Depression, Motivation, and Recovering Agency · About 4 minutes

When Wanting and Starting Are Different

A more precise way to understand a difficult beginning

“You should go. You like that artist.” The trouble is, you do. That makes the distance between wanting to go and getting out the door harder to explain.

Tessa knows. She would like to see the exhibition and spend time with her friend. The unanswered invitation is still on her phone. What stops her is the journey she imagines: two buses, an unfamiliar entrance, then conversation when she may have no energy left.

This fictional situation shows how easily an outside observer can mistake difficulty beginning for lack of interest. Tessa's wish is present. Repeating it back to her as advice leaves the difficult part untouched.

Where does starting become hard?

The same delay can have different causes. A person might have enough energy for the journey but no interest in the exhibition. Another may want to go and feel unable to organize the steps. Someone else may dread having to entertain the friend who invited them.

“What is making this hard?” can open more possibilities than “Why aren't you motivated?” The answer may concern energy, concentration, uncertainty about the outcome, or a practical barrier. Several can be involved at once.

Treadway and Zald distinguish motivation to pursue reward from the experience of pleasure.[1] That research supports asking more precise questions. It cannot diagnose Tessa or identify her brain chemistry from a missed invitation.

For her, “I want to go, and the trip feels beyond me” is more accurate than “I don't care about seeing anyone.” The more precise description points toward a different kind of help. A companion on the journey might help, if someone is available and Tessa wants that. It might also leave the cost of conversation unchanged.

A failed adjustment can still teach us something

If a lift doesn't solve the problem, it is worth asking what remains difficult. The conclusion need not be that Tessa refused help or doesn't want to get better. Perhaps she is more depleted than she realized. Perhaps the exhibition is simply too much this week.

An activity can also be unwanted. Declining one social plan does not establish depression or avoidance. Preferences deserve attention alongside symptoms. We can take someone's difficulty seriously without making every invitation a test of recovery.

Depression can affect interest, energy, concentration, and daily functioning. Persistent or worsening changes deserve a health care assessment, including consideration of medical and other causes.[2] You do not need to sort out the explanation before asking for care. If basic daily needs are becoming hard to meet, practical assistance may be important alongside treatment.

Necessary responsibilities require attention too. When capacity is insufficient, another arrangement may be needed. Shame adds pressure but does not provide transport, energy, or someone to carry a task.

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An honest starting sentence

Sometimes the clearest available account is “Something about getting there feels impossible.” That is enough to begin a conversation. A willing helper can ask about the journey rather than insist that it should be easy.

Tessa can still want the outing and need help with the distance between her chair and the door.

Where does getting there first begin to feel impossible? You can start with that piece of the evening, especially if someone can help with it.

Companion reading · When Life Becomes Hard to Reach

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Depression, Motivation, and Recovering Agency (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Treadway, M. T., & Zald, D. H. (2011). Reconsidering anhedonia in depression: Lessons from translational neuroscience. Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews, 35(3), 537–555. Source.

[2] National Institute of Mental Health. (n.d.). Depression. Source.

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