

Depression is a condition, full of paradox and irony.

You get yourself through it, but YOU are the very thing that you feel you do not have. The YOU that you remember as strong enough to fight an imposter such as depression, is, unfortunately, the YOU that has temporarily left town. In its place is a 'you' that can't sleep, can't eat, and can't concentrate, a 'you' who is highly uncomfortable to live with and who you most certainly do not want to be.

From my observations, there are two kinds of depression. The 'I can't get out of bed" kind and the 'I'm so agitated I can't settle' kind. It is largely irrelevant which kind you have, as both will strip your life of pleasure and meaning, and living with either will be one of the hardest things you have ever had to do.

It follows then that navigating a route through depression will by no means be an easy task. However, the holy grail is to develop healthy and realistic ideas of what to do with yourself and what to expect from yourself. Of equal importance, you will ideally want to figure out what not to do with yourself and what not

to expect from yourself. In short, with your very imbalanced mind you want to try to cultivate a balanced approach.

So how can you find your way through depression despite the ironies, paradoxes and vicissitudes of the depressed mind?

Scaling down expectations to the bare necessities, and congratulating yourself for the smallest of achievements helps you through, even though when depressed, nothing is ever good enough and most notably, you are very definitely not good enough. By and large, connection with others can help you through depression, yet ironically, feeling disconnected is a hallmark feature of the condition. Exercising a healthy degree of self-care helps you through, yet treating yourself like a worthwhile human being when your self-worth is taking a constant pounding is a big ask. Depression is very practiced at taking your historic view of yourself as a

worthwhile human being, and placing it under ongoing attack. When it comes to negotiating life's uncertainties, even the non-depressed mind finds this a big deal. At best, the non-depressed mind manages to accept uncertainty or simply avoid it. The depressed mind has no such luxury of choice. It does, however, have a dire need for certainty, and what tops the list, is the dire need to know for sure that this depression will most definitely and absolutely come to an end.

Knowledge of your condition, because it is a condition, will also help. Being able to differentiate the symptoms of your illness from what you may believe is the new 'you' can be invaluable. It may just give you the chance of some small measure of perspective on your current predicament, and help at the very least to keep the memory of the old 'you' alive until the time arrives for it to make a comeback.

No discussion of depression would be complete without reference to anxiety. Just in case dealing with depression were

not hard enough, it is common to feel highly anxious at the same time, and the two together make quite some pair. By far and away the most helpful stance to adopt when dealing with anxiety is to accept it without liking it. Whilst this may sound simple, in practice it isn't! It is generally understood that anxiety will persist if it gets your attention. Therefore, when anxious, focusing on trying to rid yourself of the highly unpleasant symptoms, will paradoxically perpetuate the problem. In other words, resist it and it will persist all the more. If, however, you can do your best to accept it without liking it, it will in time, behave just like the Duracell bunny and gradually wear itself out.

And if you remember a single piece of information when it comes to anxiety, remember this: whilst anxiety may be highly undesirable, whilst it may be highly uncomfortable and may help you to imagine all sorts of possible future catastrophes, it will reach its peak and come down. Admittedly this will be very difficult to remember when highly anxious, but it's worth the effort. If you

can manage to live with wanton disregard for your anxiety, it will ultimately give up on you. Try to banish it, however, and you will inadvertently give those long lasting batteries some extra juice! Having depression means that you not only have yourself to deal with, but you also have other people to deal with, or more accurately, other people's opinions about depression and how you should get better. The worst advice usually comes from people who have never experienced the condition. Curiously enough, though they have never had any professional training whatsoever, they expect their advice to be just the ticket when you have depression.

Most commonly delivered advice is 'snap out of it', 'get over it' or 'deal with it'. What they don't appreciate is that the 'it' they are referring to is an illness that affects brain chemistry just like diabetes affects blood chemistry. They will also say that it's all in the mind, which is in fact correct. However, what is incorrect is to conclude that because it is all in the mind, you ought to be able to think your way out of a major depressive episode. The view from a

professional with a first hand experience of the condition is this: give everyone the chance to offer help but only take the help that helps. Aside from the offers of help from others around you, thankfully there are real professionals available offering real professional help. In tackling depression it is best to opt for treatments that have been rigorously tested and where the results indicate that they work. Currently, the results indicate that psychotherapy and psychiatric medication are the front line treatments for depression.

So who are the professionals and what do they do?

Firstly **psychotherapy**. This is the talking treatment that tackles depression. Evidence based psychotherapy claims that it is our unhealthy thinking about difficult events that is largely responsible for our psychological problems. A psychotherapist practices psychotherapy, and will help you to develop healthy thinking in the face of problematic life events. These might include what you say to yourself in the face of an adversity

as well as your thinking response to being depressed. Secondly **psychiatry**. This involves the use of drugs to tackle depression and is practiced by a psychiatrist. Strong evidence exists to support the claim that depression is also a biologically based condition. A psychiatrist will be able to diagnosis your depression through asking lots of questions. Then, if necessary, they will be able to prescribe psychiatric medication to redress any imbalances in brain chemistry.

There are a few top tips to keep in mind when you see the professionals. Don't be surprised if you are anxious before your first appointment, as there are a number of commonly held misconceptions which may play on your mind.

The first one is that a psychiatrist will prescribe pills that make you crazy, change your personality and turn you into a zombie who will be unable to feel anything at all. Now the reality: psychiatrists are there to prescribe drugs that treat your illness - they are not there to make you

crazy, turn you into a different person or a zombie devoid of feeling. Secondly, you may be anxious that a psychotherapist is going to take years to examine every moment of your life to date, and find a tenuous link between how your shoelaces were tied and your current depression. And now the reality: psychotherapists are there to deal with any unhelpful thinking that may have contributed to your current depression, and that may be maintaining it. Their aim is to help you get better in the shortest time possible.

Thirdly, though you may have convinced yourself that you are a medical enigma with a unique and untreatable condition. Psychotherapists and psychiatrists treat people with depression all day every day, and whilst 'you' may be unique, your depression is definitely not.

Fourthly, it is best to seek out professionals with a good reputation and ideally, have been recommended by someone you trust. Meet them and see if you like them. If you don't,

move on and keep looking until you find the right ones for you. And finally, a few words about how your treatment will help to you to get better. You may hope that the combination of treatments will work overnight and you will wake up one morning un-depressed. Regretfully for all of us this is not how the 'getting better' happens. However, what you can look forward to is gradual change, where you feel less depressed, less often and for briefer periods of time, until one day you realize that you feel like your 'old' self again.

When depressed it is common to imagine that everyone else is fine and you are the only person feeling lousy. Whilst understandable, this is not only untrue but also unhelpful.

Without doubt, writing 'Depression and how to do your best when you feel your worst' called upon my professional know-how. However, it also drew upon my first-hand experience of the condition. Why make reference to this? Simply to highlight that even though you may think you are the only one

to have been hit with depression, you are in fact in very good company. So much so that even Churchill managed to lead the country to victory between his bouts of depression!

So what is the best response to the conundrum of depression? Do your best when you feel your worst, keep on trying without having to achieve and remember that no one of us is likely to make medical history, depression passes and yours will pass too.

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