

"Pull yourself together. I don't know what's wrong with young people today." I never actually heard my mother-in-law use those words, but my wife did, as she and her younger siblings tried valiantly to cope with the ravages of a broken home, a violent father and a mother who had trouble coping. She heard them, and she vowed never to use them herself. She has hated the expression since childhood

It's just as well really, because it meant she never used that awful phrase when first her daughter and then her husband were bitten by the black dog. Instead, she realised that the only way to cope with this double dilemma was to seek other methods, effective methods. As a family we found four.

The first of these was love. It sounds so simple, but anyone who has lived with a depressive personality knows how hard it can be at times to draw on the reservoirs of love. Somehow, my wife did it – and in doing so she taught us what love means.

I especially needed the lesson because – though I always thought of myself as a loving person – I often found myself unable to express my feelings. Call it heredity; call it personality; call it weakness – experiencing love was easy but showing it was torture. When my children were hurt, for example, I responded by shouting at them. I remember my daughter being badly sunburnt – I mean, really badly sunburnt – and I dealt with it by shouting at her to stop crying. I was unable to see my children in pain and stand there powerless. Only later did I learn that the only reasonable response was love – an unquestioning love. I learned it from a wife who knew that being rational was no substitute for being loving. She helped us to understand that it was "heart people", not "head people", whose support we needed.

Laughter was the second method that helped us keep the black dog at bay. A visitor to our home once said "This isn't a home – it's a Monte Python script." Instead of being upset, we took it as a compliment and we still boast of it today. The ability to laugh in the face of depression was a major weapon in our armoury. My family has been blessed with a droll sense of humour and our ability to call on that "gift" (some people see our humour as anything but a gift!) has meant that at least some difficult situations were appropriately defused.

We never laughed at the pain or suffering others were experiencing, but we did mock the idea that because we were not well, we should surrender. As a family that laughed together, we were able to refresh our personal batteries and put our pain into perspective.

The third solution to our depression is one that many people find useful – psychiatry. Oddly, it was the one we had most trouble with.

I have always believed that if you have a medical problem, you should seek the most highly qualified specialist to deal with it. While I had faith in my GPs, I was always more comfortable when I was referred to a specialist. I guess that being a specialist in my own field, education, I wanted to know that I was being treated by medical specialists when I was ill. However, when it came to seeing a psychiatrist – that was different.

I'd probably seen too many American television programs where the psychiatrist was dismissed as a shrink. Perhaps the reason was more deep-seated. I knew there was no shame in seeing an orthopaedic surgeon if I had broken my leg; I knew it made sense for my wife to consult a gynaecologist when birth complications threatened; but to see a psychiatrist was ... well, somehow it was demeaning. The old adage had got through to me: you'd have to mad to see a psychiatrist!

Whatever the reason, I was ashamed, embarrassed, at least very reluctant to see a psychiatrist, even when my doctor suggested that such a move might counter my burgeoning depression. I thought that to admit to having some sort of mental illness was to commit professional suicide. I am not sure how I would have coped with that challenge, but Fate took a hand.

One of the parents at the school where I worked was a psychiatrist and one evening, during Parent-Teacher meetings, he popped his head into my office to ask me how I was. The answer I gave was guarded, but somehow he knew that I needed help – and in his own gentle way he led me to realise it too.

Funnily enough, making the decision to speak with a psychiatrist – and his support over the coming years was indispensable – was a very important life lesson. It helped me to see that a psychiatric illness was not the end of the world as we know it. More importantly, it helped me to reach out to others who were also suffering. Being able to say "I asked my psychiatrist about this ..." somehow gave my comments a legitimacy they previously lacked.

The fourth supportive factor was prayer. Some people tell me they only started to improve after they abandoned religion, and they don't like the idea that I was using what they saw as a crutch. I see no value in debating this issue – we are all individuals and we dance to different pipers – but I know that prayer was a major factor in restoring a sense of balance in my life.

Of course, prayer depended on my having religious faith and the faith I have as an adult is very different to my childhood faith (which I had retained well into adulthood). My childish faith involved a series of strictures and while it probably helped me to lead a "good " life, it was not the key to a mature life. My adult faith, developed over several decades is very much a relational faith, where God is no longer seen as "somewhere up there" but instead is

enfleshed (incarnated is the technical word) in my life. God became for me, as T S Eliot put it so well, my "still pointing in a turning world".¹

When the world around me seems unfriendly, unstable, unsupportive, I know that God is there and this knowledge helps me to regain and retain my balance. My ability to pray to this God, to engage in a personal relationship where I can be truly open, has been indescribably important.

The four "methods" we have worked on – love, laughter, psychiatry and prayer – are not original. Many other people use these, or at least some of them, regularly. For me, and for my family, the four were not clearly spelled out in the beginning, but as time passed and as the attacks of depression became more manageable, the importance of each of them became clear.

I know from experience that the attacks of the black dog can occur at any time, no matter how well I feel just now, and to withstand these attacks I need my armour. I don't have to pull myself together – the path to health process will instead be developed in conjunction with those who love me (and whom I love), those who laugh with me, those who use their specialist skills to support me, and the God with whom I speak continuously. This knowledge gives me great peace.

¹ T S Eliot, "Four Quartets – Quartet 1: Burnt Norton", IN collected Poems 1902-62.

<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media/eventscal/index.cfm>

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