

## Learning to live with depression

I'm fourteen years old, healthy, a little obsessed with my athletic pursuits but overall a well-adjusted kid, then fairly suddenly the darkness moves in and I enter a new and terrifying phase of my life. I'm exhausted, not something I'm used to being. I become so tired eating becomes a chore. I become flat and lose interest in everything and any sense of enjoyment. In fact flat is only the beginning and far too soft a word for the despair that takes root. I can't seem to sleep despite crippling lethargy. Worse still I can't switch my mind off, it nags at me incessantly. My parents look on in their own despair, they know something is wrong, yet feel powerless. When my tears flow, as they do all too freely, I see my pain mirrored in the faces of my family, when they cry too it becomes unbearable. Things are happening so fast, I'm no longer attending school, I'm finding it hard enough to string words together at home. I watch TV, the news and whatever else comes on. As I watch the newsreaders I'm convinced it is me they are talking about, it's all out in the open now, I'm responsible for all the terrible things he is reading.

My Dad's a school counsellor, he has some numbers and arranges an appointment with a doctor in Redbank, a child and adolescent psychiatric hospital. My parents convince me to go, that these people can help, and I'm so desperate now I'd go anywhere. We arrive one afternoon, we don't have to wait long and we are brought in to a small office with a psychologist and a psychiatrist. I freeze up, I just can't talk aside from the occasional monosyllabic response. I'm afraid that these people are also aware of my ill deeds and maybe they're her to take me away. Beneath my seat is a tape recorder, it's been left on pause and I'm convinced it's there to record me. Fortunately my parents are able to discuss things and give them a fair idea of what's been happening.

The doctor is worried, he can see I'm severely depressed and wants me to come in to hospital. The idea of going in is too frightening, and we finally agree on me becoming a day patient, attending the school there. I'm started on anti-depressant medication. The Sunday before I go in my family and I go to the beach for the day. I'm exhausted and feel like my world is caving in around me. On the way home in the car the radio is on and the news tells of a shooting spree in Port Arthur. It's a terrifying story for anyone, and adds to my feelings of doom.

On my first day at the hospital school I am hardly able to speak, it's so intense I feel I'm choking. I go into a classroom with other teenagers. The image I recall most is of a young girl in a wheelchair, she had anorexia, she just sat there staring at the floor with a drip coming out of her nose, I'd never seen somebody that far gone. Unfortunately within a few months she had died.

In those initial couple of months I began to recover, the medication helped, but I also began therapies. I remember my first cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) group. Just the three of us, learning techniques to turn our tortured thinking around. More importantly I began to talk about feelings, about my beliefs, and found acceptance of them. It was liberating, as a fourteen year old boy such things weren't generally discussed.

My parents were cautiously optimistic and endlessly supportive. After three months on the day programme I was told I would be going back to my normal high school. The news flooded me with fear and despair, and I spiralled downward again. I got home that day in a terrible state and went straight to my room where I removed the light globe from my lamp, stuck my finger in the socket and turned the light on. Fortunately it did nothing but burn my finger. It became difficult to move and my thoughts went into overdrive. My parents came in and I told them as best I could what happened. None of us slept much that night. My head was racing, and I was beginning to hear arguments raging in my head. The following day we all went to Redbank and I was taken in to see the registrar. He was alarmed at the state I was in. I recall him holding my arm behind my back as he led me to the acute unit, a locked adolescent unit.

In the following weeks I was given massive doses of tranquilizers, and was seen by many doctors. All were concerned. This was psychotic depression, but it was too early to tell what else it might be. At times during that admission I became catatonic, unable to move properly and certainly unable to talk.

The absolute terror that takes over in such a state is impossible to convey to those not personally acquainted with it. I was helpless, I was dependent on the nurses, doctors and my parents for everything. My parents visited every day, as they would on all future admissions. It was heartbreaking for them to see their son like this and it took all their courage to support me. Without their devotion I don't know if I would have made it. With the aid of medication and time I recovered to the point of re-entering the open unit.

But it was only the beginning. Over the next three years I was in and out of the acute and open units. The doctors, nurses and psychologists did everything they could. All sorts of medication, therapies such as art therapy, and talking therapies. They all had their place in getting me through, but it was the personal support offered by my family and the staff at the hospital that probably helped the most. I was too unwell to care for myself. I saw no future, but thankfully others did.

During this time my schooling slipped away. My home school were very supportive and I made attempts to return, but there came a point where I felt I needed to break the negative cycle, leave school and get my life back on track. It was a tough decision to make because I had always been a good student and expected to go on to further study. After leaving school I was involved in psychotherapy that helped me gain some insight into my problems and helped me develop a clearer idea of who I was and what I wanted to do with my life.

I still had episodes but these began to lessen in intensity without requiring hospitalisation.

I took on a TAFE course two nights a week in community services. Although I had troubles at times during the course the staff were very supportive. The course provided me with many things, most importantly it gave me confidence in my abilities again, and eventually a job. In addition it assisted in my application for university.

I was thrilled to enter university at the same age as others who had finished school. I enrolled in a BA in psychology. My first year in university was a dream. I found subjects I was interested in and scored highly in them. I also found wonderful friends my own age, something my repeated hospital admissions had taken away.

Throughout my first two years of study my self-esteem rose considerably. I continued to have occasional depressed periods but nothing too severe until at the beginning of my third year things fell apart again and I was admitted into a private hospital. It took four months and roughly eighteen sessions of electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) to get me going again. On discharge I once more had to take baby steps. Attending a CBT style depression group. I also went back to university, taking just one subject to keep me stimulated and involved in something.

Over the next three years I required several more admissions to hospital, but I managed to continue my studies and eventually graduated. On several occasions I had to have day leave to sit final exams for subjects. In fact it was on day leave that I sat the entrance exams for my next course, the graduate medical program at Sydney. I passed this exam

and the subsequent interview and after deferral for a year due to an episode of depression. I will start in February 2006.

It takes the combination of multiple strategies to live with a depressive disorder. It often takes medication, such as the ones I take, it requires exercise and stress-management, meditation and relaxation, patience, a commitment to overcome it, and the love and support of family and friends. I continue to suffer from a mood disorder but I refuse to let it stop me from living the life I choose to live.