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Bitten by the Black Dog

by Janine Browne

Where does depression begin and where does it end?

While diagnosis may help to make sense of how I'm feeling, provide a guide for treatment and medication, giving it significance beyond that further darkens my world.

It spotlights weaknesses and flaws, exposes an entry point into the isolation of social stigma and the burden of shame - fragments my identity.

Separating the diagnosis from my identity was therapy in itself. What remained were my experiences . . .

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Talking about dark times . . .

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. Once I'd accepted the 'diagnosis', which was depressing in itself, 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 outcast. 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 - 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. I had a good sense of humor, I enjoyed having fun but it wasn't like I was faking happy. 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, have happy times, but I was also well practiced at putting on a convincing mask to keep my inner pain and darkness from others.

Dark times aren't purely dark, it's like living in a cocktail of intense emotions - experiencing emotions at extremes. I can have times when I feel really high - other times when I experience raging anger. I'd be pissed off with everyone, get into that; 'You just don't get it! Fuck off and leave me alone' type of space. Then there was the crippling paranoia—the belief that everyone was out to get me.

What happened when I started talking about it?

It wasn't so much a conscious decision to 'talk about it' at first. Six years ago I had a breakdown and was hospitalised for four weeks with severe clinical depression - that was a bit hard to keep a secret. It made me realise I was very much a prisoner secrets.

The hospital environment provided the opportunity to talk about those dark secrets; gain an insight into how my head worked and some ways of moving forward.

Hearing other people talk about how they were feeling really helped. I quickly realised that none of these guys in the hospital were nutcases 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 and interestingly when I did most people responded really kindly. Often it sparked a conversation about their experience of depression or a family member or someone they knew. I began feeling liberated from my 'illness'.

How did talking about it help ?

I felt less alone, more validated, less ashamed—and I got some help. Getting 'outside' help was the key. Moving out of the 'I don't need help, nothing wrong with me, I'm not taking medication' mindset. Coming out from behind my 'everything's fine' mask brought me a lot closer to those around me too. Now those around me know that I'm 'human' after all, I have fears, vulnerabilities, dark times just like anyone else, the relationships are much richer, more real. It's a huge relief to let down that guard too. It took a lot of energy to pretend I was OK, it contributed to dragging me down.

What helps me manage my dark times ?

- **Talking about it.** You feel less alone and less 'weird' when you realise other people have dark times too. I think having a family Psychologist is as important as a family Doctor. Good friends are treasures too.
- **Acceptance** - rather than fighting it - pretending it doesn't exist. Being open about it released me from the grip of shame's little fingers and allowed me to move out of the isolated place in which depression thrives.
- **'Minders'** - my family are really tuned in and let me know when they see 'the signs'.
- **Keeping fit and healthy.** I don't particularly like exercise but it's like medicine for me. It can take a bulldozer of inner strength to put the joggers on most days but it's vital in managing my moods. Exercise isn't just about physical fitness for me, it's about mental strength, it builds strength and resilience on both fronts. It's empowering which counteracts the disempowerment you feel when you're going through dark times.
- **Controlling my eating and drinking habits,** which can be really tough and I don't always win but I remain aware enough to know when addictive behaviour gets out of control and how it's effecting my psyche.
- **Taking medication.** I look at it like this – if I had diabetes or asthma I'd have to take medication. Depression is an illness—medication helps control my dark moods and deadly thoughts. I know I'll do more harm to myself lying on the couch in the company of my dark thoughts, a bottle of wine and block of chocolate!
- **Writing** and art provide a great release—a great way to get the stuff out of my head and in front of me where I can look at it more objectively and constructively.
- **Living consciously/awareness**—keeping myself in the present, and in my body as much as possible. When dark moods take hold the negative voice dominates my head space. It creates stories about all the bad stuff that's going to happen next, which sets off my anxiety, keeps me in a constant state of fear - invades my sleep. I end up out of my body so it's important I do stuff to help me stay connected and grounded.
- **Challenging thoughts**—being aware of the voice in my head and what it's saying is vital as is challenging it, bringing myself back to the 'now'. Stimulating my senses helps me do this—listening to music, getting out in the fresh air, nature, slowing down enough to actually notice and feel things. Staying tuned to my body and emotional state as much as possible. In that 'what's happening right now' kind of space (as enormously difficult that can be).

- **Slowing down**—reducing the stress in my life. Dark moods and residue from past experiences take up space in my life, as does the best defense for controlling dark moods— living consciously. Having the time to stop and ask, “What’s going on? Why am I feeling like this? What can I do about it? Do I need to ask for some help? If I’m too busy I function from old beliefs, it’s like handing myself over to the automatic pilot in my head who has a history of taking me down.
- **Outside interests/kindness**—so I don’t get totally absorbed in my own stuff. Doing things for others, making a contribution, gives life purpose and meaning and a healthy personal sense of achievement. It’s not one that is based on what we gain but what we give, what we contribute.
- **Inspiration**—hearing other people’s inspiring stories (and reducing my exposure to the ‘horror stories’ projected in the media). I watch Enough Rope with Andrew Denton, Australian Story, and read Dumbo Feather magazine—it’s essential ‘therapy’. So is talking, hence the emphasis of The Black Dog Project. Everyone has a story—we are not as alone in our troubles as we may think, and it’s reassuring to know that.

www.reachout.com.au (great for young people)
www.beyondblue.org.au
 (both websites contain additional links and resources)
www.youthfocus.com.au (WA)
www.dumbofeather.com