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ANHEDONIA ... The Loss Of Joy

Source: UNDOING DEPRESSION
Richard O'Connor, PhD

Anhedonia is the technical term for the inability to experience joy. When people are in the depths of depression, nothing touches them, not the most intensely pleasurable activities, not the most familiar comforts. They are emotionally frozen. In this state, people either must get professional help or simply wait for weeks or months until the depression lifts by itself, nothing is going to make them feel better.

Less dramatic than anhedonia but a much more pervasive problem is a condition that doesn't even have a clinical name; it's the gradual withdrawal into isolation and indifference that can mark the beginning of depression. It's a gradual closing down of the world. As depression makes us lose interest or pleasure in ordinary activities, our range of activities constricts. We stop taking chances, we avoid stimulation, we play it safe, and we begin to cut ourselves off from anything that might shake us up – including loved ones. It's the gradual poison that sinks into marriages and makes people vulnerable to affairs. It's the hardening of the attitudes on the job that makes for petty, passive-aggressive bureaucracies. It's the withdrawal from our own children that leaves them questioning why we bother to live.

I worry that the symptomatic relief of depression provided by medication or brief therapy only helps a person regain a previous level of functioning that was depressed to begin with. Acedia, the absence of feeling, makes for empty lives, and it seems to be on the increase. Putting anger, guilt, and shame in their place is not enough for recovery from depression; we also must take responsibility for learning to feel good. We might prefer to play it safe, to avoid or control all emotions, but we simply can't; it doesn't work; our selves and our relationships deteriorate into brittle, bitter, vulnerable shells. While learning to feel may be temporarily upsetting, in the long haul it adds to richness and meaning to our lives.

THE SINGLE LARGEST BARRIER IS IGNORANCE.