

WORKING TOWARDS WELLNESS

If I was in a wheelchair, it would be easier for people to understand. If struck by sudden blindness, diagnosis would be immediate and I would lose no time in learning management techniques. Instead, mood disorders are invisible and subjective, making them hard to spot and hard to comprehend. If my exterior looked as bad as I felt on the inside, people would have recoiled in disgust. I felt empathy with lepers - skin rotting, limbs dropping off. I needed a bell to warn people of my approach, feeling like a taint on everything I came into contact with. No one seemed to run screaming on sight of me, yet I was sure that they knew my embarrassing secret: I was completely useless.

For years, the majority of my energy went into hiding my defective worthlessness. I smiled, laughed, joked around a bit and worked relentlessly. Constantly attempting to outperform expectations, I dug myself deeper and deeper into a burrow. Mistakes were intolerable, any success deflected on to other team members. Pretending to be happy became who I was, frightened that if I let the mask slip I would lose the only thing I had to hold on to, the only thing I had built my identity around: my job. Paradoxically, the thing I was living for was the thing that was killing me.

Mood disorders affect all aspects of our lives – social, physical, sexual, familial. I reduced all these to a minimum so that I could continue to drag myself to work without any interruptions. It was completely normal, I thought, to focus so relentlessly on work. Aren't we told that we must work hard to be worthy? Isn't hard work rewarded by society? It was completely normal, I thought, to spend hours – hours! – crying. We all have our bad days, right? I made sure I had no one around to tell me differently.

In my head, sickness was a weakness and I would admit to no weakness. I needed to buck up my ideas, pull up my socks, stop feeling so much

pathetic self-pity, get on with it and appreciate what I had. At the same time I knew there was something wrong with me. Solution? Work harder, take on more responsibility than asked to, punish myself more for every mistake on a project, mine or not.

Eventually, I was blind: I had no clarity, no vision for the future, no perspective on my actions. I was also paralysed - devoid of any feeling and unable to move. I had no capacity to recognise my value or abilities, low self-esteem, poor decision making abilities and no energy for a new position & routine. I sensed that a new job would only transfer me and my depression from one known, safe, environment into another unknown, potentially unsafe environment.

It wasn't negative report on work performance that led me to a depression diagnosis. I may have "dropped the ball" once or twice but I was working very hard at keeping it together. It was my mother who insisted I see a psychiatrist. Attending the appointment seemed to be the only way to prove that there was nothing wrong with me. Funnily enough, diagnosis did prove there was nothing wrong with me. My essential being was fine, but it was coping with an illness – an illness which did have treatment available.

After a month on medication, I recognised that I was too depressed to accurately judge my own job performance. As ambitious as I was, I needed to safeguard my position by opening a line of communication with my employer – offering an in-road to bring up job performance if he had any concerns.

There is a lot of kindness in the human heart and my boss was supportive & grateful that I'd informed him. The few others that I shared with were similarly supportive – and secretive. The message: "this is a tough industry, depression is understandable – but don't let anyone around here know that you've got it." Health is a personal topic but for the first time it had occurred to me that this was something I might want

to keep to myself. For the most part, I did keep it to myself. I didn't need anyone cutting me any slack, after all.

In my lack of awareness, I assumed that diagnosis was the end of the path of depression. Now that I could apply a label and take a pill, I imagined my days of depression were fading fast behind me. In reality, diagnosis is only a turning point on a road that lasts the length of your life. If my life wasn't to be defined by depression, how did one travel the path of wellness?

I worked through cognitive behavioural therapy and learned to recognise faulty thought patterns. I learned to assert my needs. Drinking habits changed, physical exercise started. Tentatively, I made human contact with people outside my work. Slowly, I began to emerge from a false person with a dead soul into a world of depth and vitality I never even knew existed.

Ironically, it was only when I began to actively work at wellness did my work performance noticeably change. I left work on time so that I could get to the gym. I recognised that all mistakes were not mine to fix. I began to question long accepted beliefs about the expectations of my employment. I could recognise emotional dysfunction and disengage from it. With my new eyes, I saw the unspoken understanding that work must at least appear to be the most important thing in our lives, while at the same time, lip service is paid to work/life balance.

Gradually, it became clear that the conditions of my employment were completely incompatible with my needs to remain healthy. I realised that although my mood disorder was extreme, many people were experiencing a performance-affecting degree of mood disorder. Pervasive faulty thinking with the inability to freely express and assert feelings create and support an emotionally unhealthy environment that affects everyone. This environment is almost universally accepted as standard corporate culture.

It took two years after my initial diagnosis for me to finally accept that the expectations of my employment were incompatible with my needs to stay healthy. I needed to leave my job and I needed to do it immediately. My own concern for my health and increased ability to look after myself overrode all other concerns. I finally realised that I

wasn't a failure for being unable to cope with the demands of the job. With this realisation, the clouds above parted and a golden sunray came beaming through the gap, like the finger of a deity clearing the way ahead for me.

In less than two weeks, I was free. My doctor wrote a letter supporting my decision to resign due to illness. My boss showed incredible kindness, helping me to leave without working out notice. I composed an email to all the many people I'd worked with over the last seven years explaining my reason for resigning, hit "send" and walked out the door, perhaps feeling a little dramatic.

In the four months since, I have continued to actively work towards wellness. I stopped "working" and started to work out who I really am. I've allowed myself to learn balance, have human connection, fun. I can see myself clearly enough to realise I'm talented and capable with plenty to contribute to society. The response from co-workers, family and friends has shown me that there are just as many people in the world who understand depression as people who don't. I just had to reach out to find them. Now I know what I need to stay healthy, I can find a job that meets those conditions.

General collective awareness of the impact and effect of mood disorders (and mental health in general) is increasing.

There will be a day when, like disability awareness, health & safety precautions & sexual harassment protocols, mental health policies will be included as part of responsible business governance. It may be idealistic to hope or expect all people to recognise that, like dental or physical health, psychological health must be worked at by everyone, not just people living with the extremes of a mood disorder. It's not just the "sick" who get better when they work towards health. We all win when we all work towards wellness.