



Clear Thinking Issue 112

Learn how worry drives depression and what to do about it

Online course 'Lift Depression Fast' with Mark Tyrrell starts March 15th.

[More on our online depression course...](#)

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How to stop your client's vicious circle of worry

How to help your client separate the problem from the worry about the problem – by Mark Tyrrell

Someone with an emotional problem often actually has two problems: the problem itself, and their worry about *having* that problem. The fact is, emotional disturbances are entirely... normal.

A client recently told me how she felt she must be some kind of 'freak' because she felt so self conscious all the time. I gently reminded her that *some* self consciousness is actually essential to human interaction, because it means we have the capacity to enter the minds of other people and imagine how they might feel and think.

"Self consciousness", I suggested, "is the marker that shows we can exercise human understanding of others. It only becomes a problem when it starts to happen more than needed." I went on to admit that I occasionally feel a bit self conscious myself.

For this client the idea that self consciousness might be:

- something that most people feel from time to time
- not necessarily always a bad thing

was extremely comforting.

We want clients to feel normal because they *are* normal. Anything that a human being *does* experience is, by definition, part of what a human being *can* experience – and therefore ‘normal’. Sometimes a large part of your therapy with your client consists of helping them to overcome the ‘feeling like a freak’ thing which blights so many lives.

So how can we stop our clients from going round the vicious circle of worry and ‘normalize’ their problems?

1 Remember *normalizing is not minimizing*

No one likes to feel that something which is seriously troubling them has been brushed aside as irrelevant or dismissed as just run of the mill. Helping a client feel normal about feeling as they do isn’t about downplaying the intensity of their worries with an “Oh don’t worry! Everyone feels like that!”. This will only make them feel that you don’t really understand.

We need to let the client know that we not only *know* but also *understand* how bad it seems to them. Until we have achieved this, any mollifying comment or interpretation we offer will just seem patronising. Spend time listening and sympathizing *before* you attempt to frame the problem as non-freakish.

2 Put the problem in *context*

If we can identify the problem as part of a familiar pattern rather than some shameful one-off weirdness, then our client gets a chance to see that they are not freakish and that their problem doesn’t mean they are crazy – just human.

For example, one woman told me she thought she was crazy for suffering emetophobia (fear of vomiting). I spent some of the session talking *about* emetophobia in general – how other people experience it, how surprisingly common it is, how it normally develops and so on. I discussed other cases I’d seen of it. This allowed me to indirectly demonstrate that fear of vomiting is a part of the *general* human condition rather than a one-off freak aberration unique to her.

3 Identify the *function* of the problem

Every human psychological problem can be viewed as functional and adaptive in a particular context or to some degree. What does this mean?

Consider this list:

- checking things once, twice, and even thrice is pretty useful when it really matters – such as that child’s car safety belt
- compulsively gathering food for winter is an example of obsessive behaviour that’s vital for survival
- worrying is useful *sometimes* if it makes us more careful (we *had* to learn to worry that there might be tigers outside the cave!)
- we *need* to be addicted to learning and helping ourselves and others if we are to make progress in life
- we *need* to use the imagination as an inventive tool in context – imagination only becomes a problem when it’s uncontrolled (as in psychosis) or misused (as with jealousy or paranoia).

We can view psychological problems as ‘attempted solutions’ that can, ironically, cause problems. This neatly contextualizes even the ‘weirdest’ of problems.

So

- obsessive washing could be an ineffective attempt to help a person feel secure and safe
- terrible jealousy could be an ineffective way of trying to feel loved or secure in your relationship
- depression is an attempt at shutting down energy for a while until circumstances improve
- panic attacks are a way of erring on the side of caution by responding as if lots of things are much more threatening than they really are.

By discussing problems in context and looking at them as an attempt to address an important need, we can help normalize otherwise baffling experiences.

I might, for example, say to a man experiencing impotence that erections are *supposed* to disappear during times of stress. This is because stress is a danger signal, and when we are in danger our energies get diverted away from all non-essential activities – such as sex.

For every single individual who feels uniquely weird, mad, nuts or crazy there are thousands – perhaps millions! – of others feeling and thinking that they too are the ‘only one’. But they never are.

How to lift depression quickly

Depression is particularly effective at making people think they are freaks. A depressed person will often say to their therapist “I have nothing to be depressed about! I must be mad to feel like this!”

Even a person who self-evidently *does* have something to be depressed about, such as divorce or bereavement or job loss, will all too often believe that they are over-reacting, and that “Nobody else would respond like this!”

This is why we have made sure our cutting edge [how to lift depression quickly online course](#) includes intensive training on separating the problem from the worry about the problem as well as learning how identify more effective ways to address the issues that problem behaviours have tried – and failed – to tackle.

The next [how to lift depression quickly online course](#) starts on Tuesday 15 March and we are holding the 25% Early Bird discount open until 22 February. Places are limited, so book early!

[Read all about the how to lift depression quickly online course here.](#)

See you in a fortnight.

Mark Tyrrell

Co-Founder

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