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University of Haifa psychologists offer to treat depressed people for free

• By JUDY SIEGEL

Psychologists at the University of Haifa have begun to offer free treatment to people suffering from clinical depression, using a short-term therapy proven scientifically to be effective. The treatment, they said, takes into account the unique personality characteristics of each patient.

The psychologists who will offer the treatment underwent intensive training in the technique, said Prof. Sigal Zilcha-Mano, who heads the project. "The approaches we are studying are interpretive or supportive short-term individual psychotherapy, which are today the leading approaches for treating depression in the US," she said.

Supportive psychotherapy is a psychotherapeutic approach that integrates psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral and interpersonal conceptual models and techniques. It includes comforting, advising, encouraging, reassuring and mostly listening to the patient attentively and sympathetically. The therapist's aim is to reinforce the patient's healthy and adaptive patterns of thought behaviors to reduce the intra-psychic conflicts that produce symptoms of mental disorders.

Unlike in psychoanalysis – in which the analyst maintains a neutral demeanor as a "blank canvas" for transference – in supportive therapy, the therapist engages in a fully emotional, encouraging and supportive relationship with the patient as a method of furthering healthy defense mechanisms, especially in the context of interpersonal relationships.

In interpretive psychotherapy, the patient's construction of himself and his relationships related to his problems are identified and expressed in the form of dilemmas, traps and snags. It uses abstraction, allowing the patient and therapist to share provisional hypotheses about the goals of therapy and offering the basis for a method of measuring how far these goals are achieved.

Women are said to benefit more from supportive psychotherapy and men from

interpretive psychotherapy.

An estimated 5.5% of Israelis suffer from clinical depression, according to university researchers. Only last week the World Health Organization said the last decade has seen an 18% increase worldwide in the number of patients suffering from it. By 2020, it said, clinical depression will be the number-two cause of disability.

Zilcha-Mano said that since clinical depression can come and go, the number of people who have suffered from it at least once in their lifetime is very large. As part of her project, she is seeking patients aged 18 to 60 for 16 sessions. One problem is that many patients drop out of psychotherapy without completing the treatment.

The new techniques focus on the most up-to-date research and stress every person's different characteristics and needs for different treatment. Some need drug therapy, while others require psychological counseling.

"We know which patients need a strong bond with the therapist and which will benefit from rises and falls in the link with the patient. Today, it is clear that one type of treatment is not suitable for all and that we have to suite the treatment to each person," Zilcha-Mano said.

There are many myths involving depression, and many patients are not sure if that is really their problem. In fact, people can function at 100% of their regular abilities and still suffer from clinical depression. As a result, when something happens to them or they try to commit suicide, those around them always say: "We didn't believe they had a problem," the Haifa psychologist said.

As a result, many patients don't define themselves as being depressed and only an in-depth conversation can lead to a diagnosis.

Patients should ask themselves if during the last two weeks they had a low mood, most of the hours of the day, almost every day. Did they show less interest in things that used to interest them and or enjoy things less than before? If so, they should consider consultation, she advised.

"We want to stress that this treatment can be very

significant," Zilcha-Mano said. "Patients come into our offices with high levels of depression and leave without suffering from it. They enjoy

a higher quality of life."

Would-be participants should call 058-629-7595 or send an email to depression-psychotherapy@gmail.com.