

Aunt Bossy

Written by Susan Murphy
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Depression Confession

Dear Aunt Bossy,

I know you are not a medical doctor, but what do you know about depression?

I'm having a hard time with it. Since I am pretty, healthy, rich, have lots of friends and nice places to live, I don't see any reason for it. Please advise.

Confused

Dear Confused,

I may not be a medical doctor, but I did stay at a Holiday Inn Express more than once, so I will try to help.

First of all, if your depression is ongoing and stops you from doing the things you like to do, makes you feel helpless or entertain the idea of hurting yourself, stop reading this immediately and see a doctor. If your depression severely limits the time and circumstances in which you feel "happy," strictly dictates the circumstances in which you feel joyous, or if you feel forced to fib to loved ones about how you feel, see a doctor soon.

Here is what I know about depression. None of this is scientific, just my experience and observations.

I come from an Irish-Catholic family on one side and a Faulknerian, aristocratic cotton farming family on the other side. The Irish side assumed that if you weren't depressed you must be stupid, and the Southern side seemed to accept it as long as it made you interesting. Self-medication with alcohol and barbiturates among my relatives was not uncommon. Those do not work. Don't kid yourself.

I flunked my entire sophomore year in high school because I was so depressed that I could barely function, although I could always get it together to go to work in the fashion department at a department store and dance my heart out at teen dances on weekends. I was also fortunate enough to be raised to "keep putting one foot in front of the other," so I moved along.

I never thought of myself as unhappy, just surrounded by a translucent membrane that kept me from experiencing life like other people seemed to. I felt sluggish except when I was swimming, riding my bike, playing kick the can with the neighborhood kids, or nearing Christmas. I also spent a lot of time daydreaming about what my life would look like if I were productive, accomplished, admirable and adventuresome. And, I read like a maniac. The library and bookmobile were my drugs.

What does that tell you about my depression that might help with yours? First of all, MOVE YO BODY! The hormones that exercise – especially in fresh air – produce are addictive if you apply yourself to getting out there regularly. (I didn't).

Secondly, get yourself around people, especially if you are doing something physical together. (All right, you romantic fools, just be sure it isn't something that doesn't last very long and only gives a temporary high! Your crash will be like a dog at your throat.)

My usual advice about volunteering to help people not as fortunate as you are in some way, works here too. In high school I volunteered to wash hair, bathe, and groom the aged at

the Little Sisters of the Poor residence in St. Louis. It lifted me out of my little dark world.

Look for opportunities to gather friends together like it is Christmas, or the holiday of your choice. Buy Debbi Covington's *"Celebrate Everything"* cookbook so you will do it right.

Join: a church, an exercise group, a walking group, a book club (as long as it is the kind where if you don't finish the book they won't condemn you), a bridge group – you get the idea.

Learn to meditate. This was the most valuable tool for me. I started with TM, moved on to Silva, and added guided meditations and music meditations that I downloaded from the web. It works. Prayer is a form of meditation.

Daydream, or whatever you want to call it. "Visualization" is the popular term right now. Actually see yourself free of the bonds of depression. In detail. Envision yourself being and living your ideal life. Write down every single good thing that happened to you during the day, no matter how minor, to remind yourself that things can be good.

See a doctor and determine whether you have a mental or physical problem. Find out if an anti-depressant, talk therapy, or a combination would help. If that is ongoing, reassess and evaluate constantly. I must have tried eight different anti-depressants before I found one that is effective for me. (One was so bad, I called my fabulous doctor and asked him if he was trying to kill me. He laughed and said, "Stop taking it right now." I had only been on it for five days. If it had been for a longer duration, we would have had to wean me off.)

Pay close attention to what you eat and how it makes you feel. Write it down. Sugar is not my friend. Anything that makes you retain water is not your friend. However, do not panic, you can still drink champagne once in a while, even if it puffs you up a bit.

There is a reason Gwyneth Paltrow appears to be happy, even though she is insufferable to many of us. She doesn't let anything impure or unhealthy near her body or mouth. I promise you she isn't serene and fulfilled because she is rich and beautiful. If indeed she is, it is because she is fastidiously disciplined and has a job she loves. Elizabeth Taylor was

more beautiful, probably had more money, and had a more active “romantic” life. Marilyn Monroe was at the top of her game. Didn’t ease the pain. Mother Teresa and the Dalai Lama are most probably examples of happy folk.

Never forget there is an enormous difference between being in a difficult situation, feeling stuck, having a streak of very bad luck, and being depressed. Do what you have to do to pinpoint your sticking points and move away from them, but if a change of circumstances or personal growth does not alleviate your pain or discomfort, take the time to find out if you are depressed and what kind of help you need. It is better to overreact and reach out to a professional than to risk wasting more of your precious life, time and energy being unhappy.

At this time, I am very, very sad, but I am not depressed. Being unhappy and being depressed are two very different things. Identifying where you are in that conundrum is worth some time and money. There is no reason to put up with the confinement of depression if a professional can set you free, or at least, more free.

A final note: if you have no idea what I am talking about, count your blessings. When I first met my husband, he asked me my definition of depression. I told him it was like being in a transparent bubble with your feet in concrete. He was astounded because his definition was “slight regret.” I had no idea regret could be slight.

If you have any questions or even a suspicion that you might be depressed, see your doctor. You are not alone and you can be helped.

Love and peace to you,

Aunt Bossy