

Walking the Black Dog – Thriving through Depression

Between 20 and 25% of people will have a significant episode of depression in their lifetime. This incidence is slightly higher in women than in men, and this is not surprising considering the complexity of hormones coursing through our veins every day of every month of every year of our lives.

Depression is degrading and destructive. It destroys our capacity to give and receive affection, devastating our connection to others and also our ability to be peacefully alone with ourselves. In depression meaningless reigns supreme, it robs us of the capacity to be consistent, leading us into a love-less sense of insignificance with regularity.

Mild depression is a gradual and sometimes permanent thing that undermines people the way rust weakens iron. Depression starts out insipid, weakening ordinary actions, leaving us tired, bored and self-obsessed. In response to depression some of us over-eat, under-exercise, over-spend or over-react, we drink too much or abuse drugs, we become overly sensitive to criticism, we lose the ability to trust and to receive affection. In depression we withdraw from our responsibilities, we live in fear, we live in doubt, we exist, we are overwhelmed by self-consciousness, self-criticism, our perception of ourselves and the world is dampened by recurring guilt and pessimism.

Depression takes with it our happiness, our sense of humour, our life force and our health. It is a risk factor for a variety of illnesses (such as heart disease) and has a habit of masquerading as many physical illnesses (such as back & neck pain, irritable bowel, overweight). Diagnosis is as complex as the illness.

I have spent a life time looking for 'the answer to depression', but most of all I have always wanted someone else to give me 'the answer to depression', to make it easy for me for a change...but there is no easy answer to recovery from depression. Rebuilding ourselves from the ravages of this black dog requires a delicate balancing of love, insight, work, support, deep honesty, self-forgiveness and most of all time. We need lots of time and lots of love – and we must seek the guidance of those who have gone before us.

Considerable control over depression can be achieved through a good, disciplined regime of daily exercise. Great freedoms can be achieved through this discipline. Exercise has played a major role in keeping me sane, keeping me whole and getting me through those dark nights of the soul, which inevitably visit themselves upon me. It doesn't matter if you hate it or love it; the universal agreement about exercise is that it helps to clear depression out of our blood. It literally feels like it is cleaning our insides out, refreshing the internal environment, burning the negativity up in the fires of physical activity.

Exercise produces endorphins, which are like a naturally occurring morphine. So if you're feeling awful, endorphins will make you feel a little better, and if you're feeling normal they'll make you feel great! But you have to get these endorphins up and running; and to kick start them you have to exercise at least at moderate levels of intensity – I recommend that you aim to exercise every day – allowing yourself a 70 to 80% success rate. So if you miss a day or two a week it's still ok.

A serious workout may be the most impossible idea we can imagine in the depths of depression, and it may be no fun doing it at the time, but post-workout brings extraordinary improvements in mood

and perspective – far in excess of the actually time and energy invested in the simple activity. This is where consistent discipline is required.

From personal experience I know that when I am in depression, the effort required overcoming the inertia and heaviness of my mind and body is almost too much for me to even contemplate, let alone achieve with any semblance of consistency. This is where a commitment to others, or having a personal trainer or coach who understands our personal challenges is essential to our health, wellbeing and life...I have had some incredible coaches in my life, who have nurtured me through the dark times. I turned up to training because of them, in spite of the inertia of my depression.

One extraordinary coach, my swim coach, would know from the way I held my head and body, as I walked into the swimming centre before training, exactly what mood I was in and the type of training session I would require to get the best out of me on that day. These are the quality of people we need in our lives to help us pull ourselves through the tough times of depression. When you're feeling ok begin shopping around and asking around until you find a trainer you trust, and then committed them to you and you to them -no matter what. It's that simple.

In my quest for relief from depression I became a professional triathlete, I didn't set out to become a world class athlete, I simply knew that I had to move my body to save my life. The more I trained the better I felt, it helped curb the destructive forces of depression...not eliminate them, just curb them. Exercise quiets the mind, soothes nervous tension and helps contain irrational fears. If we keep moving our bodies as much as possible, our minds will follow suit.

Chinese wisdom says that "the beginning and the end are the same". And so it is with managing depression. For me and for many people, exercising first thing in the morning is an essential element in achieving quality of life. Early mornings are also a time of day when there are fewer distractions and conflicting priorities; it's a time when the rest of the world and its concerns are still sleeping, so the energy of the atmosphere feels clearer, gentler and easier somehow.

I love swimming, cycling, running, yoga and hiking. These are the physical activities which have sustained my through many years of depression. What exercise you choose is as personal as the company you choose to keep. There's no right or wrong – exercise is what you make it. A vital key to overcoming and managing depression is that we engage in moderate intensity physical activity, daily; and that we do it with a discipline and routine that the sun could set itself against. For as surely as the sun will rise tomorrow, so too must we walk the black dog.

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