

Highly Commended: Norman Bennell (NSW)

My Depression Emerged Suddenly

My depression emerged suddenly, upon retirement, and I fear black moods will stay with me for the rest of my life...

I'm not sure how high I rate on the 'depression scale' as it has never been assessed professionally. Identifying the severity of one's depression is very elusive. Obviously, there are few outward symptoms, nothing showing on your body, no ache or pain or anything to be indicated by x-ray. How much of my problem is just due to old age is hard to evaluate, but it is pretty clear that these depressive cycles are debilitating and have changed my character.

My confidence in dealing with other people has been reduced. I am often asocial and dread leaving the house. I don't want to meet new people. I become stressed over minor issues and irritations. For example, hiring a tradesman for house repairs or having the car serviced can be very disturbing. I spend most of my days at home alone. When I make the bed, it's hard to stop myself getting back into it. My daily shower has become less than that and I have let my hair grow long.

After three score and ten years of life (plus a couple more), I fear being consumed by my own anxiety and anger. I worry about the appalling performance of parliamentarians; teenage girls binge drinking; obesity; climate change; 'shock jocks' inciting racial hatred on the radio; young lads with massive bank balances from sport not knowing how to avoid trouble. Somehow, I feel responsible that things are not better.

My previous high profile working life was pretty successful by most standards. There were disappointments but none seemed to drive me down. I held senior positions in both the public service and the corporate sector, rubbing shoulders with politicians and leading businessmen. Large numbers of people reported to me. I made decisions that impacted on people's lives and I mentored the young and inexperienced. In the nineties, I was the CEO at a retirement village and hostel. It is to my deep regret that I never initiated any programs to handle depression. In retrospect, many residents would have been suffering from it, usually in silence.

The onset of retirement and the removal from regular interaction with others seems to be the shortcut to depression. For some of us elderly, that depression will become a constant. Irrelevance and invisibility will take over. The phone will hardly ever ring, extended families have too much on their plates to worry about you. Even ex-workmates, some still employed, are often too busy to meet for a drink. You are yesterday's man, somewhat alone and certainly forgotten. It is likely you will spend a lot of time in a chair, staring into space and wondering what happens now. You are not valued anymore. Years of experience, survival of hard times, wars, tragedy and success don't count.

In old age, you had expected to be revered; sought after to scatter pearls of wisdom and dispense sage advice. The satisfaction of having a grandchild on your knee attentively absorbing your knowledge and adventures is the ultimate. Such dreams are nothing but fantasy. The only reality is that you are being sucked into a vortex of introspection, loneliness, and even despair. You have never felt irrelevant in your life. Now, it's there every day.

That irrelevance and invisibility brings on intolerance and impatience. (Everything seems to start with 'I'). You show intolerance in many ways. You become angry with people who express a contrary point of view. You

cancel the newspapers because the writers get it wrong. If you ask for something, you seem to be low down on the priority list of responses. Your blood boils while you wait. But nobody notices. After all, you are invisible.

So what to do? Perhaps seek professional medical advice. What if you tell your doctor that nobody seems to be listening anymore and your stressed-out GP doesn't have time to listen either? Anyway, most men will only visit the doctor for an obvious problem or to get a script renewed! For my age (they say), my health is good. I don't feel inclined to share moods of anger, loneliness and despair. I don't want to be prescribed medication to be taken for the rest of what is left of my life. The catastrophic results of people giving up these medications or forgetting to take them are well documented, not a danger that an older person needs.

I sleep pretty well, although the dreams are often quite horrendous and almost always relate to past events and people. I go to bed as late as possible. I have no debt and a working wife, so money is not an issue. We've had the overseas trips, holidays and cruises. When the holidays end, I am usually back into moods of despondency almost before the unpacking is completed. My only regular activities are a commitment to crosswords to activate the brain and a weekly class to exercise the body. There has been some urging that I should take on volunteer work. Frankly, I fear being useless should my mood turn sullen and the depressing fact that you are probably dealing with people whose needs are real and greater than yours. I have never felt suicidal. At my age, death is a companion who doesn't need any help.

So where to from here?

Recognising where I am now is obviously a good thing. Writing this has been somewhat therapeutic. But the reality is only by finding something bright and uplifting will I be sure of being able to fight the times of darkness. Religion can be uplifting but having lived as an atheist, I expect to die as one. People are always inclined to ask somebody they've just met: "And what do you do?" Retirement translates as 'nothing' and they are inclined to move on. You are often judged by what you do rather than what you are.

But I firmly believe my problems, depression and anguish, would diminish with any sort of a job, just something I could talk about to strangers and be proud about. Not often does a 73 year-old get a second chance but what a great antidote to depression if you can pull it off. Dream on?