

# THE PAIN OF Existence

*It is said to be the same kind of depression that plagued the titular character in Shakespeare's Hamlet, but what exactly is existential depression?*

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**E**xistential depression is part of the human condition to ponder the big questions in life. Does God really exist? Why do good people suffer? Is there any meaning to this life? The lack of concrete answers to these questions can be both frustrating and distressing, resulting in a type of fear that can only be described as existential dread. Most people at some point in their lives will experience existential dread, where after deep introspection, a lack of certainty about the mysteries of life may overwhelm them. This fear usually passes shortly though, and most people are able to carry on with their lives, resolved to the fact that they may never discover the answers to such colossal questions during their lifetime.

But what happens when the repeated cycling of existential matters starts to have a major impact on somebody's wellbeing?

An inability to stop ruminating over the big questions in life can result in a never-ending downwards spiral of anxiety, apathy and despair, where that person may begin to wonder what the point in even living is. This can lead to the development of depressive symptoms or what may be referred to as the onset of existential depression.

Like other depressive disorders, such as clinical depression and seasonal affective disorder (SAD), the symptoms of existential depression are typical of other depressive episodes: chronic low mood, a loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, changes in eating and sleeping patterns, low motivation and energy levels, and, sometimes, suicidal thoughts. With existential depression though, there may be additional indicators, including an obsession with death, a loss of one's self-image, goals and values, a fixation on tragic events, suffering and the

state of the world, and a general sense of futility and helplessness. This may also be accompanied by 'existential anxiety', where the same preoccupation with existential matters can result in agitation, a sense of impending doom and panic attacks.

Although much has been written about this type of depression, it is not formally recognised by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), the handbook that doctors and mental health professionals use to make diagnoses. This is one of the reasons why existential depression can be so difficult to treat - unlike other types of depression that can be caused by biological or situational factors, existential depression is predominantly a crisis of the soul that doesn't respond as well to a standard course of treatment such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or antidepressants.





Existential depression can manifest at any time, but it is often linked to the occurrence of a major life event, such as the death of a loved one, a job loss, a divorce or the diagnosis of a serious illness. It may also be caused by transitioning to a new life stage, such as moving away from home or retirement. Anything that forces us to face our own mortality or brings into question the uncertainty of our existence, like a crisis in faith, can be a potential trigger.

Anyone can experience existential depression, but it tends to be more prevalent in certain groups of people than others. Researchers have suggested that those with high IQs or individuals who fall under the gifted and talented bracket, such as artists, scientists and intellectuals, are more likely to experience existential depression without a specific event causing it. This could be because it takes a great deal of substantial thought, reflection and curiosity to contemplate and scrutinise such lofty matters. Some notable figures that have reportedly suffered an existential depressive episode at some point during their lives include Abraham Lincoln, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Furthermore, those with highly sensitive temperaments may also be vulnerable to suffering from the throes of existential depression. This occurs when their idealistic view of the world doesn't match up to the harsh reality they see around them of suffering and injustice and they realise that there is very little they can do, if anything, to prevent such cruelty.

The term 'existential depression' has its roots in the philosophy that shares its name: existentialism. Existentialists, like nihilists, believe that the world has no objective meaning, but unlike nihilism, which concludes that it is pointless to try and construct any purpose for your life, existentialism actively addresses this by encouraging you to create your own meaning.

In his book *Existential Psychotherapy*, psychiatrist Irvin Yalom writes that the four primary topics that existential questions focus on are death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness. Concerns about death might include what happens to us after we die, death's inevitability and the purpose of our fleeting physical existence on Earth. Our worries about freedom regard the overwhelming number of choices and consequences we face in this life without any real guide to tell us what to do. Feelings of isolation can be caused by the realisation that despite our relationships with other human beings, we can never truly be understood by another person or vice versa, and so we are condemned

to face life alone. Meaninglessness is the culmination of these three concerns and queries if we are ultimately destined to live a temporary, uncertain and lonely existence, what is the point of any of it?

Some people try to cope with an existential crisis by adopting maladaptive methods such as numbing themselves with drink or drugs, becoming so absorbed in daily distractions that they don't have time to think about existential matters, or by throwing themselves wholeheartedly into a religious or spiritual framework because life is too hard to face without certainty. Other people become preoccupied with what anthropologist Ernest Becker referred to as 'immortality

projects': grand acts that will preserve someone's legacy after their physical death, such as becoming a celebrity, or through procreation, by passing on their genes.

Some people believe that existential depression though can be a positive catalyst for change and growth. According to Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski's *Theory of Positive Disintegration*, symptoms of distress, such as existential depression can be a sign of personality development or the 'pain' of growing into oneself. Exploring challenging thoughts and feelings can lead to what Dabrowski refers to as 'reintegration': a new deeper level of understanding and self-awareness, and a renewal of our values and purpose in life. ■

## TREATING EXISTENTIAL DEPRESSION

Although existential depression can be difficult to treat, there are some methods that can help to ease the angst and isolation faced by sufferers.

### FIND THE RIGHT KIND OF THERAPY

The best form of therapy for dealing with an existential crisis is existential therapy, which focuses on processing the thoughts involved surrounding death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness, and helps you to accept and integrate these concepts into your life. Humanistic therapies, like transpersonal therapy, can also be effective in treating existential depression as this type of therapy emphasises living authentically and finding a path in life that best suits you.

### ALLOW YOURSELF TO GRIEVE

If you have suffered any kind of loss, whether it be a death, a relationship or a part of your identity, then give yourself time to mourn. Grief is a process that involves different stages of acknowledging, accepting and moving on, and shouldn't be rushed.

### CREATE YOUR OWN MEANING

It is essential to have some kind of meaning or purpose in life if only to stave off being completely consumed by the grip of depression and apathy. Whether that's through helping others, discovering your passion, or contributing something to the world, living a life of purpose can have a huge impact on your wellbeing, as well as that of others.

### FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN DO

You may not be able to change everything in this world, but focusing on what you can control and taking small steps towards that which is possible can boost our confidence and help us to remain hopeful for the future.