

Communities Get Depressed Too

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Communities are a collection of people who share a common purpose and identity. The employees who all work at the same company, the parents whose kids are in the same sport, the families who all live in the same neighbourhood, or the people who belong to the same volunteer club are all members of those larger communities. People in a community often have a shared history, shared experiences, a shared purpose, and common objectives. They talk, relate, share, grow, and suffer together, becoming intertwined and wrapped up together.

People have feelings and emotions, behaviours and attitudes, as well as psychoses and neuroses that impact how they act, and react, to what happens around them. They can find themselves fired up with energy, spoiling for a fight, or feeling down on their luck and lacking confidence. People can experience either acute situational depression or persistent depressive disorder. I know it isn't supported by any psychological theory, but I believe communities can suffer from depression, situational or persistent, just like people can. After all, a community is just a group of people sharing common experiences and a common purpose.

That is the reason so many plans and good intentions get no results. Strategic, economic, business, social, recreation, and tourism plans are written every day for communities, and yet the results are often unrealized. The reason is because those community plans are the equivalent of helping a person suffering from depression to polish up their resume. We think we have done what is needed to change their future, but if they still can't get out of bed to face the world, the resume will do no good. I firmly believe many communities suffer from depression, and need help with overcoming that before huge investments are made in plans for their future.

Depression in communities, just as with people, can arise from a traumatic situation. In people, it can be the result of the loss of a job, the end of a relationship, or the death of a loved one. In communities, it can be the result of closing a school, the loss of a major employer, or a tragic death. Individuals may find themselves feeling unable to cope with the situation, leading to depression. The collection of individuals that make up a community may find it equally challenging to cope with a community situation, leading to community depression. As with individuals, what begins as acute depression based on a situation, can evolve into persistent depressive disorder. I have seen and worked in communities that display chronic depression, and others that display other neuroses.

We know that when we are sick or have a broken arm, we need to go see a doctor to be treated. We recognize physical ailments aren't a sign of weakness, but too often we still believe mental health issues are a sign of weakness, and we hide them. Mental ailments are not a sign of weakness. They are simply something that needs to be treated so healing can begin. Only in recent years has the stigma of mental health begun to be lifted, but we still have a long way to go. We have not even begun to consider the mental health of our communities, but it is time we do. The ability to help communities overcome depression, and other ailments, is the first step to helping them on the path to finding success.

The most significant challenge with community depression is recognizing that the depression exists. Communities deny they are depressed, and explain it away by explaining the world is a cruel and unfair place. Sometimes it gets so bad the community gives up, saying there is nothing they can do and there is

no point in trying, because the world will just smack them down again. That is a clear sign of community depression.

There are things that can be done, but they aren't easy, and they don't happen overnight. It takes a lot of private conversations, and a lot of group discussions, and it takes small plans to gather small successes to turn the tide. And it takes some research, because most of the communities that are suffering from depression have been suffering for years, decades, even generations. Finding ways to help our communities come out of depression is critical to the future of the nation. Our communities are worth the time and the investment, because our communities are worth saving.

This syndicated content is provided by Doug Griffiths, best-selling author and chief community builder at 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit www.13ways.ca, or we can start the conversation at info@13ways.ca.