

Depression
In Perspective
1983

Depression, the disease of the twentieth century, has afflicted almost everyone at some time or other. It can range from "the blues" to despair and thoughts of suicide. It might last for a few hours or days or drag on for weeks or months. In severe cases the victim is unable to function normally and requires hospitalization. Persons in the grip of depression report a loss of interest in their surroundings and an inability to concentrate on their usual tasks. Their attention is focussed inward, and they are convinced that they will be unhappy forever. These feelings are usually accompanied by a loss of self-esteem. Sometimes the cause of the depression is obvious--the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the end of a romance. At other times the sufferer is unable to pinpoint the author of despair, and the pain is even more difficult to bear.

Why has depression become so widespread in our time? Although it was known to the ancients, who called it melancholia, in no other period of history has it appeared to be so common. It might well be that depression has always been around on a grand scale, but that our current interest in analyzing and talking about our feelings has simply increased our awareness of its presence. Another possibility is that in highly industrialized nations the relative affluence of the majority of the populace affords the time and opportunity for people to reflect on philosophical questions in a way once reserved for the leisured few. People who are engaged in a daily struggle for food and shelter might not be happy in the usual sense of the word, but neither do they have the luxury of exploring their feelings. Depression is also seldom reported by those who are involved in demanding and productive or creative endeavors. They are too engrossed in tasks outside themselves to monitor their emotions on an hourly basis. It just might be that depression is one of the prices we pay for narcissism.