

TMS TRENDS

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The Difference Between Sadness & Depression

Click on almost any standard health site, such as Web-MD, and look up “depression” and it will report that depression is different than normal sadness. The site will normally proceed to proclaim that, unlike normal sadness, depression is a “treatable medical condition”. Unfortunately, differentiating depression from sadness by describing the former as “a treatable medical condition” does not really explain what depression is; it only tells you that you need to see a doctor. So what is the difference between sadness and depression? Sadness is an emotional reaction to loss. It is your motivational-emotional system’s way of signaling that something you valued or something you hoped would come true was lost. Sadness is the way we digest the pain of our loss. Guilt is the signal that you failed to do something you ought to have done and, in failing to do so, someone got hurt. You can see why I felt both sad and guilty in the above example. Depression, in contrast to sadness, is a state of mental behavioral shutdown. It occurs when the whole system of psychological investment is “dead ended”, meaning the system cannot track or identify any positive or productive pathways of investment (or ways of being). We can look at the key symptoms of depression and see that they are part of a syndrome of behavioral shutdown. The most prominent symptom is a general increase in negative emotion, especially feelings of futility, despair, powerlessness, and hopelessness. Also jacked up are feelings of fear and anxiety (future threat), shame, guilt and vulnerability, and frustration, bitterness and irritability.

The second most prominent symptom of depression—indeed the most important diagnostic symptom—is “anhedonia”, which is the technical term of loss of pleasure and interest. In other words, whereas the negative affect system is jacked up, the positive affect system is toned down or muted. Desire, interest, excitement, and joy, are all lessened or “deadened”. So why, according to the shutdown model, are your negative emotion systems jacked up and your positive emotion systems muted? Because when you are depressed a fundamental shift has happened in your motivational-emotional investment system. Basically, a subconscious calculation has taken place that says what you are doing is not working, that you have tried the best you can and there are no good solutions, and so your system is shutting down the positive investment system and gets defensive by activating the negative/avoidance system to try to avoid further failed investments. Virtually all the other symptoms of depression, including fatigue/lack of energy, difficulty with attention and concentration, disruptions in sleeping and eating, thoughts of death or escape, are consequences that stem from the fundamental motivational-emotional shutdown. So instead of describing depression as “not normal sadness but a treatable medical condition”, we should instead be clear that depression is a state of mental/behavioral shutdown.

If you are suffering from treatment resistant depression, please contact us or visit our website at www.psychfirst.com for more information about the possible benefits of TMS.