

Living With Existential Depression

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Existential depression is a form of depression where someone struggles to find meaning in their life and in existence itself.

As a result, people dealing with existential depression may lack motivation in their day-to-day life, fixate on thoughts of death and dying, feel indifferent about the “unfixable” state of the world, and avoid connections with others.

Reminder

It's important to note that existential depression is not a formal diagnosis.

How Common Is Existential Depression?

“Everyone experiences [a level of] existential depression at some point in their lives and it is very common to find it as one moves through the challenges of the maturation process,” says Jed Turnbull, PhD, LCSW, CHT, a licensed social worker, and therapist.

Common questions people may ask themselves that can trigger feelings of existential depression:

- What is the meaning of life?
- Why is there suffering?
- Why do people have to die?
- Can I make an impact in the world?
- Why do bad people go unpunished?
- Why do good people experience pain?

According to an analysis on the subject of finding meaning in life, only about 25% of Americans adults say they have a strong sense of purpose in life. About 40% say they either don't have that guiding star or generally feel indifferent.

Signs of Existential Depression

Existential depression is similar to other forms of clinical depression in that the person feels sad and might be less interested in things they once enjoyed. You might also experience changes in your sleep patterns.

Specific symptoms of existential depression may include thinking about death and what your life means. You might also reflect on your life. It's important to note that for the person dealing with existential depression, these thoughts are uncomfortable.

Who's Prone to Experiencing Existential Depression?

Some people may be more likely to experience existential depression compared to others. For instance, people with higher levels of expectations—as in unrealistic expectations or hard-to-reach goals—may suffer more frequently and to a greater degree of existential depression than others.

Also, there are indications that people with higher levels of intelligence may be more likely to deal with existential dread and depression compared to others.

There are also some life experiences that can potentially trigger existential depression, including:

- **Stressful life events:** Situations that cause major upheaval can greatly impact your life. For example, one study notes that cancer patients may question the meaning of life when they realize that death is a very real possibility.
- **Having poor job satisfaction:** Research has shown that there's a relationship between job satisfaction and mental health. So, if you're dissatisfied with your job you may have poorer mental health. You may also start to wonder what the purpose or point of your job is.
- **Lack of meaningful relationships:** Science notes a strong link between healthy social relationships and aspects of our health and wellness.

Impact of Existential Depression

Existential depression can cause people to miss out on meaningful life experiences or not enjoy life to its fullest capacity. For example, you might pull away from some of the meaningful relationships in your life.

When you do have a sense of purpose in life, it can help improve levels of life satisfaction. This translates to a more consistent uplifted mood, positive outlook, and contentment. Further, research has found that people tend to live longer when they have high levels of “eudemonic well-being”—which is described as a feeling of happiness derived from feeling like your life has a meaningful purpose.

Another study published in 2018 also noted that people who found meaning in their life experienced fewer physical health issues, including strokes, heart attacks, poor sleep, dementia, and physical disabilities.

Ways to Deal With Existential Depression

As is the case any time people struggle emotionally, reaching out to others or speaking with a therapist can help tremendously. Doing so can prompt you to find new perspectives and help lessen depressive feelings and thoughts about life’s meaning.

Recognizing that you are stuck—and that you aren’t yet equipped with the tools to dig out of the mud—is the first step.

Existential depression is also unique in that it often ushers in a deep state of soul-searching as we try to find meaning in the world and in our lives. Use these uncomfortable feelings and probing thoughts about life’s “big questions” as an opportunity for [self-discovery](#).

Often this involves questioning our assumptions about the world and the way it’s “supposed to be.”

Turnbull says that challenging our long-standing assumptions or beliefs—and being open to being wrong about those assumptions—will provide us the proper space to refill and rejuvenate our values. It can also help us gain a renewed sense of meaning and purpose in our lives that can help us feel better on the whole.

“In more immediate circumstances, one’s way of expression can be very helpful in alleviating their depressive symptoms,” Turnbull notes. “Journaling or writing, and other abstract ways of self-expression such as art and music, as well as learning something new, can all be ways to decrease depressive symptoms.”

Research has found a strong correlation between art therapy/creative expression and improved mental health.

Takeaway

Existential depression is a common human experience. These feelings may be more likely to arise as you move through particularly formative years and start asking deeper questions about the world. However, existential depression can occur at any time. If you feel that you're struggling to find purpose and meaning, try going on a quest of self-discovery. It also helps to speak with others, including trusted friends and family and/or a therapist who can guide you through complex thoughts and feelings.

11 Sources

Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

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