

MOOD QUALITY=LIFE QUALITY

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It never ceases to amaze me, how people interact with each other in airports and airplanes. You can see it all! -the jokers and extroverts, the shy ones and introverts, the angry and irritable ones and the ones in the middle. What a spectrum! But, such is life-you can find it all. everywhere. And perhaps that is the way it was meant to be. At least as it related to the 'big picture.'" On an individual base, we have the difficult but challenging task of understanding others and ourselves. We have as well the responsibility of bettering ourselves, and that implies change. In fact, at times it is very tempting to attempt changing others, but that is a boundary we should never allow ourselves to cross. Hopefully in a future article I will have the opportunity to discuss the elements involved in the development of our personality and mood, but at this time it is behind the scope of my present objectives (besides the time and paper factors).

Mood could be simply defined as the subjective expression of our emotional state. This is in contrast to the objective observation of our mood by others, called affect. However, as you and I know, we routinely use the word mood to measure both aspects. Obviously our mood might vary according to our circumstances and different situations in our lives. However. there is sort of a baseline for our mood and this depends mostly on genetics and environmental factors. which help form our personality. There fore we can say that our mood expression is part of our personality. Analysts might refer to it as part of our ego or persona; "same thing." So, people with a baseline "happy mood"-most of the time would present as avoidant, with a depressed or flat affect and a negative attitude towards life. The angry ones could be irritable, difficult to please and argumentative (and watch out for they can be very explosive, abusive and shortly fused). And of course, there are all kinds of presentations in the spectrum.

An important concept to understand is that no human being is perfect, and perhaps we were not meant to be! This does not take anything away from trying to be better ones. The key is to gain, achieve and balance what could give us the "comfort zone" needed to be that better person. That should be an ongoing process, which we constantly should look as a measure of our capacity to function in our society. Starting with ourselves, to significant others and from there to the community we live in. In turn, this would include all aspects of our lives; spiritually (another great topic for the future) family, friends, educational, occupational and civic. And that my friends, is one of the bottom lines: our capacity to function.

As long as our individual mood expression does not interfere with our ability to function, we are "okay." When it starts getting in the way of such capacity, that is when we start running into problems. A good example would be the development of clinical depression, now we're talking "dysfunctional mood." This is to be differentiated from a rather depressive mood that I was alluding to earlier.

In a clinical (medical) sense, depression is a syndrome-it is a constellation of signs and symptoms that can affect people's lifestyle, leading to demise the capacity to function. To list a few; fatigue, lack of energy and motivation, inability to enjoy, irritability, difficulties with sleep, and appetite, problems with

concentration and memory and all kinds of somatic complaints (headaches, muscle pains, gastrointestinal problems, weakness, anxiety, etc). On the more severe and serious end of the spectrum; feeling of worthlessness and hopelessness, death wishes, suicidal ideation, (including plan, intent and attempts) and psychotic symptoms (misperceptions, delusions, etc.). And the list goes on and on.

Suicide is the #1 killer of our youth (if you exclude accidents of all kinds), ages 14 to 25. That is alarming! And so is the fact that clinical depression claims a 15% mortality rate in our nation. Just consider that there is a 7% prevalence of clinical depression in our population. The mortality rate (15%) is up there with many kinds of cancers. Another important factor to consider is that it is the illness that costs the most dollars to our nation, when you factor in not only treatment cost, but also lack of productivity and disability!

To top it all, it is a potentially lethal illness that is poorly understood, unfortunately even by some of our medical professionals. First of all, you don't have to have a reason to be depressed; you might have one, but not necessarily. Its bases are neuro-genetic; it tends to run in families. Think of it in terms of a loose gene that given certain factor might find expression, but don't forget it can happen "out of the blue." This genetic factor gives neurochemical vulnerability, putting the person at risk for a chemical imbalance in the brain. More specifically in the Limbic System, which today we have coined as the "seat of the mind"-since it mediates specialized areas having to do with factor such as; our thinking process, our mood and emotions, as well as our capacity to respond to our environment and therefore our behavior. But enough of that, since I would like to avoid going too deep into neuroscience's.

The point is that a dysfunctional mood can ruin our lives and that of the ones we love. And this is not to say that clinical depression is the only mood dysfunction, unfortunately there are others; Bipolar Mood Disorder (Manic Depression), Dysthymia (Chronic Depression) and different degrees of mood fluctuations (Cyclothymia or Mood Swings), that can severely impact the capacity to function in the environment.

But there is good news the good news is that there is very effective treatment for mood disorder response rates have been quoted as high as 85%. It consists of both psychotherapy (talk therapy) and psychopharmacology (medicines) and in some cases Electro Convulsive Treatments. Also new options are being developed on an ongoing basis, to address this need. We keep moving in the right direction (thank the Lord). The first step could be to talk to your family doctor; he should direct you from there.

Going back to working in becoming "better us", there is also good news in this arena. There are the "little things" you can do that add up and serve as a buffer to prevent any deterioration of our mood, a good healthy diet, a balanced exercise program, plenty of rest, a reasonable amount of work, scheduled and unscheduled fun activities (including vacations and travel), safe consenting sex (adults only!), regular health check-ups with your doctor, deep breathing with relaxation, professional massages, a positive attitude, music and a great amount of respect for you, others and life. If this is not enough, make up your own. No penalties for creativity!