

New research could take hopelessness out of depression

December 5 2016, by Matt Terry



Credit: McMaster University

People with depression can't even imagine what it feels like to not be depressed.

People who aren't depressed, however, are more easily able to empathize with those who are.

That's according to a new study by McMaster psycholinguists Constance Imbault and Victor Kuperman, who used a word test developed at the University to measure empathy levels between the two groups.

The test asked participants to place faces representing people with and without depression closer to or further from random words, depending on where the participant imagined that kind of person would be in relation to the feeling that word elicited.

The words had previously been rated for positivity and negativity.

The study showed that people with depression couldn't match the placement patterns of those without depression - they literally could not imagine where a person without depression would place themselves in relation to the words.

"It's not that people with depression aren't capable of feeling like someone who's not," says Imbault, a PhD candidate who presented the findings at a recent meeting of the Psychonomic Society. "People don't start out being depressed – it's that they've lost the ability to feel emotion altogether. They're apathetic."

This might be because those with depression spend too much mental energy on thinking about themselves and the problems they face, leaving little room to imagine how others might feel.

"People with depression tend to feel hopeless about their lives," says Imbault. "And if you can't even envision what it might be like to not be depressed, it can be hard to find motivation to overcome depression. You can't see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Imbault says the study could help people better understand what it's like for the roughly seven per cent of the population that suffers from depression. She also hopes the work may one day inform the development of better treatments for depression.

"You can imagine treatments that involve teaching the ability to empathize, so that [people](#) with [depression](#) can see that there is hope, that they can imagine what it's like to not be depressed."

Provided by McMaster University

Citation: New research could take hopelessness out of depression (2016, December 5) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-12-hopelessness-depression.html>

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