

6 *Dark Spaces*

Human beings ache for understanding—they should never be regarded as mere containers of their symptoms.’
kathryn J Zerbe

Dark Spaces .

For many years I didn’t acknowledge that I was even depressed. I told myself I was just feeling a bit low.

Problem was, I’d been feeling a bit low
and self medicating with alcohol and food
for about 15 years.

I’d accepted the diagnosis, which was depressing in itself, but I still didn’t talk about it. I didn’t see depression as a subject that would win points with people. I thought it would make me more of an outsider. I felt a sense of guilt too. I thought if I told people about my depression they’d feel obliged to say or do something and I didn’t want to burden anyone. I didn’t want people feeling sorry for me either, or avoiding me because they thought I was fragile or unstable.

I also thought people would think I was a fraud. Outwardly, I lived my life fully. Had a good sense of humour. Enjoyed having fun but it wasn’t like I was faking happy. You can lift from it and function but it takes a lot of energy and then when you’re on your own, you crash. Therein lies the misconception about depression. Why it makes it so hard for people to understand why someone would take their own life when they seemed so happy. For most of the time I could (and can) function quite normally, having happy times, but

I was also well practiced at
putting on a convincing mask
to keep my inner pain and world from others.



Depression for me isn't just about a well of pure darkness. It's a cocktail of emotions and it's mixed in with post traumatic stress. So I can be going along well and then something will trigger off a downward spiral that's hard to pull up from. But it's not all sadness. I can get really angry with the world and intolerant of people and situations I'd normally be okay in. I'd get into that; "You just don't get it. Fuck off and leave me alone", type of space.

Then there's the crippling paranoia,
the belief that everyone was out to get me.
Everyone was waiting for me to slip up.

These conditions of mind make life challenging but I've learnt to manage them. The catalyst for accepting I needed help to do this was when I had a breakdown and was hospitalised for four weeks with severe clinical depression. It kind of cracked open the problem for me and revealed it to those around me. Which was helpful.

I was a prisoner of my secrets
and that didn't help me access the support
and understanding that would become
essential to getting well again.

Hearing other people talk about how they were feeling really helped me too. I quickly realised that one of these people in the hospital were 'nut cases' or weak in character either. They were just people trapped in a dark space and we all pulled through eventually. After that I felt more confident talking about it and interestingly when I did, most people responded with empathy—and often had a similar story of their own, or of someone they knew.



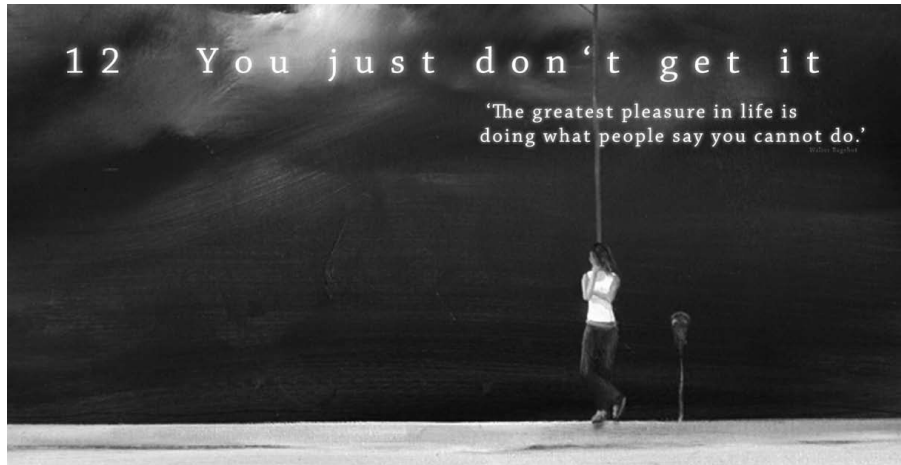
The more I talked the more I felt liberated from the illness aspect of what I was going through.

We're all human,
we all have feelings and dark times.
So when I put aside the diagnosis, the label,
I could work with how I was feeling
and what was going on in my life—
minus the shame.

Talking helped me feel less alone, more validated, less ashamed—and more confident in asking for help and support. Getting 'outside' help was the key. Moving from the 'I don't need help, there's nothing wrong with me - I'm not taking medication.' stance. Coming out from behind my 'everything's fine' mask brought me closer to those around me.

People thought I was this
really capable person
who 'had her shit together'.
So when I allowed them into the whole me,
the 'real' me, flaws, fears and all,
relationships became more 'real' too.

It's a huge relief to let down that guard. It took a lot of energy to pretend I was okay. It contributed to dragging me down.



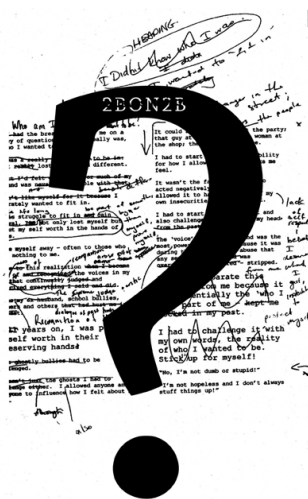
What helps me manage my depression and dark times now?

Accepting a full range of emotions
and experiences in my day and life
rather than pretending life is all good
and nothing's worrying me.

- * Sadness, fear, confusion, grief, anxiety, despair to name a few, they're all real and valid states and everyone feels them. There's this perception that you're weak if you have feelings (particularly for male folk) but it actually takes strength to sit with those tough feelings and deal with them in a way that they don't continue to negatively impact on your life.
- * Talking about it. Being more open and less guarded about how I feel has helped me feel less alone because you find out other people have difficult times too. You will get people who don't want to know or go there and you have to respect not everyone can take on what you're going through—they often have things happening in their own lives too.
- * Letting those close know what signs to look forward when I'm on the downward slide—and at that point, letting me know what they're noticing.

Controlling my eating and drinking—
the ongoing challenge that is.

- * When my eating and drinking is out of control, I do less, do more time on the couch and then I gain weight and feel depressed about the weight gain. It's a vicious cycle and it's not one I've completely mastered, but I continually work on it.



- * Not everyone needs medication or medication for long periods of time but it's been essential for me personally. I've been on medication for about 20 years. I did recently 'test' whether depression was actually an illness I had that needed medicating by going off my medication. I did this under the supervision of my Psychiatrist and Psychologist but I crashed.

The main thing was that I couldn't sleep
and without sleep my life turn to moosh
and I felt like I was in a black well
I couldn't get out of.
Mentally I ended up 'on the edge'.

So I'm back on medication and I feel much better on it.

- * Keeping fit. Another big challenge but it's essential medicine for me. It's also about mental strength. I know if I can't get out the door to exercise then I'm likely not to have the mental strength to deal with other challenges in my life. It's empowering to be able to override the mind that doesn't want to budge. It shakes off some tension and stress too and helps me sleep better.

Exercise and getting outdoors also
forces me to keep engaging with the world
outside of my head and room.
Nature is the best medicine.

- * Being aware and challenging the voice in my head that creates stories about what's going to happen next and what terrible things people might be thinking about me—most of which is far from the reality of things. It also does re-runs of conversations and things that just happened, dusting a negative take on everything. Being aware of thoughts, challenging them and creating positive change through this process helps us become the master of our mind - not a slave to it.



In you go
Sometimes when something's really hard
or scary - I just don't do it
I'll help you give
it a go.

- * Writing down what's going on in my head, how I'm feeling, or what's going on in my life. This helps get it out of your head and puts it in front of you where you can see it—question and challenge it. Or show someone close to you to communicate what's going on for you.
- * Nature. It has a way of putting things into perspective. It provides an escape from ourselves and the whirl of the world around us. It sits us down in a place of appreciation—like when you watch a sunset, a wave, the stars. It provides an escape. Time for the mind to power down.
- * Having outside focuses and interests so you don't get totally absorbed in your own stuff. Doing small good things for others can make us feel good. Social media can cause tension and anxiety around what people think about us and what we might be missing out on. So limit time in this realm.
- * Stories. Seek out other people's stories in documentaries, books, magazines, the internet. Stories about people who have overcome adversity or do good things. Question the influence of celebrities and super stars and reality TV shows—a lot of the time they just make us feel inadequate and sell us material success. It's not healthy.
- * Keep connected with yourself and the present. Anything sensual helps with this. It helps you get out of your head and back into your body. We're being constantly stimulated by outside influences so be aware and limit these. Dim the lights, set the table, turn off the telly, listen to some music, sit in the stillness and breath.
- * Finally, my dog and Psychologist.

Having someone to talk to that you can trust.
It doesn't mean you have something wrong with you—
it just helps you work out things
when they're not right.



The Kiss .

- Curiosity stimulates forward movement.
- Kindness keeps me warm.
- Water carries me away.
- Nature sustains my sense of wonder.
- Humour makes me rich.
- Music transports me to another place.
- Movement turns mind to muscle.
- Sensual experiences secure a connection to the present.
- Conscience a bond with purpose and meaning.
- Solitude an essential power source.
- Risk the window of potential.
- Critical thought the liberator.
- Talking a solvent when stuck.
- Hope the peacekeeper.
- Self care my temple.
- Self-reliance my faith.