

A Beginner's Guide to Depression

Abstract—This paper documents my experiences with depression, in the hopes that some lessons I learned may be of help to others who are struggling with similar problems. I put forth a few ways of modelling the problem, and offer some techniques for coping with depression.

I. PREFACE

It seems reasonable to believe that each person's experience with depression will be different. The causes, effects, and therefore solutions must also be varied. But perhaps there is enough commonality between a large group of depression sufferers for some of the following advice to be helpful. At least that is the hope, as what follows is merely what I perceived as my causes, my effects, and my solutions. So following any of the advice may not do anything, or it may make things worse, I don't know. But it also may make things better, and if nothing else seems to be working, it might be worth trying.

A brief synopsis of my experience is as follows. I began suffering from depression around age 6, which became exponentially worse until age 14. The negative thoughts running through my head made it difficult to sleep at this point, which lasted until I got to college at age 18. Things became a bit better at this point, as I had more control over my surroundings, and was distracted by amazing new opportunities. But within a few years, the stress of school became greater as the novelty wore off, and my depression worsened. I ended up seeing a therapist after a particularly bad episode, but didn't pursue this path, as I was afraid of the university having me committed, or being asked to leave.

After graduation things worsened again, as I was no longer constantly surrounded by a good support group of friends, and was not nearly as busy or externally directed (Idle hands are the devil's playthings!). Within a few years this became unbearable, and I basically snapped. I quit my job, gave away most of my belongings, and spent the next two years driving around the country, living out of the back of my car. It was in the period that I finally admitted to myself that I had really severe problems that I needed to fix, and I gave myself the time to fix them.

After two years of talking with friends, thinking about the past, and writing down all of thoughts, I began to see a number of common threads in my bad experiences. I formulated some solutions, and began the daily practice of enacting these solutions. Within about two years my life had become orders of magnitude better, and within another two years, I knew I would never think about suicide again. Now, ten years later, I can not describe how happy I am with my life. I never imagined it could possibly be like this. Quite frankly, there is a part of me that thinks it must all be some sort of illusion, that the hammer will fall any day now. But for years it's just been getting better and better. Sometimes it's quite frightening

as it's all so foreign to me, feeling how most people have probably felt their whole lives.

II. HOW DO WE LEARN ABOUT DEPRESSION?

According to one survey by the CDC, about 5% of the population suffers from depression. More shockingly, suicide is the number three killer for all people aged 10-44. Suicide deaths are almost as likely as death by homicide for this group. The rate is highest for those aged 25-34, where it is the number two killer with 12% of that population dying by suicide. Just for completeness, accidents are the number one killer amongst those in the first half of their life, with 35% dying from that cause. The majority of these are car accidents.

There are a few things I find disturbing about these statistics. First off, suicide is a large factor for those so young as 10 years old. Secondly, how little attention is paid to depression and suicide considering its large impact. Consider the expenditures the government makes to prevent homicide in comparison.

The first I ever heard of depression being spoken about openly was when I arrived at college. Granted, the general climate has changed since that time (1992), and the public perception of depression has become more helpful. But, as a youth I rarely heard any discussion on the topic, and if it was mentioned, it was referred to as some sort of personality problem - as if it was a matter of just smiling more.

This is where the problem begins, when we are young. We learn so many things when we are young, and for good or bad, those lessons are the hardest to forget. If you break your leg or have a cold, you are taught to seek help, and go easy on yourself until it is better. But with depression, you aren't taught anything, or worse, you're taught to hide it. It is mocked in the same way that other disabilities are mocked. Not directly or openly, but more subtly. For example, everyone being silent when a person in a wheelchair goes by, or offhand comments about the people on the 'short bus'. Depression is lumped into this category, making the sufferer less likely to talk to anyone about it, in fear of being ostracized, or thought of as different than others.

Finally, we often don't even know it can be different. There is so much going on developmentally at those young ages, that it's hard to say whether what is internal to us is common or not. And we don't have the life experience to really understand what is going on. For myself, I just assumed that everyone felt shitty all the time. I didn't like it, and I knew I was somehow broken, but since no one ever talked about it, I just figured that was the way life went. And from the way my parents spoke about most mental problems (e.g. "get over it, it's just between your two ears") I didn't want to admit to them that I felt this way.

So I didn't talk about it, and as a result I didn't have any opportunity to learn about it from anyone else. The things I

did pick up were offhand comments, or advice from friends. And, to my knowledge, few of these people has suffered from depression, and those that had were still struggling with it. Basically it was a case of the blind leading the blind.

And this is the state I assume the average depressed person finds herself in. Feeling like crap, reluctant to talk about the problem, and getting questionable advice when she does. Under these conditions, it's not surprising to find that the problem won't go away.

III. WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

There are two modes of looking at life, one is that of the scientist or philosopher - an interest in the fundamental truth. The other is that of the engineer - an interest in a basic model which describes the system adequately enough to get usable predictions about the future. Both are useful approaches, but for day to day activities, I find the engineer's approach to be more efficient. It is from this perspective that I present my models of depression:

- Depression as a chemical imbalance.
- Depression as a symptom.
- Depression as an addiction.
- Depression as a downward spiral.

Each of these models is useful at various times, and should be viewed as such. They are merely models which can be used to guide your decision making process. They are not absolute truths or unbreakable laws of physics.

I will start with perhaps the least useful model: Depression as a chemical imbalance. This seems to be modern medicine's view of the situation, and it might be the closest to the truth. But that is not very helpful, for what direct control does anyone feel like they have over the instantaneous chemical state of their body?

The benefit of this model, oddly enough, comes from its conclusion that you have no direct control. For many years I tried to solve my 'chemical imbalance' by working to cut out emotions from my life. I strove for a very rigid control of my inner workings, to change those fundamental aspects that I considered to be the root causes. This merely created more stress and worsened my situation. By letting go some level of control, you keep this from happening, and you obtain a freedom, or disconnect from the problem itself. It's not your fault. You have not failed in some way to cause this to happen, you were just born this way.

The second useful conclusion from this model, is that you have no instantaneous control, and you should think preventatively. The analogy to another chemical imbalance problem that I like to draw is that of diabetes. Similarly, here is a chemical imbalance that can kill. You can get relatively fast stabilization with drugs, and for some people this is the only option. But, for the large group with type II diabetes, simple preventative measures can keep the problem in check. Similarly, the focus for maintaining a healthy chemical balance in the brain should be on keeping a close eye on how you are feeling, and doing small things on a regular basis to keep yourself where you want to be.

The second model, Depression as a symptom, also does not provide a good instantaneous solution. The difficulty with locating the causes of a symptom, is that they are not necessarily active when the symptoms occur. In the case of post traumatic stress disorder, the depression a person feels may be the result of some event which happened 20 years ago - quite the needle in the haystack.

So how does looking at depression through this lens help us? It forces us to break up the problem, and seek both short term and long term solutions. As with any problem, the immediate symptoms need to be dealt with. In this case, that might mean generating good coping techniques to get you through your day and thinking clearly again. Once the symptoms are mitigated, then you can start searching for the causes. And, as with most ailments, this usually takes a long time, with a lot of trial and error to locate. Finally, once a solution is found, there is usually an even longer period of rehabilitation. Perhaps not the most reassuring model, but it does set our expectations appropriately, that we are in it for the long haul, and we need to make incremental progress on a daily basis.

Depression as an addiction - the beginnings of a solution. This was the first model I found to be useful in the short term. It occurred to me that I fundamentally did not want to be un-depressed, at least not if you analyzed my behaviour. The majority of things I did actually made the problems worse. On the surface I payed lip service to wanting to get better, but night after night I would slip into the same bad behaviours, only to get up the next morning feeling miserable and repenting, swearing I would never do that again.

What other behaviour model fits this better than addiction? To constantly do something we know we shouldn't, with seemingly no ability to stop. I would spend hours and hours talking to other depressed people, exchanging stories of how crappy our lives were, basically wallowing in our own misery. Not to say that talking about a problem is bad, as this is often helpful to understand you have a problem, and see yourself through someone else's eyes. But, there is a limit where it is no longer cathartic, and is merely masturbatory.

I saw the same behaviour in my friends. They would endlessly complain about how certain people, or certain situations would make them feel like crap, only to have them fall into the same trap a few days later. The same is true of solitary moments where I would become consumed with negative thoughts, just drilling down deeper and deeper into my pain, as if I was somehow going to find the exit down there. I never did, it never got better from any of that, but yet I would continue to do it.

Some part of me needed to feel extreme emotions, and negative emotions are far easier to come by than positive emotions. And just like someone who is addicted, at some fundamental level, it really is out of your control. The solutions are not clear, and there is no single fix for it. If there were, I probably wouldn't be writing this right now.

This brings us to the final model, Depression as a downward spiral, which attempts to explain the basis of the addiction model. The basic building block of this model is that it's hard to see the world in a positive light when you are depressed. This seems very simple and self-evident, but is also very

powerful, and the key to what ended up working for me. Basically, something in your life triggers a negative thought, which is very common. I can't imagine someone going through a day, having to interact with other humans, without having a negative thought pass through their brain at some point. But, for the depressed person, they have a harder time letting this go, and it also clouds their vision to a greater extent. So, they either begin to focus on that single thought, or perceive the next new thought negatively. Now there are two negative thoughts, and the brain has an even harder time seeing clearly. Each new thought, or recursion on the original thought, makes this worse and worse, until you are too far gone to have any control anymore. You can no longer think clearly enough to find your way out, and are relegated to waiting for it to pass.

This explains why it is such a difficult addiction. Your judgement becomes impaired very quickly, and you are no longer able to stop yourself. It is a positive feedback loop revolving around negative thought patterns. Once the system overcomes a certain threshold, it quickly saturates.

IV. HOW DO I CHANGE MY LIFE?

This is the question I asked myself for years, until I realized it was the wrong question to be asking, and was actually exacerbating the problem. A better question to ask, is: How do I become happy? Fundamentally, you will always be yourself, and to try to change that will merely cause an immense amount of internal conflict which will lead to more depression. And although a tendency towards depression might be a part of yourself, being happy or sad isn't a fundamental characteristic of anyone, and is more readily changed.

Section Overview:

- A. You must want to get better.
- B. Believe it will get better, because that is the only way it will.
- C. Become aware of when you are thinking negative thoughts.
- D. Stop thinking negative thoughts as soon as you realize you are doing it.
- E. Develop strong coping techniques/fallback plans for when you are not capable of stopping yourself.
- F. Look at yourself through fresh eyes to understand yourself better, and hopefully get at the root causes. But, self reflection is of no use while you are depressed.

A. *You must want to get better*

This may seem obvious, but using the addiction model above, it really isn't quite that easy. There may always be some part of yourself that enjoys those emotions. And how you feel, and what you prioritize, will vary with your surroundings, and with time. So, although one day you will be galvanized to your cause, the next might find you lost in despair and not caring what tomorrow brings.

For myself, I didn't truly want to solve my problems until things had gotten completely out of my control. At some level, I believe it was not a conscious decision on my behalf, but rather something wiser than that within me, which forced my

hand, made me quit my job, and throw myself into a situation where I had no choice but to face my problems. I'm not certain that I realized what a serious problem it was before then, or if I did, I certainly didn't believe I could do anything about it.

Fundamentally, coping with and recovering from depression is a very difficult task. It can not be done only partially, so you must truly want it, and be ready to work at it. And if you're not ready yet, that's OK. Someday you will be, and in the meantime, do what you feel capable of.

B. *Hope is the opposite of depression*

You should write this phrase down and put it in your pocket. When times are tough, pull it out and read it to yourself. It will get better, and you need to believe it. If you don't have faith in the future, you will not see any point to any of these efforts, and without them things are guaranteed to not change. But if you have hope, you can often free yourself from the downward spiral. You can remind yourself that what you are experiencing now is not permanent, and that life can be good, and that you need not continue to worry about it.

Just as negative thoughts can lead to a downward spiral of despair, so can hope lead to an upward spiral out of the abyss. This was the very first tactic I developed to stave off the depression. The reminder that what I was feeling would not last forever was amazingly liberating. All I had to do was wait, and at some point it would be better. It required no more effort on my part than to believe it to be true. I could let go of control, and stop trying to force my brain to do one thing or another. I would let my thoughts go, and they would quickly run themselves out.

My brain and I were fighting with one another. Hope showed me I didn't need to fight, that I had already won. And without an adversary, my brain stopped fighting back. It didn't take long for this simple tactic to dramatically lessen the amount of time I spent being depressed. I would have the same number of depressive episodes, but the time spent in each one decreased. This quickly led to seeing my life more clearly, and developing better coping skills, and finally getting out of the hole. Hope was the catalyst for it all.

C. *Become aware of your thoughts*

You are always keenly aware of when you are deep in depression, and often in retrospect you can see the steps that led to where you are. But, how often were you aware of those steps at the time. Because of the downward spiral effect, at some point in your thought cycle it is too late prevent the depression from really setting in. At this point you have little recourse other than to just wait for it to pass. To get to a point where you can keep this from happening, you need to become aware of the first thoughts which trigger the negativity.

The difficulty here, is that as a depression sufferer, your baseline viewpoint of what is negative is probably completely skewed. My general happiness level was continually low. So low, in fact, that I had become desensitized to the depression itself. I was no longer aware that the thoughts I was thinking were negative, or that I was unhappy. It had become so normal to feel like such shit, that I had forgotten what 'normal' was.

The less time you spend being depressed, the more able you will be to spot negativity. This is another part of the upward spiral of hope mentioned above. You will begin to see trends in the sorts of things that trigger these negative thoughts, as they are usually quite repetitive. I would continually obsess over the same internal problems, or let the same people cause me pain. When I began to see the correlation between having certain thoughts, and becoming extremely depressed, I realized the power of these thoughts. I realized I needed to be more aware of what I was thinking.

We are constantly thinking. Even when we sleep, our brain is thinking. But, what percentage of these thoughts are consciously generated by us? What percentage of these thoughts are under our control? Usually this a rather low percentage, and in the beginning I wouldn't worry too much about trying to control them, but you should begin to be aware that it's happening. Your brain is generating ideas, and you should pay attention to that activity, as it has large impact on how you will feel.

D. Stop thinking negative thoughts

OK, if it was that easy you wouldn't be reading this right now. The main point here is that you really need to be vigilant. I began monitoring myself on this topic after a discussion with my sister. She quoted some statistic or another about how suicidal thoughts increased with time - that you were more likely to think such thoughts the more often you did it. And although this sounds rather recursive, I found a bit of truth in it. Again, these thoughts feed on each other. If you can lessen the amount of times you think them, or how far down you let them go, you really do reduce the probability of them happening again.

Nowadays I'm really good at this tactic, but it has taken a long time to get to this point. At first it seemed completely pointless, and that was mostly due to catching myself too late. What I perceived as the initiating thought, was really quite far down the chain. But, it's a good habit to get into. If you notice yourself thinking these cyclic, negative thoughts, try to stop entirely. Switch topics in your brain. Don't stress about it though. If it isn't working, don't begin to get negative on yourself because you cant stop yourself from being negative. I think you can easily see how that would just make the problem even worse.

E. Develop good coping techniques

This is really a continuation of the above points, but I thought I would give some specific examples. It's important to have solutions already set and ready to go. When you start feeling depressed, your brain is already in a bad state, and will not be capable of generating happy and fun things to do. This is where a bit of forethought comes in handy.

The main techniques I use fall into three camps:

1. Letting go.
2. Distraction.
3. Blanking the mind.

The first, letting go, was very powerful for me as a result of my particular problem. I would continually beat myself up for not being this other person I thought I should be. And of course, the person I thought I should be didn't suffer from depression. So, I would get depressed, and then I would think about how pathetic I was for being depressed, and it would get progressively worse. To let go, to stop trying to control the situation, and let it just run its course, often would minimize these problems.

So how do you let go? You remind yourself of some simple truths. First off, it's not your fault. Secondly, you have very little control - at this instant - of what your brain is going to do. Thirdly, it won't last forever, and it will get better. And finally, worrying about it will just make it worse. I would often close my eyes, and repeat one of these to myself as a mantra while I waited for it to pass.

Distraction is the best fallback plan. This is because it doesn't completely rely on your willpower or capabilities. But, it also is the least effective at generating a long term solution. I would use distraction as a last ditch effort if I just couldn't get my mind to shut off. Usually picking an activity that does not use your brain, and changes your surroundings will work the best. You need to give your brain new stimuli, so it quits thinking about the old, negative stimuli.

I would often go for a run, or find some friends to hang out with, and be sure to have a conversation that had nothing to do with feeling like crap. Work on a puzzle, play a board game, watch a movie, do anything that keeps your mind occupied. Typically, things work-related did not help to distract me, as my brain really didn't want to do them either. I had a list of useful distractions, and would go pick something off the list if I felt I needed to clear my head.

Blanking the mind is the most difficult of all of these. It took me years to be capable of shutting off thoughts entirely. To accomplish this I began using simple meditation techniques. Repeating mantras, or focusing on feeling the blood flowing through my body, or the tension in various muscles. It all struck me as pretty new-agey to begin with. But hell, it worked, so I can't complain. but it also took practice, and practicing when I wasn't depressed was critical as well. It was much easier when I wasn't depressed to slip into a meditative state, and this got me more familiar with how it should all work.

Regardless of what techniques you choose to use, it is important to practice them, and stick with it. Find things that work for you. They may not work all the time, and they may not work at all in the beginning. But, with practice they have a good chance of making life a lot easier for you.

F. Look at yourself through fresh eyes

Here is where the real work begins. All of the above is critical, and will hopefully make life bearable for you. But to really reach escape velocity, some serious soul searching is probably in order. But, it is critical that you don't try to evaluate yourself while you are depressed. This will lead to nothing good, as your brain is not in a state to see anything as good. Hopefully by using some of the above

coping techniques, you will find yourself with a great deal more un-depressed time, and your background mood level will elevate.

At some point a few years into my efforts to eliminate these negative thoughts, I realized how completely fucked in the head I actually was. That is when I began to see myself through fresh eyes. That is when I began to make progress on finding the causes of the depressive symptoms. I have to imagine this is where therapy helps a lot of people, having a sane person to talk to, who can view you with their fresh eyes, and relate back to you what they see. Ultimately though, you must become aware of yourself. you must see yourself anew.

It is possible that, for some people, depression is merely a chemical imbalance - that there is no underlying cause. There was no childhood trauma, there was no irrational thought, or poorly learned life lessons. But, as that was not the case for me, I can't really speak to that, and hope that at least the previous bits mentioned can offer some relief. But as an example, I will walk through very briefly what some of my issues were, and how I sorted them out.

First off, it is really hard to see yourself from an outside perspective, and your internal perspective is obviously skewed and not to be trusted. For myself, it was this internal view that was the problem. In order to get past this bootstrap problem, I began writing in journals. I spent a month completely isolated from other humans, in a cabin in a remote area, writing in journals all day, every day. Ted Kaczynski would have been proud. Not everyone has this sort of freedom, and extended isolation is probably not all that healthy either; but whatever free time you do have, you should consider spending some of it by yourself, recording yourself.

This brings up the second point: It is hard to see yourself when you are surrounded by other people. Too often we merely see ourselves as reflections in other people's eyes. What do they expect of us? How do they perceive us? We are too distracted by social constraints to focus inward.

In terms of recording one's self, you should first pick a subconscious activity. For me, writing works very well. After writing for about an hour, I am no longer aware of what I am typing, and the thoughts just flow onto the page. Some people have this experience while hand writing, but not while typing, so experiment with different techniques. Speaking into a tape-deck or video recorder might also work. Paintings, sculpture, or any form of self expression is valid. Just focus on producing, and don't bother analyzing until you think you have it all.

After a month of writing, I finally ran out of things to talk about. So I went back and read what I wrote. It was strange, as if someone else had written most of it, as I didn't remember half of what was there. It was quite enlightening to view myself this way, and really allowed me to step back and see quite clearly what was going on. Basically, I was very fixated on these views of myself that were not in line with who I was. Nothing I ever did was good enough for me, and I basically hated myself. It's no wonder I was depressed all the time, when I spent all day every day with someone who hated me.

It took quite some time to figure out who I actually was, considering I spent so long trying to be someone else. But

once I did that, it became a simple matter of accepting that person. And as it turned out, that was merely a symptom of another cause. I'm still figuring myself out, and probably will never get all the way there. But, I got myself to a point that I can happily live with, and I am grateful for that.

V. CONCLUSION

A number of different approaches to dealing with depression have been presented, and hopefully one of them works for you. Again, all of this is a result of my personal experience, some of which, such as living out of the back of my car for two years, shouldn't be taken as a good solution. It was quite dangerous for a number of reasons, including seperating myself from the support of family and friends. The hope is that the information provided above will prevent the need for such drastic measures. I have tried to seperate the recommendations from the personal experiences in order to make this more clear, but it's often good to get a second opinion before embarking on any new plan.

Depression may be something you will need to live with for a long time. But, there is no reason why it should drag you down. It is similar to type II diabetes in this way. Unchecked, it can have fatal consequences, but with daily attention to your self, you can live a completely happy and healthy life. Never give up hope.