

Overcoming Depression

By Kate Kent, Dipl. Ac., C.H. (NCCAOM)

Depression is an insidious disease that strikes randomly across a wide population. It can happen any time, even when times are good and when one ought to be happy. Abraham Lincoln fought depression all his life. His law partner, William Herndon, said “His melancholy dripped from him as he walked”. Boris Yeltsin in his own words says he suffered “debilitating bouts of depression.” Winston Churchill’s depression was legendary, he called it his “Black dog”.



The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders labels a major depressive episode as: depressed moods, a marked decrease in pleasure, or both, for at least 2 weeks, and symptoms such as agitation, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, and thoughts of death or suicide. Certainly, many people live their whole lives in a grey zone where the smallest decision or activity involves a huge effort. They may experience spurts of sunshine but these can be short lived before the greyness descends yet again. Some people feel they have a happy person inside them waiting to get out but prevented from doing so by a huge weight that refuses to lift. Other people have ups and downs but can have more consistent periods of depression. Whatever the severity, this disease can have a huge impact on one’s life. So much effort is required just to cope that it is hard to actually live to one’s full potential. Antidepressant drugs can be effective but do not work for everyone.

Counselling

Neuroplasticity, a new science that investigates whether and how the brain can undergo wholesale change, reveals that the brain is capable not only of altering its structure but also of generating new neurons, even into old age. It shows how the brain is dynamic, remodelling itself continually in response to experience. In *Train Your Mind Change Your Brain*, Sharon Begley writes “Yes, the brain can change, and that means we can change. It is not easy. Neuroplasticity is impossible without attention and mental effort. But if the will is there, the potential seems immense. Depression and other mental illnesses can be treated by enlisting the mind to change the brain, not by flooding it with problematic chemicals”. In *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama writes “the brain is not static, not irrevocably fixed. Our brains are also adaptable.” Such thinking encourages us to use our own brainpower for change.

Of course the way one thinks is very important and the way one thinks of oneself is instilled by one’s caregivers. When, for example, one has been taught, that one has no value or that there is something “wrong” with who one is, one tends to carry that teaching way past parental influence. It’s like housing a terrorist in the brain, whose sole function is to instil negative feedback. Of course, that kind of thinking will lead to depression and that kind of thinking **must** be changed if one is to find peace and acceptance.

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I practice Experiential Dynamic Counseling and I remember a young man who came to see me for help precisely because he suffered an entirely negative sense of himself that was affecting every aspect of his life. As a child he had struggled for acceptance and never felt good enough. He carried these feelings into his teen years and became anxious and depressed. He was on Zoloft and Lithium which helped initially but the dosage had to be increased fairly regularly or he would crash and have to be hospitalized. Besides the depression, he was having trouble with emotional closeness, had real difficulty making decisions, and suffered from anxiety. He would only stay at a job for a few months until his anxiety would get so bad that he would quit because he was convinced they were about to fire him. However, our discussion did not reveal any evidence that he was at all likely to be fired, especially as he had been told that he was doing a good job. We traced his depressive episodes to situations that triggered his inferiority complex. First came the anxiety followed by the depression. We agreed on a definite link between the two. He implicitly agreed with anyone's negative feedback which fed into his depression and so it went round and round in circles. The terrorist in his brain was whipping him constantly and he was passively going along with it. What was conspicuously absent was anger at the destructive part of his mind that was torturing him.

In order to get over his passive acceptance and distorted thinking we went over difficult situations that had triggered his depression in the past to find out how he really felt. We discovered that anger was absent but so were other emotions like sadness. He was completely numbed out. It was a revelation to him that he could change his thinking and challenge his beliefs and as he did, as he "unfroze", his emotions began to surface and as they surfaced he had fewer and fewer depressive episodes until a year went by and he hadn't been depressed at all. In fact, he was feeling good and had stayed put in a job even though he found it challenging.

It is important to fight depression and not accept it as just the way life is. There are many approaches these days that can alleviate this disease, one does not have to suffer.

Kate Kent has been in private practice since 1985. For an appointment, call 416-466-5849.

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