

Highly Commended: Jenny Towndrow (NSW)

Late Onset Depression: Manifestations and Remedies

One is not expected to make new friends in late life but at an adult education course on memoir writing I met Toni, once a cosmetician at David Jones, and Jake, a retired scientist. The three of us adopted a pleasant routine of lunching together after class and exchanging life's experiences.

It was at one such lunch, over a bottle of wine, that each of us revealed that we had suffered from what we identified as late life depression, quite unfamiliar in Jake's case.

"I'd never been depressed, always a no nonsense, stiff upper lip type," he said. "This time, grin and bear it didn't work. In the end I sought help – and I'm not one who goes to doctors."

Toni had known sadness (she was a widow) but had never before found herself helpless, in the grip of a misery that seemed endless and for which there seemed to be no cure.

"Of course, I'd grieved terribly when Charlie died. This time the sense of loss was acute but it was a different loss. I felt I'd lost my youth and looks." (She was still a pretty blonde, very well groomed.) "Worst of all, I'd lost my children. They both moved interstate, and I became obsessed with the idea that they'd done that to get away from me and that I'd never see my grandchildren again. It was awful."

For myself, also unexpected, was an attack of depression and anxiety, unlike the paralyzing inertia and hopelessness I had experienced following hypomanic highs – I am bipolar and no stranger to clinical depression. But, as I explained to my friends, the depression which had descended on me during the last year was quite different from the depression of my bipolar episodes. Initially I felt overtired; I was sleeping badly and was run down. A knee replacement operation had precipitated even less exercise than usual. Convalescing at home, I didn't pursue my journalistic career and had to face the truth that this was becoming more and more difficult. I found myself eating and drinking more – with consequent weight gain, and that was depressing. I experienced a total pessimism. I became convinced, I explained to my friends, that I would never lose weight and had I told myself I would never work at anything worthwhile or creative again, and I had never really accomplished anything. Now it was all too late, my life was nearly over and – nothing. I was useless.

"Worst of all," I confided to my lunch companions, tears in my eyes, "was the certain knowledge that my ambitions and plans would never be achieved. And now there was no chance. I was too old. I was a 'failure'."

Jake nodded sympathetically. "I know how you feel – felt," he said. "I'd started planning a trip to Egypt – I'd never been there – and then almost overnight all my dreams became impossible. In my case, it was the recession. I lost thousands, and went from having adequate superannuation and private investments to almost nothing, it seemed. I fell into a profound despair. I felt my life had finished. I convinced myself I'd be reduced to living on the state pension. So shaming. At nearly seventy I was too old to find a job and," he leaned over the table, "I have to admit I had some foolish notion of meeting a woman and eventual happiness. That, too, was now out of the question."

"I was financially OK," Toni said, "but I felt helpless – and hopeless about the future. I even stopped going out, seeing friends. I no longer found any pleasure in any sorts of activities, even hobbies like my needlework. I was bored. Bored and very lonely."

“I’ve always been a loner,” said Jake, “but that was partly because I had financial independence. That meant freedom. With loss of equity I felt I’d lost everything.”

“*Loss*, yes,” said Toni, “*Loss*, that’s the worst thing in old age. Loss of loved ones, they die or go away; loss of possessions; loss of youth —looks. In the middle of my depression my dog died, and for no good reason I felt guilty. I think I felt I’d neglected him when I felt so low.”

“Did you feel suicidal?” I asked.

“No” said Toni, “I was in good health and there were the children.”

“I did” said Jake unexpectedly. “I knew I’d never do it but it was a comfort to know I could.”

“But we’re all here” I interjected. “We’ve all got over it. What did we do to sort ourselves out? How did we pull ourselves out of our debilitating and unexpected depression?”

Toni blushed, “I fell in love.”

We all laughed.

“That’s not a guaranteed cure for anything” I said. “Love can lead to heartbreak – agony.”

“Yes, but that’s when you’re young” said Toni. “When you’re older it’s different; you’ve been through it all before... you don’t rush into things.”

“No, not even quick fixes for depression” said Jake. “Being a scientist, I researched everything thoroughly, mostly on the internet.”

“Oh don’t think mature love was the only thing that got me out of depression,” said Toni. “In the end I was becoming agoraphobic. I was terrified of going out and forgetting my keys or wallet. I got myself to my GP who prescribed a new antidepressant. It took a while to work, but it was amazing. It was as if the sun came out after weeks behind a cloud.”

“Interesting about your forgetfulness” said Jake. “In my researches, I discovered that a common side-effect of depression (or stress) is memory loss. If the depression isn’t treated this can cause permanent damage.”

“Yes, think of stressed soldiers and the way they turn to drink and drugs.” I said. “I used to self-medicate with alcohol – to calm me down and cheer me up. It doesn’t work! I am now very careful about what I eat; I avoid fats, particularly saturated and hydrogenated fats – junk food – and sugar, I take lots of Omega 3 and vitamins; and I’ve cut right down on the alcohol.”

“What about exercise?” Jake asked.

“When I felt better,” said Toni “I took up playing badminton with my friends.”

“Exercise is great for lifting depression.” said Jake. “It causes release of endorphins – natural pain killers – and pain, as we know, is not necessarily physical.”

“I actually took dancing lessons.” I contributed. “I even tried salsa, incredibly energetic – I could feel a sort of high; lots of endorphins there!”

“Was diet and dancing enough?” asked Jake. “It sounds as if you’d got pretty low”

“No. There was walking and, also, with the help of a very efficient friend, I became more organised – and tidy. Chaos, mental and domestic, is pretty depressing. I got a regular cleaner to come in to help with the house. I kept a diary, didn’t let bills get on top of me, made lists and so on. And simple, but effective, my husband and I went on a long holiday for the first time in years. I came back feeling relaxed and more philosophical about my life; above all, more positive. I realised I had a few more years to live and they might as well be good ones.”

“That goes for all of us” said Jake. “But getting out of depression takes a while. With my computer and library researches, I hit on the best method for me.”

“Yes, how did you shift the black dog off your back?” I was curious. “Did you take medication?”

“No. Ever since I found out I was allergic to penicillin I’ve avoided any kind of drugs. I tried meditation which helped a bit, but eventually I gave in and went to my GP who, after some form-filling, referred me to a course of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Medicare paid. To my great surprise, it worked. The therapist pointed out I’d been indulging in ‘unhelpful thoughts and behaviour’ and, through structured problem solving, and most of all, through challenging and identifying established beliefs or ‘wrong notions’ (like me thinking my neighbour was ignoring me because I’d come down in the world, when really he hadn’t seen me and was preoccupied with his own problems), taught me the skill of thinking *realistically*. I’d been jumping to conclusions, ‘catastrophising’, imagining the worst possible alternatives – like, I’d become destitute and homeless. Actually, the recession was easing and I wasn’t so badly off after all. In fact, why don’t you let me take you both to lunch next time?”

“Lovely. Lets go to that place by the fountain” I said. “Being near water is meant to be good for the soul.”

“That’s something to look forward to” added Toni. “And let’s not forget there’s always something to look forward to.”