

Understanding My Son's Black Dog

As children growing up we enjoyed watching cowboy movies. I don't know why but we always expected at least one scene where someone got caught in quicksand. It made simple sense if it was one of the Baddies who died this way. It added drama if a Goodie fell in and was saved. Lying on the lounge room floor, clutching for the rope thrown from an armchair, we would act out these scenes dozens of times, pretending we were being sucked into the quicksand. We thought only momentarily about how it would feel being consumed by this silent blackness.

These Cowboy movies of the 1960s seem so long ago, (I am showing my age) but the image of the quicksand victim returned to me in recent years as I watched my son suffer with depression.

Like the pool of quicksand, it is hard for me to say with precision when Oli's depression started. It is not like breaking an arm or a leg. I can't point to a day or a month or a year when he became depressed. Somewhere along the way it took hold of him. It was somewhere after the magic moment of his birth. It was somewhere after the days when, as a baby, people in the street would stop and comment on his winning smile. And it was somewhere before his late teens when he consulted our GP and was prescribed anti depressants.

He was and is a child with a variety of interests. He enjoys academic pursuits. He enjoys physical pursuits. He enjoys artistic pursuits. He has performed well in all three. He is physically healthy, and at the age of 23 he still has his winning smile. My friends often comment on his good looks. They say he has sexy eyes. I don't paint this picture to boast about him, but more to set the background against which he struggled with his depression and I struggled to understand it and how to cope with it.

I used to look at him and wonder how a child with so much talent and so much opportunity could fail to find contentment. But depression, like quicksand, is not selective with its victims. It wraps its dark and smothering

cloak around people regardless of their intelligence, beauty, talents, social standing, physical prowess or financial position.

During his last two to three years at school Oli seemed isolated from his peers. Did they see this? I don't know. He went through the motions of school sporting activities and the like but drew little companionship from this. He spent hours reading. He devoured the writings of James Joyce, Truman Capote, F Scott Fitzgerald, and Joseph Conrad, and then read whatever he could lay his hands on about the authors. Why was he drawn to the works of troubled artists with their bleak messages? As a mother I admired his inquiring mind but also as a mother I wanted him to enjoy the simplicity and freedom of childhood. I wonder now if I was too quick to praise the intellectual rather than seeing that he used it as a shield.

Oli and I talked about his unhappiness. We did not refer to it as depression. Yes he *was* depressed but I thought it was transitory. I thought that in the main it was because he was a child who found school limiting and socialising with his age group difficult. I gave it other labels. I desperately wanted him to be happier. I know it is a motherhood statement, but I lived his pain with him. It hurt to hear him sobbing in his bedroom. I would try to comfort him. Talk him through his lowest moments. Rationalise. Give advice. Stroke his forehead. Whilst the quicksand pulled him in a downward spiral I tried to throw him the rope from the armchair.

Then and now I ask am I somehow responsible for his suffering? Is it something I did or didn't do? Why has this happened to him? I can read about depression and family histories and genetic links. I can intellectualise about causation, but as his mother could I have made a difference?

Rather than being able to chase it away, the black dog moved in and dominated his life after he left school. The debilitating periods became more frequent and intense. They would drain away his energy. He talked of giving up. He could not see that his future would ever be any different. He had been a prisoner held in the tentacles of depression for as long as he could remember and he was tired. He craved just one day when he could switch off the tormenting tape in his head. I felt powerless and at times fatigued by his suffering.

Oli's first hospitalisation for depression came nine months after leaving school. He was overseas. Sadly the black dog is an international traveller. We had been in regular contact so his desperate call came from out of the blue. "*Mum, I need help.*" I won't forget the pleading in his voice nor the fear I felt. He was in the quicksand and I was not there to throw the rope to him. I was frightened that I would lose him.

His second and third hospitalisations came a year later when he was back in Sydney.

No matter how broadminded you think you are it is confronting to have your child admitted to a psychiatric hospital. I have a public and a private life. I am the product of an upbringing where you did not wear your heart on your sleeve. I was taught that in adversity stoicism is a virtue. So despite my training as a social worker and a lawyer, despite my baby boomer upbringing, despite my love of my family and my absolute love of my struggling son, I was only able to tell two friends about Oli's admission to hospital. My family and work colleagues did not know.

Why was it a secret? Early on Oli had asked me not to tell people about his constant struggle. He did not want to be the topic of conversation because of it. He feared he would be diminished in other people's eyes, even in the family. To be honest, I was comfortable with this request. I found it so hard to talk about it to others anyway. Partly because I wondered what their reaction would be. Partly because I am my mother's daughter and we hide our pain. And partly because I saw it as Oli's privacy about which only he could make decisions. I rationalised our secrecy.

In retrospect I was wrong to do this. Secrecy about depression simply fuels the fire of despair for everyone involved. Pretending everything is all right closes the door on support whereas disclosure has healing qualities and spreads a safety net beneath the sufferer. But it is easier to know these truths than to act on them. I am learning to act.

It was fortunate that through his dark haze, Oli was always able to ask for help. Even today, as I write, a friend of mine five hundred kilometres away is burying her son; a wonderful and much loved young man who took his own life. At times, when Oli was at his lowest, I worried that he may do the same. If he was late home or late up, my mind would be tormented by such

thoughts, relieved only by the sound of him closing the front door or opening his bedroom door. Help and death can be seconds apart.

What an all-powerful thing is this depression that it can torture a person so much that the human instinct for self-preservation is overridden. The taunt by some to “pull up your socks” fails to appreciate the enormity of the blackness, the despair, and the exhaustion that engulfs the sufferer. Everyday tasks can be too hard. It took me time to understand. It took me time to see that Oli’s hours of sleeping or video watching were respite for him from the struggle of each day. It looks mindless to the outsider but it is restorative in a sense. If you stay still in the quicksand you might not sink so fast.

Through years of psychiatric treatment, anger, fear, resolution, impatience, self-doubt, tears, humour, strength, openness, willpower, courage, understanding and gradual acceptance, Oli has chased his black dog towards its kennel. But it is still there in the backyard. The dark periods have become far less frequent and far less intense. Will he ever be totally free of it? I do not know. Will the dark days return? I do not know. What is important is that *he* knows his life is now different. *He* knows he can be free of the torment.

For the moment most of his body is out of the quicksand. Whilst I will always be happy to stand on the chair and throw him the rope, for now I can put it away.