

Depression - what to do about it.

Of all the mental health difficulties, depression is the one that has touched me most closely. As a sixth former, I sank into a deep state of gloom. We are certainly living in challenging times now but as a teenager in the 1970s, the world didn't seem much better! There was war in Africa, seemingly endless famine, the Cold War with its constant threat of apocalypse - well, that's how it looked to me - we seemed to read endless novels and poetry about surviving the bunker.... or not! Nor was Britain's economy in a great shape. Most people my age will remember the power cuts, which forced us to use candles and boil eggs on our open fire and sit in freezing classrooms with coats, hats, gloves and scarves on top our blazers! All that, combined with reading First World War poetry and struggling with raging hormones, was a pretty toxic mix! I wasn't looking after myself well either - too little sleep, not a great diet, virtually no exercise and all work, work, work! In terms of bad weather (to use Stephen Fry's analogy), I was brewing up a storm!

Stephen Fry points out that sometimes bad weather just happens - we don't see it coming and we don't know where it's come from. It can be the same with depression. When it rains, if we're sensible, we put on our waterproofs or we get soaked. It's the same with depression - you can do nothing and you'll get sodden - or you can put on your waterproofs. The rain doesn't go away at once but you don't get so wet; likewise, the depression won't go away just like that, but you're doing something to protect yourself.

So what do depression 'waterproofs' look like?

It's not rocket science. There are some basic, practical steps you can take:

Regular exercise (that doesn't have to mean sport!) Find something you ENJOY - exercise releases endorphins (the 'happiness' hormones). It's also really good for your brain and helps you to grow your brain cells - honest! Exercise in green spaces and natural environments really helps - so if you're going for a run, choose fields and parks over streets. Can you get to school by bike or walking? Do it! You'll give your brain a natural boost at the beginning and end of the day, especially if you can manage to cut through the park. If you come by car, get yourself dropped in St Nicholas Park car park and walk through the park from there. If that idea worries you, find a friend to do it with!

Avoid ruminating This is where you go over and over the things that are upsetting you. As soon as you notice yourself doing it, take steps to stop. All ruminating does is establish well-worn neural pathways in your brain - so the more you do it, the better you will get at it! Planning is useful. Ruminating is not. As soon as you find yourself doing it, accept the thought - just acknowledge it's there - and then mentally walk away from it. Do something to distract yourself! The idea of 'Thought buses' can really help. Don't stay on the 'I am so depressed' thought bus - it will take you to dark places that you don't want to go to. Get on a different 'Thought bus' with a destination that you like!

Examine your thinking and beliefs. What self-limiting *stories* are you telling yourself? Some classics are: 'If I don't do really well at school, my life will be a disaster!' 'I am just a

miserable person. It will always be like this and there is nothing I can do about it.' 'No one will ever love me.' 'I am useless – everyone else is cleverer/more talented than me, therefore there is no point in me.' All these really are stories your brain is telling itself. They are fictions, not facts, but you may have been telling yourself a story like this for so long that you have come to believe it is true. Start telling yourself a different story that will serve you better! **Remember:** A thought is not a fact.

Try Mindfulness Meditation You can find all sorts of information about this on the Internet and a lot of people find the Headspace App a really helpful way in. My favourite website on this topic is:

<http://franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/>

The Chocolate Meditation is a fun place to start!

If you need some help with this, do get in touch.

Eat a balanced diet. If you eat rubbish, you can expect to feel rubbish! Add sunflower seeds and sesame seeds - these have natural serotonins in them. Make sure you are eating your 5 fruit and veg eat day to get the vitamins and minerals that your brain needs. Eat breakfast! If your blood sugar plummets, you will feel awful - that's a no brainer.

Have regular chill-time doing something you enjoy! Yes, you have academic goals to achieve but you will work better if you have fun too. Consider taking the whole of Sunday off. Sounds outrageous? Just consider - it's only fairly recently that our society has dropped the idea of a Sabbath - and our mental health has deteriorated. People didn't always go on about work/life balance - they didn't need to!

Spend time with good friends. Time and again, research shows that people who have good networks cope better at times of trial and crisis. A friend once told me she'd decided to spend more time with radiators and less with drains. Good tip. Choose your friends wisely!

Smile! This sounds really crass when you're feeling low but recent research shows that our bodies reflect our moods and vice versa. I think we all realize that if we feel low we tend to look grumpy, but did you know that if you look grumpy, you will tend to feel low? So 'Grin and bear it!' really is good advice! If you smile, your mood will tend to start rising! If you hunker down and look miserable, you will feel even worse. So stand up straight, shoulders back and smile! And keep on smiling! (Botox injections into the face actually help people recover from depression because they stop them from looking miserable – and if they look less miserable, they feel better! It's true – believe me!) Even holding a pencil horizontally between your lips can help!!!

Be grateful! Expressing thanks lifts our mood - trials show this again and again. So think about all the things you are thankful for. Say thank you to people. Tell people when you are grateful for something they have done. You could even keep a **Gratitude Diary!** Each night before you go to bed, write down 3 things that have gone well that day. Our memories get laid down when we sleep so it's important to be thinking of good things you want as

memories just before bed - really not the time to be watching disturbing and depressing things on TV or anywhere else! Personally, I do this in the morning -it's a very hopeful start to the day and it's great to look back on when you are feeling low.

Protect your sleep time. Computer screens and phone screens disrupt sleep patterns - so switch them off at night. If your friends really like you, they'll wait till morning. Arrange your work so that you're doing something which isn't looking at a computer screen for at least the last hour before bed. Reading a good, fun book before sleep is a good strategy – though not one that's so thrilling that you are tempted to keep on reading! Make sure you are getting the right amount of sleep for you. Not every adult needs 8 hours but you're constantly feeling tired, you're not getting enough. Younger people are thought to need 8 - 10 hours. Unfortunately, the teenage brain would prefer to go to sleep late and get up late but school doesn't allow for that. If you sleep in at the weekend, you can end up in a constant cycle of something very similar to jet-lag - so it's actually better to try to stick to a regular sleep pattern, at least in term-time. Sorry!!

Seek help for academic problems. We all tend to feel better if we feel we're achieving something; it can be really draining to feel like we're getting nowhere. So use your teachers - that's what they're there for!

Filter out the troubles of the world, at least for now. Try NOT listening to or reading the news for a while. What exactly are you going to do about it? Decide what the focus of your life is at this particular time and get on with that to the max, whilst looking after yourself. There are times and seasons for everything - this may not be the time for you to be wallowing in bad news!

Maintain a routine. Recent research suggests that people report a sense of meaning in life more if they have a coherent routine for maintaining an ordered life. Perhaps with that bedrock of orderliness we can feel secure. It makes sense - if we want to tackle big things, we need to look after the little things. So, if you're slithering down the slippery slope to despair, keep going with a routine to tackle the mundane things of life. (Sorry about this, but making your bed each morning, has been shown to make people feel better and sleep better! So get on with it – your mum is going to love you! ☺ There's a great little book called 'Make your Bed' by Admiral William H McRaven, a US Seal – you might find his tips inspiring.

Seek your life's meaning and purpose. 'What is the meaning of life?' is an age-old conundrum. There is much to read and explore in this area. You could do worse than start with a chat with a teacher whom you got on with or another trusted adult, including our Chaplain or one of us in the counselling team. You could also ask the librarians for some help finding some reading. Studies show time and again that having a faith helps maintain well-being – but it doesn't have to be a formalised religious faith. Maybe you have a strong faith in socialist principles or in being ecological. The sense of purpose and the social network that you will become part of, will both help you psychologically.

Get yourself some counselling or coaching. Finally, you can, of course, ask to see one of us in the counselling team or you can see your own GP to get some through the NHS - though the waiting list will probably be longer than at school!

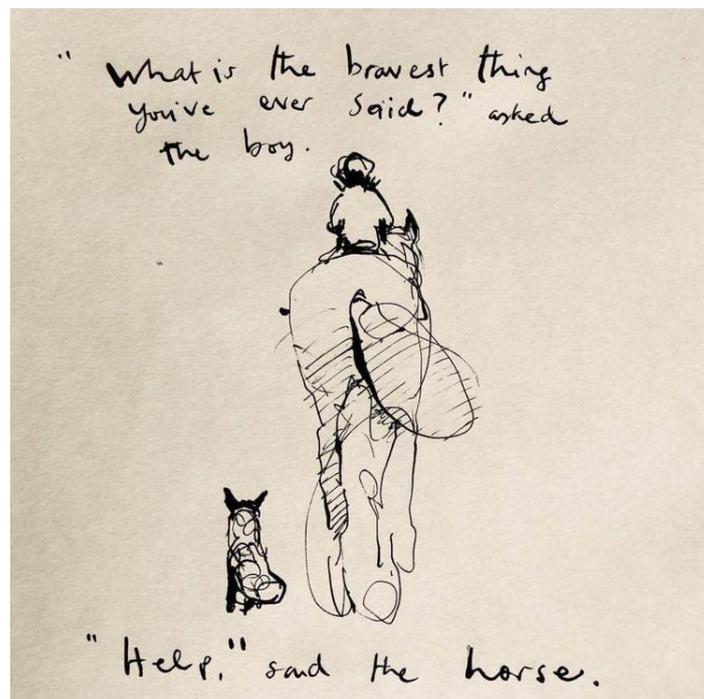
I like Stephen Fry's metaphor. He has suffered very badly with depression so I trust what he says. I like the way that comparing depression to bad weather suggests there is something we can actually do to help ourselves whilst accepting that we may have to be patient whilst the storm rages and eventually passes.

VERY IMPORTANT

IF YOU FEEL SO BAD THAT YOU ARE HARMING YOURSELF, THEN PLEASE GET IN TOUCH WITH US ASAP OR TALK TO AN ADULT WHOM YOU TRUST.

IF YOU ARE CONSIDERING TAKING YOUR OWN LIFE, THEN IT IS VITAL TO GET HELP IMMEDIATELY. IF YOU ARE NOT AT SCHOOL, (WHERE YOU CAN TALK TO US IN THE COUNSELLING DEPARTMENT OR ANY ADULT WHOM YOU TRUST) TALK TO YOUR PARENTS OR GO TO YOUR GP OR TO ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY.

DO NOT HESITATE. THE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE WHO ATTEMPT SUICIDE ARE LATER VERY GLAD THAT THEY DIDN'T SUCCEED.



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