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Depression: A Yearning for Clarity

Imagine you are trapped in a dark abyss, with no way to escape, and you are in constant agony. Everything you do feels pointless, there's no light at the end of the tunnel, just endless torment. This is how it can feel to suffer from depression. It won't feel like this for everyone, because depression can manifest in various forms; these forms or disorders are dependent on multiple factors that come from the individual. Essentially, depression tends to get used as an umbrella term that encompasses many different disorders. There are still many people today who don't believe depression is a mental illness and say things like: "Depression doesn't exist," "People with depression are just lazy," "Choose to be happy," or "You don't look depressed." These statements are just a small portion of the numerous misconceptions pertaining to depression. It's understandable to question the experiences of others because you are uninformed or lack personal experience. I have lived with depression for roughly half my life and, before speaking with medical professionals, I too, had many of my own misconceptions about depression. I hope that by the end of this essay, you will see how perpetuating misconceptions and/or spreading ill-informed opinions about depression can unknowingly cause serious harm to yourself or others.

"Depression is a choice." This is usually the main statement I hear from those who don't believe depression is a medical condition. There are some reasons why people may come to this conclusion: they have no personal experience with depression, they believe happiness is a

choice, and/or they think sadness and depression are the same thing. These opinions usually stem from a lack of experience, ignorance, and/or being uninformed. I unknowingly had depression for years before I spoke with a psychologist, who explained why my symptoms were considered part of a medical condition and not just sadness. It's okay to not understand depression, but that doesn't remove the negative impact a statement like "depression is a choice" can have on someone who suffers from it. When I was around thirteen years old, I remember going to a large family gathering at my grandparents' house. I was sitting by myself in a rocking chair by a window in the far-left corner of their spacious living room. During this time, I was confused because I was feeling down most of the time, had no interest in any of the things I used to enjoy, and just had a general feeling of hopelessness. There was no logical reason I could think of for feeling this way and yet I did. I also never told any of my friends or immediate family about this because I was worried about what they might think. So, when a relative that I had only interacted with one time before came up to me and asked if I was doing okay. Without thinking, I immediately said "not really". Normally, I would have just used an automated response of "yeah, I'm fine" or "I'm good," but for some reason I shared how I was truly feeling. I was absolutely terrified and wanted to take back my response, but it was too late. He then asked, "What's wrong?" I reluctantly mentioned that I was feeling depressed all the time and didn't know why. He said that everyone experiences those feelings, but the key thing to understand is, "depression is a choice, you need to have the strength to not let your feelings control you." When I heard that, it just made me more confused. All I could think after that conversation was, "Is there something wrong with me," "Why can't I choose not to be depressed," "Am I just a weak person?" These questions helped form an unhealthy mindset and further deterred me from reaching out to anyone. This also led to me putting on a façade of a positive person whenever I was around other people, regardless of how terrible I felt on the inside.

When I was in my late teens, I started to get more comfortable sharing my struggle with depression with extended family and friends. I don't think many of them knew what to say or how to react. So, in trying to be helpful, they gave me "cure-all" solutions for depression. They would say, "if you exercise and have a well-balanced diet, you won't feel depressed anymore," "if you go to a therapist, they will make you feel better," "just take this medication and it will sort you out." Offering examples of what may have personally helped you or a loved one is great. But acting as if there is a "one size fits all" solution to depression downplays the severity of the illness. When I was first speaking to a psychologist about personal treatment options, he mentioned that there are many types of depressive disorders and the symptoms that align with them manifest in various ways. He also said that treatments and their success rates vary heavily between patients, even ones diagnosed with the same depressive disorder. This showed me that depression is personal and unique to the individual who has it. Thus, there is no "cure-all" solution. So, if you are suffering from depression or other mental health issues, speak with a medical professional about treatment.

Throughout my life, I often heard the phrase, "Other people have it worse, just be grateful for what you have." This statement shows me that many people believe depression is only due to life circumstances. Serious life events can contribute to depression, but that doesn't mean this is true for everyone. There are a multitude of biological, psychological, and social factors that can contribute to someone having depression. There were no traumatic events in my life that caused my depression. I had a wonderful childhood with two loving parents and a supportive brother. I never had to worry about going hungry or having a place to sleep. I'm grateful for these things. Growing up, there appeared to be a lot of people who had it much worse than I did. This observation was partially what made my depression feel so confusing when I was a young teenager. At the time I couldn't find a logical reason why I was depressed. This lack of

understanding caused a lot of self-loathing. As I got older, I realized that it does no good to tell someone they have it better or worse than anyone else. We only see a glimpse into the physical aspects of a person's life. You have no idea what is going on under the surface.

This leads to another common misconception about depression, which is that people with depression always look sad or depressed. Depression can sometimes be visible to others through facial expressions or changes in behavior, but this is not always the case. Many people hide their depression for various reasons, me included. I was confused, afraid to appear weak, and didn't want to be a burden, so for years I hid my depression from everyone, even those who were closest to me. From the outside, I would have looked like a happy go lucky guy who puts a positive spin on whatever life throws at him. However, my internal thoughts and feelings couldn't be farther from what I was portraying. Keeping up this façade was mentally and physically exhausting, which only exacerbated my depression. Eventually, I reached a point where I was having suicidal thoughts and ended up asking my parents for help. If you are having thoughts of suicide and feel as though you have no one to reach out to, please call Minnesota's 24-hour mental health crisis line by dialing the phone number 988. Outward appearance doesn't necessarily dictate whether someone has depression, so try to be emotionally available for those around you regardless of how they may appear.

If you still believe in certain stigmas surrounding depression, that's okay. I don't expect everyone to automatically change their minds or immediately grasp the complexity of depression through a single essay. However, it's important to educate yourself before informing others about something as serious as depression. I encourage everyone to do their own research on not just depression, but mental health in general. As long as we all try our best to be open-minded and aware of the impact our opinions can have on others, the misconceptions about depression will be drastically reduced. For those of you out there who may be suffering from depression or other

mental health issues, don't be afraid to reach out to a family member, friend, teacher, or mental health professional. Just taking that first step can change your life for the better. Although it may feel hopeless, you can conquer the abyss.