

3rd Place: Wes Brierley (VIC)

The Black Dog is Unluckier than Black Cats

Imagine if every day of your life began with the utter bewilderment of untreated depression. Imagine the feeling of constant frustration, the unrelenting anxiety and the everlasting loneliness of a disease that you do not understand. Imagine how this would affect your wellbeing, your day to day activities, your relationship with your spouse, your children, your family and friends. Imagine the effort it takes to try and live a happy, normal life, to succeed in your daily endeavours and to maintain healthy relationships, all the while desperately trying to keep your private battles within yourself and taking whatever measures necessary to ensure that nobody knows what you are dealing with.

My Father passed away two weeks before my fortieth birthday. For each of those forty years I watched him try to unsuccessfully deal with a depression that slowly ate away at him from the inside out. It was some time after his death that I came to fully understand what was happening to him. The frustration and anxiety caused by his depression manifested itself in extreme fits of anger that were directed at whoever and whatever was near enough to feel his vengeance. My mother, my siblings and I constantly found ourselves being held responsible for something that we had taken no part in, we were simply close enough at hand to know his wrath. For the most part we considered him to be a monstrous man with no self-control or real feelings for those who should have been closest to him.

Over each consecutive decade my Father's depression grew, his anger increased and his self-control became nonexistent until he had reached a stage that he could scarcely take on the simplest of tasks without becoming overtaken by a rage that would leave him incapable of functioning on any level. The unfortunate side-effects of his actions only further alienated him from his family. In his later years when family would return home to visit, he would sit alone in the lounge while my Mother was visited in the kitchen. At best, family members would put their head in the door and say hello and little more. Such are the long-term effects of misunderstood and untreated depression.

Where I have not, even after all these years found it within myself to totally forgive my Father for the way that he treated my Mother and his children, I now understand to a reasonable extent what he was dealing with and the internal battle that he fought on a daily basis. I am saddened by the fact that his illness was left untreated throughout his life, as I believe if appropriate treatment was available to him, that he could have lived an entirely different and rewarding life that would have included the reciprocated love and respect towards and from his family.

I know from conversations that I had with him in his later years that he dearly wished for the love and friendship that was missing from his life, however too many bridges had been burnt, so his frustration and loneliness was with him to the end. At the time of his death his body was riddled with cancer which, in my belief at least, was the result of the eternal struggle that he dealt with throughout his entire life.

I am however my father's son, so my understanding of his battles is not accidental but through personal experience. I now know first-hand what he had lived with for a lifetime and the devastating effect that it can have on your personal health and your relationships, and the never-ending battle to keep the black dog at bay. In the years between my twentieth and fortieth birthdays my bouts of depression and the side-effects that ensued cost me two marriages and two businesses. Finally, I found myself at a crossroad in life where I was forced to make what I consider to be the most important decision of my life. I chose at that defining moment to step back and ask for help. The journey from there to where I am today has been long and difficult, but every day

becomes easier. I will be eternally grateful to a small group of friends and professional people who have assisted me on that journey.

I am now fifty-five years old and find myself working in aged care. To fully understand the varying degrees of depression within our elderly population I believe it is necessary to take a moment to put ourselves in their shoes, and try to understand the enormous life changes that occur in our later years. These changes are a major contributing factor leading to bouts of depression. Consider this scenario: you have lived in the one home for forty years, this home you have shared with your life partner, your children and their children, and almost overnight you find yourself living alone in this home for the first time in your life. Apart from the feelings of loneliness and isolation, you are finding it increasingly difficult to carry out basic daily tasks that you always managed with ease; your agile body and sharp mind appear to have deserted you also.

Ask yourself: *“Would I find this too much of a challenge?”*

The next life-changing event is the sometimes frightening although necessary move into an aged care facility. The challenges facing new residents are enormous. They have left their familiar surroundings. On many occasions it has been necessary to sell their family home. They have left behind their pets and many treasured possessions. Finally, there is a need to give up much of their independence and allow care staff to assist with their personal care, their meals and many of the daily activities they have always carried out on their own.

Ask yourself. *“How well would I cope with these changes?”*

In my observations most facilities have sufficient staff to ensure that personal care, diet and medical wellbeing are maintained. However I believe a far greater emphasis should be placed on activities that stimulate the mind and body, to encourage participation in life and a healthy, active lifestyle. In general, one or two activity staff members are on hand to somehow provide daily activities for sixty or seventy individual residents. If we wish to decrease the level of depression suffered by our elderly it is essential to provide sufficient care staff, activity staff and resources to deliver the quality care that our older people deserve, it should be remembered that residents make the move to *live* in aged care, not to merely wait to *die*. It is well within our grasp to provide a healthy wholesome lifestyle that offers the mental and physical stimulation to ensure a smooth transition into care with limited stress. I cannot believe that our parents and grandparents have not earned the right to live out their final years in comfort, peace and good health.

Speaking from the experience of having the black dog follow me for much of my life, I understand the devastating effect this disease can have on one's life. It should be a priority for all government bodies and those responsible for the care and wellbeing of our elderly that they do not spend their final years in an unnecessarily depressed state. As our numbers of elderly are increasing rapidly, so will the need for quality care and appropriate staff. The time to act is now, to look to the future and provide the opportunity to treat our treasured elderly with the dignity they deserve.

“There is no way to Happiness; Happiness is the way.” (The Dalai Lama)