

Reading Passage (287 words): Are the benefits to depression?

Clinical depression goes by many names -- depression, "the blues," biological depression, major depression. But it all refers to the same thing: feeling sad and depressed for weeks or months on end (not just a passing blue mood), accompanied by feelings of hopelessness, lack of energy, and taking little or no pleasure in things that gave you joy in the past. A person who's depressed just "can't get moving" and feels completely unmotivated to do just about anything. Even simple things -- like getting dressed in the morning or eating -- become large obstacles. Jonah Lehrer's essay "Depression's Upside" in the Feb. 28, 2010 New York Times Magazine raises many important questions about depression, and what, if anything, we can "learn" from suffering a bout of serious depression. The article makes several claims about depression.

First, depression is seen as a "clarifying force," or as an "adaptive response to affliction" — notions being advanced by a number of psychologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists. Thus, Lehrer quotes psychiatrist Andy Thomson as saying, "...even if you are depressed for a few months, the depression might be worth it if it helps you better understand social relationships... Maybe you realize you need to be less rigid or more loving. Those are insights that can come out of depression, and they can be very valuable."

Second, depressive "rumination" may actually help us analyze our way out of difficult dilemmas — the so-called "analytic-rumination" hypotheses. To support this claim, Lehrer cites several studies showing that depression leads to increased activity in the "problem-solving" part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex.

Lastly, there is a "...striking correlation between creative production and depressive disorders." Many famous artists and musicians, some of whom suffered from depression, were very creative.

Writing Prompt: Summarize the main points of the lecture showing how they oppose the main points in the reading passage?

Lecture (375 words): There are no benefits to depression

I seriously doubt that Lehrer or anyone that he knows has ever suffered from depression because there are no positive aspects to this debilitating mental condition.

Now, with all due respect to Dr. Thomson, whom the author uses as an expert in this article, I am inclined to ask, "Worth it to whom?" Perhaps the patients Dr. Thomson has treated emerge from their three-month bouts of depression saying, "Ya know what, Doc? It's been a bad three months—lost my job, almost killed myself, and couldn't get a damn thing done—but overall, it was worth it!" The depressed patients I evaluated over the past nearly 30 years almost never reported that their major depressive episodes had a "net mental benefit," to quote Lehrer's article. Most felt that their lives and souls had been stolen from them for the duration of their depressive episode.

One of the other notions put forward in Lehrer's article is that depressive "rumination" may actually help us analyze our way out of difficult dilemmas. But there are also numerous studies showing the precise opposite, which Lehrer fails to note. For example, Hosokawa and colleagues in Japan found that, compared with healthy controls, subjects with major depression showed decreased metabolic activity in frontal brain regions. Furthermore, there are innumerable studies showing that major depression impairs higher-level thought processes. Dr. Charles DeBattista, in a recent review, concluded that, "The types of executive deficits seen in depression include problems with planning, initiating and completing goal-directed activities" and that such "executive dysfunction" tends to worsen in direct proportion to the severity of depression.

Finally, Lehrer trots out the old war-horse claim that there is a "...striking correlation between creative production and depressive disorders." But such a correlation hardly proves that depression itself heightens creativity. Psychiatrist Richard Berlin, M.D., editor of *Poets on Prozac: Mental Illness, Treatment, and the Creative Process*, has summarized his experience as follows:

"The idea that depression might enhance creativity is a myth, often based on the life stories and statements of deceased artists and writers... Contemporary poets who are alive and can tell us about their experience with depression are consistent in reporting that it was only after effective psychiatric treatment that they were able to create at their highest levels."