

Dr. J. Raymond DePaulo, Jr., Says

Conquest of Depression Needs Commitment
On Par With Cancer and Heart Disease

By Bill Wilkerson

(Wilkerson, a business executive, is the award-winning Co-Founder and CEO of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto)

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND – Depression is behind about two-thirds of the 30,000 suicides taking place annually in the US and one of the world’s top psychiatrists is “convinced” these deaths can be prevented through earlier and better treatment.

Dr. J. Raymond DePaulo, Jr., Chairman of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University says in his 2002 book “Understanding Depression,” that depression kills in other ways too.

“Some patients with depression and no history of heart disease develop a heart attack and depression doubles and quadruples the risk of sudden death.”

The Roundtable has delivered this message to business people. We believe the whole public discussion of mental illness needs to be re-conceptualized. One example of that is seeing depression as a physical disorder with mental or psychological effects.

Just like other forms of chronic illness.

Terms like mood disorder or behavioral health trivialize and misrepresent the nature of depression in the breadth of its complexity, nature and impact on human health. Besides, Dr. DePaulo, says, “depression is a brain disease, not a behavior.”

(When I read that, I gave Dr. DePaulo a standing ovation sitting down.)

“We are poised on the brink of some remarkable discoveries about depressive illness,” Dr. DePaulo says in this amply readable book co-authored with Leslie Ann Horowitz and published by John Wiley & Sons of Hoboken, New Jersey.

“Genetic and advance brain imaging technologies (*already*) allow us to understand brain structure and function in ways we could only dream about in the ‘80s. But realizing these breakthroughs won’t be easy. It will require the same commitment to research that has been made in the past for cancer and heart disease.”

“Our objective must be to speed up the time it takes to make an accurate diagnosis. Today it takes an average of 10 years to diagnose bipolar disorder and to predict which patients will respond best to which treatments.”

Dr. DePaulo answers several questions on the minds of a lot of people including those in the insurance business.

Q *Is the diagnosis of depression too “subjective” to be reliable?*

JRD *We have specific criteria and reliable markers to diagnose depression and while we don't have lab tests, blood tests, X-rays or CAT scans, MRIs helps determine if something like a stroke or low-functioning thyroid is the cause.*

Q *Are there visible, physical signs of depression?*

JRD *One patient (I see) developed stiffness, slowness and tremors that would appear only when he was depressed. About 90% of patients with clear-cut, treatable depression complain of fatigue.*

Q *Does stress trigger depression?*

JRD *Stressful life events can lead to depression in some people and simply discouragement in others. In a medical sense, stress is the nervous system's response to intensively unpleasant conditions.*

Dr. DePaulo adds: “It would be a major breakthrough if we understood how external events (*environment we live and work in*) interact with the internal functioning of the brain.”

“We need to know which ‘stresses’ will produce depression. Research is being done to discover why stress affects the brain and how repeated stress affects those parts of the brain that are involved in depression.”

“It seems pretty clear that repeated severe stresses and persistently elevated stress hormone levels compromise the functions of brain cells in some critical brain regions possibly linked to depressive illness.”

In “Understanding Depression,” Dr. DePaulo describes one of the most formidable barriers to getting treatment: “Depressed patients generally believe they cannot be diagnosed or treated and are often convinced they will never recover from what ails them.”

That kind of misunderstanding depression can be tragic. And fatal.

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Sidebar Article