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What's stress got to do with it? Coming to terms with the fact that depression is more closely associated with self-generated stress than with real stress

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Talk about an epidemic! Depression has become so widespread in our society that it's sometimes referred to as the 'common cold' of emotional disorders. In fact, it's estimated that approximately 15-25% of individuals will experience a bout of major depression at least once in their lifetime. This fact reflects the sharp increase in the prevalence of depression in the past 50 years. This increase has been so dramatic that the World Health Organization is predicting that depression will become the second leading cause of disability in the next 10 years.

This begs the question, why have we experienced such an important rise in the prevalence of depression? One popular theory is that the rise in depression has been caused by an increase in stress. To understand how this might be the case the term 'stress' needs to be clearly defined. Stress can be understood to be a feeling of being overwhelmed which occurs when **perceived** life challenges exceed the **perceived** resources that can be allocated to meet these challenges (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Based on this definition, stress can be either (a) real, as in when major life challenges exceed the resources of most individuals (e.g., traumatic events such as the death of a parent); or (b) self-generated, as in when relatively minor life challenges are incorrectly perceived as exceeding the available resources to meet these challenges (e.g., time management issues; being stressed about not having a romantic partner, etc.). In other words, objective stress is mostly independent of an individual's perception, whereas self-generated stress is highly dependent on perception.

There is a growing body of research evidence which suggests that depression is more closely related to self-generated or dependent stress than to real or independent stress (Hammen, 2005). To be clear, I'm not suggesting that objectively stressful life events aren't related to the onset of depression; however, this relationship is not as robust as is often implied by the media and some health professionals. Findings from my own research support this contention. Results from my Ph.D. dissertation suggest that individuals characterized by low self-esteem, low optimism, and a belief that life events are beyond their control tend to generate a high degree of stress, which, in turn, places them at risk for depression. In addition, real or independent stressors were related to risk for depression mostly through their association with high levels of self-generated or dependent stress. This evidence should be considered in the context of certain other facts. For example, depression is very high among the prosperous youth in North America. In addition, approximately 90% of individuals who experience stressors equivalent in severity to those who are depressed do not become depressed. **What emerges from considering these and other similar findings is that major depression is more about people's perceptions of relatively minor events than it is about experiencing real and intensely negative life events.**



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The above conclusion is counterintuitive and may be difficult for some people to accept. It may appear to some as though I'm blaming the victim. Such is not the case. The reality is that though depression can sometimes come about as a result of experiencing a constellation of negative life events, in many instances depression is, to a significant extent, caused and/or maintained by self-generated stress. How we think and what we do matters greatly in relation to depression. This is no different than why we sometimes suffer from the common cold. If we lack rest, eat poorly, and are pessimistic we're more likely to suffer from a cold. When cold season comes around many of us heed the advice of medical experts and try to avoid colds by doing what has been proven to be helpful. Similarly, much can be done to prevent or overcome depression if we accept certain facts. Let's come to terms with the fact that self-generated stress is highly associated with depression. In doing so, the very real suffering caused by major depression can be reduced significantly.