and was offered a job that more fully utilized his qualifications. He found, to his surprise, that he was capable of performing the tasks he was assigned. However, he quickly felt dependent on the praise of his boss in order to motivate himself to do his work, and for the most part procrastinated until the last minute by taking naps at work and otherwise doing nothing. Even when at home, he had trouble thinking of anything he wanted to do, so unless his girlfriend was around he tended to nap or aimlessly surf the internet. He had frequent thoughts of being worthless and felt undeserving of the love of his girlfriend and the positive regard of his boss. The analysand was perplexed about all of this and could not understand his persistent depression because ostensibly things were better than ever for him with his job and his relationship.

He described his mother as “borderline”, intrusive, and controlling, and for these reasons he had cut off contact with her. As a child, however, he had experienced great pleasure at being picked out as her favorite from amongst his siblings. For many years, he had not made major decisions on his own and had tried to meet her every demand. She insisted he attend an elite private school for both grade school and college, and he felt a great pressure to succeed academically. He later became aware of her controlling behaviors and resented her for it, often choosing the opposite of what she wanted from or for him. At the time of the analysis, he was initially convinced that he unambivalently hated his mother and wanted nothing to do with her, yet he chose not to block her number on his phone and would read the text messages she sent him. Much to his embarrassment, he spoke about sexual dreams that featured his mother. Thinking back on his interactions with her, he realized that his mother had sexualized their relationship, as, for example, she had been jealous of his girlfriends and she spoke openly about

her own body to him in a sexualized fashion. The analysand described one disturbing dream as follows:

I forced my mom onto her knees, grabbed her by her head and her hair. I put her cock in my mouth and forced her to get me off. It was all very satisfying to put her in her place.

The interpretation of the dream revealed the analysand's desire to force his mother onto her knees, a position of supplication, which was a reversal of what had been their power dynamic. He said he was unsure whether he wanted to make her beg for him to stop or to beg for more, and here he grappled with his sexual attraction to his mother and how his object choice (of an older girlfriend) in hindsight rendered this attraction apparent. Finally, his slip of the tongue—saying “I put her cock in my mouth” rather than “I put my cock in her mouth”—belied an ambivalence about which of them should have the phallus, who was the desiring subject, as well as which of them should be in the position of enjoyment and if he wanted to be the cause of her enjoyment or not.

Similarly, in terms of the Other's desire and jouissance, the analysand became jealous and resentful of his boss, who often took vacation or worked from home. In response, in an attempt to assert the freedom of his desire and his right to jouissance which he felt was threatened by that of his boss, the analysand frequently took sick days when he knew his boss was taking vacation. The analysand's sleeping on the job or not working while at work was a way to avoid being in the position of sexual object for his mother and to avoid fulfilling her desires for him to work hard and succeed. In addition, although he derived some enjoyment from secretly slacking off and rebelling against the Other's desire, at the same time his superego had its say about this, thus keeping him depressed, feeling worthless, and unable to fully enjoy himself. His depressed mood may have resulted from transformed hatred as well as transformed love, as thoughts related to both affects were repressed. The analysand's depressed affect and corresponding self-castigation was a kind of compromise formation, such that it was both a disguised return of the repressed and operating via the superego to punish him for his repressed desires. Although initially he understood his depression as resulting from his inadequacies and chemical imbalances that manifested in low energy and anhedonia, through the process of analysis he discovered that it actually functioned to hide this spider's web of conflicts surrounding his mother.

In contrast, the depression of an hysterical analysand centered around her desire for unfulfilled desires and her avoidance of pleasurable jouissance. She was middle-aged, married with two children, and had a demanding career. She was unhappy in her marriage, and despite the fact that for many years they had not had sex let alone shared romantic words, she said nothing to her husband about her complaints and desire for divorce, feeling very worried about hurting him and also worried that he would flare up in anger (even though he was a calm, generally approachable person). The analysand enjoyed romance novels and comedic films, but hid these preferences from others, rarely allowing herself to indulge in them, and instead trying to make herself read nonfiction books, watch documentary films, go to art galleries, and the like—all things she felt she should enjoy but did not enjoy. If she were over at a friend's house and was asked if she would like something to drink, she found herself automatically saying she

wanted nothing even though this was false. She felt compelled to work harder and longer hours than anyone else in her company's department, despite recognizing that it was unnecessary and she could succeed in her job without doing so. On one occasion, she received a text from her brother that featured her brother smiling and enjoying a relaxing vacation. The analysand said she felt a bit hurt that her brother was shoving his vacation in her face and that he did not ask how she was doing. She felt proud of herself for pushing her resentment aside and responding enthusiastically that she was glad her brother was enjoying his vacation. The analysand said she felt more depressed than usual in the days after this exchange, and found herself ruminating on a chain of instances in which her family did not take what she wanted into account. At the same time, she recognized that she was perfectly capable of taking a vacation and that she was responsible for her relative lack of enjoyment. Even when she did take vacations, she recognized that she would often try to hide it from her friends and family, lest they accuse her of enjoying herself too much. She had this concern even though she structured her vacations so that she was often on work calls while her children and husband had fun.

The analysand felt guilty for having felt resentful at her brother, and in general her depressed affect and self-deprecation served to cover over her anger and complaints about others. Her extreme fear of her husband's anger, for instance, was a projection of her own anger. Through the course of her analytic work, she began to realize how often she was angry at others, and that avoiding its direct expression was not sufficient to eradicate it; instead, it manifested in her depressed mood, self-hatred, and passive-aggressive actions toward the objects of her anger, such as not returning a phone call. Her efforts at resolving her underlying conflicts succeeded in eradicating her depression.

Depression as Giving Up on One's Desire

In Lacan's seventh seminar on ethics, he commented that the only thing the subject can be guilty of is having given up on its desire (1959-1960/1992, p. 319). In this vein we can understand, for instance, the aforementioned hysteric's guilt for not going on a vacation and not pursuing her desire with her marriage. The guilt that typically corresponds with subjective complaints of depression, then, may in many cases of neurosis indicate not following one's desire. Further, a depressed mood is often the affect associated with conflicts marked by giving up on one's desire.

In another case of hysteria, a woman became increasingly depressed living in a city she disliked, working as an executive in a company she helped to found, and being married to a man that made her dread coming home from the work she disliked. In terms of her marriage, she complained that her husband was controlling and flew into interminable rages at the slightest of provocations. With each of these situations, she felt it was due to a moral failure on her part that she was having difficulty enjoying or at least appreciating her situation. Why, she wondered, could she not find something to love about her new city? Why could she not be proud of her business accomplishments and enjoy her new executive role instead of wishing she were in her former role in which she dealt more directly with clients? Why was she unable to communicate her desires to her husband in a way that could be more effective? Likewise, the analysand severely chastised herself for having gained weight. She imagined that if only she could eat

more healthily and get back into a rhythm of regular exercise, she would feel more confident and as a result obtain the ability to take on the unsatisfying aspects of her life and turn them into positives. In a move typical of individuals in neoliberal society today, she reasoned that her unhappiness in work and in love were due to her own insufficiencies. Correspondingly, she criminalized her own desire and tried to conform to the Other's desire, attempting to obey various superegoic commands. At the inception of this woman's analysis, then, she demonstrated a passion for ignorance about her unconscious as well as having relinquished her desire, and her depression did not abate until she began to follow her desire.

To consider a case of an obsessional neurotic, a white man sought treatment after his long-term girlfriend broke off their relationship upon discovering his infidelity. He had a longstanding pattern of cheating on his partners, and he wanted to find a way to end the cycle. He suffered from terrible guilt and self-loathing and had been depressed for many months. At first, he felt he needed to learn better relapse prevention skills to control his behavior, but he soon became curious in his own unconscious and wondered about the meanings and function of his symptom of infidelity.

He had a history of getting and trying to get into relationships with women with whom he had been infatuated and who fit the perfect picture of an attractive white woman who might be featured, he said, in a Playboy magazine. Sometimes, he would chase after such a woman for years without his hopes coming to fruition. When he did enter into a relationship with a woman he pursued, he would inexplicably have trouble maintaining an erection during sexual acts but had no such troubles when masturbating with the aid of pornography.

During the last months of his relationship with his most recent ex, he had cheated on her with a black woman whom he found very attractive and with whom he had no troubles performing sexually. After the girlfriend ended their relationship, he did not feel much sadness or regret because he did not believe that he had truly wanted to be in that relationship. This fact was of interest since he had initially said he fell into a depression as a result of his breakup. Instead, his depression materialized months later when he tried to start a relationship with the woman with whom he had been having an affair. The two of them got along very well and he admired her as a person in addition to having chemistry with her in the bedroom. He had organized a weekend-getaway for the two of them, with the explicit intention of starting their committed relationship. However, when on the trip he found himself tortured by guilt and anxiety, and the two of them parted permanently. From that moment on, he felt deeply depressed and presumed his guilt was about having ruined his relationship with his ex-, whom he then tried fruitlessly to convince to take him back. He decided there was something wrong with him that had damaged his relationship with the perfect woman that he should have married.

Through the process of analysis, the analysand came to realize that his "type" had always been black women, and that if he was honest with himself, he was not attracted to white women. Having grown up in a predominantly white, racist environment with racist parents, his desire for black women was formed in relation to the Other's desire. He had always felt deeply ashamed about his attraction to black women and tried his best to hide it not only from others but also from himself by pretending that his type was a white Playboy model look-alike. His attraction

for black women was a way to rebel against, express aggression towards, and question the values of his parents, but he had not been able to openly avow these thoughts and desires. Later on in the analytic work, he was disturbed by his own racism inherent in this conflict.

The analysand realized that he had contrived their first date as a weekend-getaway so that they would not be seen—as an interracial couple—by anyone in his social circle. Notably, the moment when he felt the object of his desire was attainable instead of impossible, that he could have a fulfilling relationship with her, was the moment he fled in anxiety, once again rendering their relationship impossible. His guilt, then, was not truly guilt for what he had done to his ex-, nor was his depression due to having ruined his relationship with his ex-. Instead, his depression and guilt was due to not following through with his desire and entering into a relationship with the other, black woman.

Conclusion

As these clinical examples should make clear, the three underlying causes discussed for the surface symptoms of depressed mood and self-castigation are by no means mutually exclusive. Far from it, they often co-occur. In the case of the most recently discussed male analysand, his will-not-to-know anything about his unconscious had kept him in a cycle of repetition instead of remembering, and his avoidance of following the path of his desire was clearly related to repressed desires, to conflicts with his parents and with the Other. The resolution of his depression did not arrive until he made progress in all three realms.

As a final note, contemporary culture lends itself to the abdication of desire—and thus to the development of depression—via the capitalist discourse and the push for *jouissance* over desire. In the capitalist discourse, subjective lack is denied, and the subject is lured to purchase yet another product, another S1, to supposedly fully remedy its discontents. For instance, when a parent's child moves out of the house to attend college, rather than mourning the loss, the parent purchases a new car. When mourning is ignored and covered over by reaching for an S1—be it a new car, a pint of ice cream, a new wardrobe or anti-depressant pills (without also engaging in talk therapy)—it renders the subject susceptible to depression. Under the capitalist discourse, to attempt to solve the discontents of everyday life the subject might seek job promotions, more money, more luxurious vacations; each one ultimately fails to make the subject feel whole and perpetuates a tendency for depression insofar as *jouissance* is pursued at the expense of desire. Related is the idea that nothing is so successful in preventing pleasurable enjoyment and ensuring painful *jouissance* as the superegoic command of our day of “Enjoy yourself!” Contemporary depression, then, is often related to the denial of loss and of lack and the consequent abdication of the path of desire that is produced and reproduced in the discourse of the capitalist.

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