

HOW TO LIVE WITH THE BLACK DOG (DEPRESSION)

It didn't matter that I was well educated and more than capable at my job, with a comfortable lifestyle, children and close friends, and an apparently happy marriage.

In the past eighteen months I lost my health, my marriage, my job and my sense of purpose and self-esteem.

If it wasn't for my GP, psychiatrist and counsellors, and the care and support of my family and a few close friends, I might even have lost my life.

And it wasn't as if I could do anything about the onset of depression. Unbeknown to me, work colleagues first started noticing my mood swings, increasing pessimism and seeming personality changes over two years ago. Like a black dog, depression had crept up on me.

By the time my marriage collapsed eighteen months ago I was on the verge of a massive crash. The marital separation pushed me over the brink into black despair that I am still fighting.

Grieving and in denial, I became a recluse, a prisoner in my own home. I shunned all social contact and was unable to carry out the simplest of tasks, let alone report for work.

For months I believed there was nothing I could do about my depression. I was so afraid of the shame and judgement of anyone finding out about my inner pain and sadness. I cried. Cried over the unfairness of it all, cried from the aching for happiness that I perceived in the lives of others.

Finally, at the insistence of family and Mends, I confided in my GP, who diagnosed major depression and prescribed antidepressant medication. Despite being closely watched by him and Mental Health Workers he contacted, I began to behave in an erratic, self-destructive manner, self-medicating with alcohol and soon I found myself in trouble with the law for the first time in my life.

My internal voice was all the time telling me over and over how hopeless and pathetic I was. Then came self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

It was weeks before doctors, Mental Health Workers and counsellors could convince me that I needed intensive treatment for my depression in a private mental hospital. I had to overcome my misplaced pride and fear of the stigma, I had to make a response when everything seemed out of control but once I did, once I agreed to seek further help, I was on my way to recovery (although I didn't see it that way then). It took a long time for me to accept that these people kept encouraging me to seek help not because I was worthless or a failure but because I was suffering from a serious illness and they cared for me.

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I remained in hospital for three months, uncured but in the end better equipped mentally, and physically, to live with the black dog, to manage my depression and my life.

Since my discharge twelve months ago my rehabilitation has continued, with cognitive behavioural therapy, antidepressant medication and fortnightly to monthly assessments by my GP, psychologist and treating psychiatrist. I now understand the importance of a balanced diet, healthy sleep and regular exercise in fighting depression, and all have improved greatly. I attend tai chi classes and no longer feel shame and the need to mask my depression: I have severely moderated my alcohol consumption to light 'social' drinking that will not interact adversely with my medication.

In hospital, I began regular meditation and found it liberating and insightful. It has helped me fight off the black dog, with all its insecurities and anxieties. I learned to detach myself from my debilitating, negative thoughts and to realise that they are mostly unnecessary and fanciful creations of my ego. Meditation has helped me overcome feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing, which plagued me for months during my deepest despair. I have begun to engage with life in a more positive and vital way that eighteen months ago I could never have conceived possible.

Through practising meditation I have been able to combat the onset of stress and restlessness, slow my breathing as a defence mechanism against fears and feelings of vulnerability, and to lower my blood pressure. It has given me a sense of inner calm and stability. It has increased my confidence and self-esteem, and has given me invaluable insights into the factors which contribute to a sense of joy, optimism and gratitude in life. I have begun to understand that my sense of self-worth is not dependent on how other people see or react to me.

A related practice I have found to be successful in fighting off my depression and morbid self-absorption has been the pursuit of gratifications, which produce a sense of 'flow', or total immersion, and mental clarity. I have begun a journal in which I record these gratifications, whether it is the stimulating conversation I had with a friend, the book I read that revealed to me new insights or a meal I cooked that required skill and stretched my culinary ability. The feelings of satisfaction and sharing from engaging in such activities have contributed to my ongoing wellbeing and sense of self-worth and engagement with life.

While I have cautiously re-kindled the flames of old friendships, I also spend time alone, walking in the bush or along the beach or river with my dog, or going back to what I have done well in the past: writing, photography and painting. Slowly, I have reconnected with my creative self. I have heeded the wise counsel of Australian poet, Peter Bakowski:

*look...
for the virtue within yourself
what you have done, what you have mastered,
no matter how small the arena,
and what it is that you must do
now.*

(lines from *Counsel*, from *In the human night*, 1995)

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

31 May 2006

I have begun reading again. At first poetry and then books dealing with depression and wellbeing, such as William Styron's *Darkness Visible*, Thomas Moore's *Dark Nights of the Soul* and *Instant Calm* by Paul Wilson. These, and web sites such as *beyondblue*, *DepressioNet* and *blackdoginstitute*, have helped me to understand depression and to overcome the fears and stigma associated with it. They have helped me to understand that I am not alone in dealing with depression, that I am not a failure or weak because I suffer from it. It can affect anyone at any time.

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No one strategy, or 'magic pill' on its own, has been responsible for me coping with the black dog. It has taken a combination of talking therapy, exercise, diet, the pursuit of gratification, meditation *and* antidepressant medication to transform my life from the pitiful state it was in eighteen months ago. Together they have helped me to combat the constant negativity, to break the harmful thought and behavioural patterns, and to relieve my anxiety and depression. Counselling from my doctors and psychologist has given me insight and support vital to anyone who wishes to recover from depression. Along with the love and support of family and friends, they have helped me appreciate more what virtues I have inside me and to realise family, health and wellbeing are what matter above all else. They have helped bring joy and gratitude back into my life.

Furthermore, I now realise that the bottom line in dealing with my depression has been my finding ways of *believing* that I have the power within myself to counter it. Daily, I am conscious of managing my depression. It is, and must be, ongoing management. I now view myself more positively and my life's ambitions more plausibly. I realise I need to gradually reinvest my energies socially, by opening up to new relationships and experiences. I have slowly begun this and have become stronger but there is still a long way to go.

In a sense, I have now lost my old self and am in the process of becoming a new person. My experience of living with the black dog over the past two-years has brought about a heightened awareness of what has happened to me and while I am not grateful for having had depression I accept that I wouldn't be who I am now without having gone through it. Although it does not define me, it's now part of who I am.

I don't know what the future holds for me, but it is much brighter. I have hopes of returning to the work force sometime in the future, and I have the blessings of two wonderful teenage children and supportive friends and family, without whom I would not have been able to cope with the black dog. I take one day at the time now, telling myself that if I'm having a black day then things *will* be better tomorrow.