

## **Psychodynamic Therapy and Depression**

### **Abstract**

Literature on the theories and principles on psychodynamic therapy and depression were examined and filtered using a case study of a girl undergoing emotional turbulence caused by her mother's depressive disorder. Important details surrounding the case were reviewed as well as the different types of therapies which can be used to address the problem. The effect of the depressive behavior on the child was likewise investigated. Results of the study showed that psychodynamic therapy in the context of communication and family would be most effective in this case.

## Outline

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## Research

Psychotherapy – or simply, therapy – is usually the first step in treating depression (Smith, 2008). It has also been proven effective in the diagnosis and treatment of personality disorders (Leichsenring & Leibing, 2005). Psychotherapy usually involves different treatment techniques. During therapy, the person suffering from depression identifies and works through the different causes of his or her depression with the aid of a trained and licensed mental health specialist.

Depression is caused by many things. It can be brought about by chemical imbalances in the brain; it can be hereditary. It can also be a combination of both. In any case, it is important that both the psychological and psychosocial aspects of depression are addressed (Smith, 2008); one way to do so is through psychodynamic therapy. In psychodynamic therapy, it is assumed that the causes of depression may be an unresolved and generally unconscious conflict, usually rooted in the individual's childhood. The goal of psychodynamic therapy is to allow the individuals to talk about their own experiences, thereby helping them to understand and to cope better. The administration of this type of therapy can range from a few days to a number of months (Smith, 2008). For this paper, the case of Hannah (not her real name) will be tackled in order to better appreciate psychodynamic therapy and understand its real life application. Real names of the people involved will not be revealed in order to protect their identities but the situation that is described here is based on actual events.

Hannah is the only daughter of Fred (not his real name) and Sussy (not her real name). Fred and Sussy have been sweethearts since their early college years and they have been through many things together. Initially, both their parents were against their relationship. Sussy's parents are very conservative Christians. They insisted that Sussy should only be involved in a romantic

relationship only after college. Fred, on the other hand, is the only son of a business tycoon. After graduation, he was expected to take over the business, especially since his dad was already well advanced in years. It seemed the immediate future that Fred and Sussy wanted together was not possible. These expectations would have forced them to wait for more than five years, when Fred had mastered the business and was ready to devote time to his personal life. Their decision to enter into a serious and committed relationship disappointed their parents deeply. Sussy's parents would not allow her back into their house until "she comes to her senses." Fred allowed Sussy to stay with him, an act which angered his own mother when she heard the news and caused her to have a heart attack. Fred's father blamed him for what happened; he discontinued supporting his son. With no one to turn to, Fred and Sussy had to find work while studying. They went through the eye of the needle together but their love was greater than all their hardships.

Finally, after graduation, they decided to marry and go on a honeymoon. Even though they were living in the same house, they restrained themselves from having physical relations. Their honeymoon gave them unspeakable joy. Hannah was conceived and was born nine months later. They loved her dearly, especially Fred; Hannah was his bundle of joy. He didn't mind working another job because it brought in money for Hannah's needs. Hannah was just four years old when Fred met a car accident on his way home. It was December, just a few hours before Christmas. His car was hit by a twelve-wheeler truck at a traffic intersection when the driver of the truck tried to beat the red light. The car was crushed and Fred died instantly. Hannah was too young to understand the gravity of what just happened. Sussy was left to carry the whole weight of the situation. She could not believe it at first and as the days passed, she refused to believe it even more. How the love of her life can die in a very senseless way, she could not comprehend. Months passed and Sussy's situation worsened. She was often found

staring out of the window, as if waiting for someone to come. Concerned relatives noticed that she was at a point where she was neglecting Hannah so they decided that someone should stay with them until Sussy recovered. But weeks passed and Sussy showed no signs of improvement. So they decided to enlist the help of a psychodynamic therapist named Ken (not his real name). Ken was the best in his class and was highly esteemed in his profession. He is very diligent and seemed to be eager to help. The only problem was that Sussy did not seem to respond well to the treatment. Moreover, Hannah was undergoing a roller coaster of emotions herself in seeing her mother so depressed.

According to Smith (2008), there are two approaches to therapy that might be applicable to Sussy's case. The first approach is individual therapy wherein only the therapist and the patient are involved. The second approach is family therapy wherein the patient's family members are also involved so that they can understand what their loved one is going through. In this approach, the family members are taught how to cope and what measures they can undertake in order to help. A third approach, marital therapy, would have been done with the help of the spouse but because it was Fred's passing that caused her depression in the first place, it is irrelevant.

The first approach is individual therapy. According to Fenton (2008), this can be classified under "talking therapies" which were used solely for the treatment of mental illnesses in the 70s and 80s. A particular field of individual therapy is interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT), an effective short-term treatment that usually lasts up to 20 sessions of weekly meetings, taking about an hour per session. Here, one or two key issues related to depression are focused (University of Michigan Depression Center, 2006). For instance, the psychotherapist may focus on Sussy's relationship with her parents and with her parents-in-law. Sussy might have had

issues of alienation from them which did not surface until now because her marriage with Fred made her happy.

Although Sussy's depression is not directly caused by interpersonal events, the University of Michigan Depression Center claims that usually, there would be an interpersonal dimension. Usually, the causes of these issues are (1) interpersonal disputes or conflicts, (2) interpersonal transition in role and (3) complicated grief going beyond the normal time for mourning. In this case, it can be said that it is a combination of all three. It involves interpersonal conflict since there are issues with parents in the past which have not been resolved. It involves transition in role since the death of the husband would force Sussy to act both as father and mother. Finally, it involves grief going beyond the normal time for mourning since Sussy still retained her depression problem even after initial psychodynamic sessions. The goal of the therapist, then, would be to find out and address which of these issues is the most important and the greatest contributor to the depression (University of Michigan Depression Center, 2006).

IPT sessions usually begin by identifying the specific issues that need to be addressed for the remainder of the therapy. Usually, one to three sessions are devoted to this. While the University of Michigan Depression Center (2006) claims that this type of treatment is not effective in all cases, research suggests that it is effective in aiding short-term depression issues, much like anti-depressant medication. Aside from attending sessions, Fenton (2008) also recommends treatment. Decision to use IPT and medication should be based on the answers to the following questions: (1) How severe is the depression? (2) Is there a past treatment history? (3) What are the preferences of the patient? Moreover, during the assessment phase a qualified interpersonal psychotherapist such as a psychologist, psychiatrist or social welfare officer should present the different options to Sussy's family for her treatment. Furthermore, the rationale for

the treatment must also be communicated well. University of Michigan Depression Center (2006), however, recommends combining successful short-term treatment with an ongoing maintenance therapy once a month afterwards. In this way, there would be less likelihood of depression recurring within a short span of time (Frank et al., 1990)

The second approach is family therapy. According to Herkov (2006), this can be used when a person's symptoms are taking place in a larger context. In this case, the problem was not just confined to Sussy but also very much involved Hannah due to Sussy's unhealthy responses to the situation. There are three techniques that may be employed here. First is the use of a genogram where a therapist constructs a family tree for Sussy. One by one, the therapist would examine the different relationships that the patient is linked to and examine its impact on the patients' current emotional technique. In this case, the therapist may see the sour relationship of Sussy with her parents and with her parents-in-law which was caused by their decision in college. Efforts must be focused on dealing with this. The second technique is systematic interpretation where the depression is viewed as the symptom a larger problem in the family. It is also possible that Sussy's depression is due to loneliness. Even though she has relatives who care for her, she thought of Fred as her only companion because they went through so much together when everyone was against them. So when Fred passed away, Sussy may have focused too much on the loss and forgot about Hannah and the others who loved her. All she could see was that she was all alone, that the world is against her and the only one who rooted for her was no longer there. The third technique is communications training where dysfunctional communication patterns are identified and corrected. Due to Sussy's neglect, Hannah could have had a hard time communicating her needs. When her needs were not satisfied because she was unable to communicate them, she became frustrated. In the same vein, when things seem to be going her...