

THE DARK ROOM — Depression in the Photography World

Depression is an all too common illness in the creative industries, and photography is no different. Our resident psychologist, JENIKA MCDAVITT, offers her advice on how to cope

"I worry others will think it is an excuse, that I'm just too lazy to 'pull myself up,' or that I am seeking attention," said one photographer. "I am known as an exceptionally strong woman and admired by others in my circle," said another. "It's hard to show 'weakness.'"

When I sent a survey to my community of blog readers asking those with depression to share their experiences, responses poured in from around the world faster than I could read them. The number of replies should have been no surprise. Estimates vary, but at least one in 10 adults experience depression, and the World Health Organization anticipates that by 2020, depression will be the second-leading cause of disability (right behind heart disease). Yet the silence and stigma surrounding this illness sometimes makes it seem less prevalent than it is. Which, sadly, makes it even more challenging for people to talk about.

This silence, particularly within the photography community, is troubling. The nature of photography can make it a particularly difficult environment for someone experiencing depression. Understanding what depression is, how we can help those who have it and what we can do when we experience it, are keys to making our industry a healthier and more productive place.

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

People often use the word 'depressed' to refer to feelings that are different from clinical depression. We all experience emotional lows – things like frustration in business or a bad break-up. We might say that we're 'depressed' because we feel down and blue for a few hours or days afterward. But despite these difficulties, we usually know that it won't last. We might help ourselves feel better by 'looking on the bright side,' expressing gratitude and doing things we enjoy.

However, clinical depression refers to an entirely different condition. As one photographer wrote, "Too many people equate depression to having a couple of bad days." That's not to diminish the difficulties of everyday life,

but clinical depression cannot be thought of in terms of emotions experienced alongside regular life events. When someone is clinically depressed, they may feel down most of the day, nearly every day, for two weeks or more. One of the prominent features of depression is not merely 'feeling sad,' but actually being unable to experience pleasure. This condition, known as 'anhedonia,' makes it difficult or impossible for someone to enjoy activities they would normally love, like spending time with family or even just picking up their camera.

Thus, while typical sadness might be made better by hanging out with friends or going to a movie, people experiencing depression may find no relief in doing these things, because there is no pleasure in doing them. Rather, they may only feel fatigue, or guilt because they think they 'should' be enjoying themselves.

One of the hardest things to grasp about depression is the idea that someone can feel depressed even when there is 'nothing to be depressed about.' Depression isn't always 'about' something. While depression can be triggered by a negative event, it can also come on for no specific reason at all. And as one photographer put it, "Having even the closest of friends press for explanations on exactly why I feel so depressed right now (like there needs to be a proportional event to justify the feelings experienced) is very frustrating."

Even when depression comes in response to a negative event, research indicates that it is still biologically and psychologically different from 'regular' sadness. Overall, it is an illness rather than an emotion, and it does not always respond to the same interventions that help us with the normal ups and downs of life.


DEPRESSION'S IMPACT ON A PHOTOGRAPHY BUSINESS

Photography is never an easy path, but it can present particular challenges to someone experiencing depression – even aside from the usual emotional dangers like feeling overworked, underpaid and comparing oneself to others.

On a fundamental level, running a photography business requires us to endure long, solitary stretches in front of a computer screen, punctuated by intense periods of social activity where performance expectations are high. People experiencing depression can sink further when spending so much time alone, and find it even harder to 'put on a happy face' to interact with clients and market themselves.

The business side also requires the timely coordination of hundreds of small, tedious details (filing taxes, book keeping, answering emails, delivering products), which can feel crushing even when we're at our best. Because depression attacks concentration, sleep, energy and motivation, these tasks become even more cumbersome. "I'm overwhelmed by my to-do lists," wrote one photographer, "I have trouble making decisions, I have no attention span, I'm exhausted... I'm ashamed at the failure I'm bringing on myself, and I'm constantly blaming myself for this failure."

It's easy for anyone to fall behind in business, but depression can create cycles of feeling overwhelmed, procrastinating and feeling guilty about the things that 'fell through the cracks' – which only leads to further depression.

In the panel to the right, I have given some advice on how to cope if you are suffering from depression, and what we can all do to make sure our working environment is as comfortable as it can be for anyone else who might be depressed. If we, as an industry, take up that challenge and offer kindness to our colleagues, it will not only make the photography world a safer place to talk about depression, but also make it a richer community for all of us to take part in. 



5 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO SUPPORT OTHERS

Even if you don't have depression, there are things you can do to support your friends, and also make our industry a safe place for peers to talk about depression:

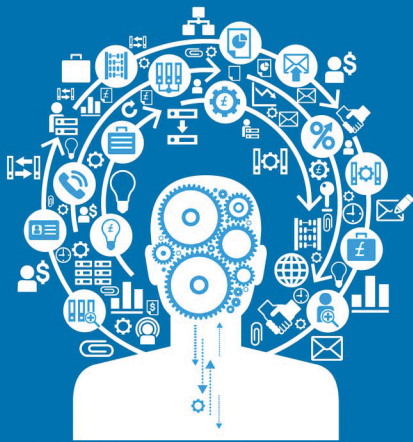
1) BE A GOOD CITIZEN ONLINE - Whether you're hanging out on a forum, engaging in debate or offering critique, never forget that there are real people on the other side of that screen. Don't type what you wouldn't say to someone in person. Offer constructive suggestions when requested, and be quick to offer praise when it's deserved.

2) EDUCATE YOURSELF AND REFRAIN FROM JUDGING - People with depression aren't lazy or weak, they're dealing with an immensely challenging illness. As one online commenter quipped, "depression isn't fun enough to choose laziness to get it." If people could make it go away by 'cheering up', they would. Be patient, and don't offer advice unless it's requested.

3) LET THEM CONTROL WHETHER OR NOT THEY WANT TO TALK - "Asking how I'm doing can be a bit hard because I may not be doing well – and if I'm not then I may not really feel like discussing it." It's good to show concern and compassion, but constantly asking how someone is doing may make them feel even more hopeless or guilty that they're not feeling better.

4) EXTEND FREQUENT INVITATIONS - Reaching out and inviting people to do regular things is often the best thing you can do. Keep in mind that a rejected invitation doesn't mean that they don't want to hang out, or that the invitation wasn't valuable to them. Don't pester, but don't hesitate to invite them to go out for lunch or just a chat, and drop them an email to let them know you're thinking of them. Regular contact can mean more than you know.

5) LISTEN - "The best thing people can do for me is to acknowledge that it sucks to be depressed." When someone wants to talk, listen. Don't try to 'fix' anything, that's not something you can do. One reader perhaps summed it up best: "Depression is a very personal battle. Understanding, patience and a willingness to just be there are all I need."



PSYCHOLOGY FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS

PART 3

5 TIPS TO DEALING WITH DEPRESSION

If you are experiencing depression, you are not alone. And although everyone is different, fellow photographers living with depression have offered a few suggestions to help cope while running a business:

1) Seek treatment – Depression isn't your 'fault,' and it is treatable. If researching available options feels overwhelming, ask someone close to you for assistance. There are online resources like The Black Dog Institute and Depression Alliance that can provide a place to start. It may take time to find the right course of action, but seeking professional help is as worthwhile for depression as it would be for any other illness.

2) Cut overwhelm by outsourcing business tasks – Running a business doesn't mean you have to perform every task. Survey what needs to be done and delegate out responsibility – it may be far less complicated or expensive than you think. Dozens of photographers mentioned that editing in particular brought on feelings of isolation and inadequacy. There are online labs you can send your files to. You might hire an accountant to handle your taxes. Or show a virtual assistant how you respond to client inquiries, and let them handle your inbox. Find ways to free up your time so you can focus on what matters most, and damp down the cycle of procrastination and guilt.

3) Exercise – Research shows that stepping away from your desk and exercising helps lessen symptoms of depression. Start small if necessary. "Even if I can't bear the thought of leaving the house, I will force myself to go for a tiny walk down the street and back," said one photographer. Physical activity and being in the outdoors also help break up long tasks and reduce the sense of isolation.

4) Seek inspiring companionship – Some photographers with depression found that although they didn't look forward to social contact, they were glad when they went out. Local or online photography groups can provide reasons to get together. A few people even mentioned that the structure and social interaction of a part-time job helped. Far from 'giving up on photography', this strategic social time helped them feel better equipped to work on their art.

5) Be gentle with yourself – As one photographer wrote, "self-kindness has been as life-changing as the right medication." Be mindful of what you're saying to yourself, and challenge or reframe negative thoughts. Another reader found that "working really hard to rewrite the tapes that play over and over in my head" helps. Honour the things that help you feel better, practice self-care, and find trusted allies who can both offer support and help hold you accountable to manageable goals.



Jenika McDavitt runs *Psychology for Photographers*, a blog that helps photographers run meaningful and profitable businesses through a savvy understanding of people. She holds a master's degree in psychology, loves shooting portraits and spends far too much time in bookstores. Wave hello on Facebook! www.psychologyforphotographers.com www.facebook.com/PsychologyforPhotographers