

Proposal Essay: How to Overcome Depression

Kristen E. Asmus

Depression can move in on a person quickly or creep in like a fog. It can be a visceral experience, like a blow to the gut or a heavy burden suddenly pressing down on one's shoulders. It can affect one's experience of the world: if it's sunny outside, somehow it seems dull and cold; if it's gray, the gray gets heavier.

Have you ever been depressed? How do you stand against it; how do you push back the gray veil? How do you cope with depression and even work to break out of it?

First, it's important to know the difference between "the winter blues," an occasional down day, a week when you're just feeling off, and longer-lasting, biologically based depression. "Depression is a 'whole body' illness, involving your thoughts, mood and even physical health," says the University of Tennessee Medical Clinic Web site. Raymond Crowe, M.D., a professor of psychiatry at the University of Iowa sys, "I think the difference between having the blues and depression lies in the symptoms... If 'the blues' persist for more than a couple of weeks and are accompanied by trouble eating, difficulty sleeping, or suicidal thoughts, you should see someone" (uihealthcare.com). Psychotherapy and medication usually are necessary when you are battling this more persistent and insidious form of "the blues."

With any form of depression, however, there are certain things you can do to get you through each day, or even just the few hours ahead of you that seem so empty. The following are a few counter-depression strategies to help keep the depression from curling itself completely around you, immobilizing you, or endangering your life.

One of the most important weapons in your counter-depression arsenal is music. Not just any music. You must choose music that will lift you and arm you for the battle. I do not recommend songs like “Dust in the Wind,” by Kansas (“all we are is dust in the wind”) or the depressive spiral of “Tourniquet,” by Evanescence (“I tried to kill the pain but only brought more (so much more). I lay dying, and I’m pouring crimson regret and betrayal...”). I do recommend anything by Bill Withers, especially the soulful “Lean on Me” (“Sometimes in our lives, we all have pain, we all have sorrow, but if we are wise, we know that there’s always tomorrow...”). One song that always cheers me is Dobie Gray’s “Drift Away” (“And when I’m feeling blue, a guitar’s comin’ through to sooth me. Thanks for the joy that you’ve given me...”). Sometimes music can be used as a catalyst, something through which to channel your anger (depression can stem from deep anger [McCrary 1998]) and pain. For that, I recommend Mary J. Blige’s “No More Cryin’” from her *The Breakthrough* album (2005). Other songs I recommend from that album are “Take Me As I Am” and “Good Woman Down.” Finally, because depression can also stem from fear, I recommend listening to “Mindkiller,” by Adam Freeland off of his *Now and Them* album (2004). Blast this song and remind yourself that, as the lyrics say, “Fear is the mind killer.”

Going for a drive in your car can also be a distraction from the depression, as long as you feel safe in handling the vehicle. You can take your music with you, head east, then turn back toward the Front Range to give yourself full view of the area’s jagged, snow-covered peaks. Or

drive right up into the mountains, allowing the music to serve as a soundtrack for each turn in the road. When you break over the top of a hill and have a view of the valley below, use this as a metaphor for your depression—that you will rise above your current circumstances.

Working on your own thought processes in this way constitutes another powerful way to combat depression. Imagine yourself free from your troubles, like an eagle flying across a valley in the high mountains, not hunting, not searching, but just enjoying the freedom, grace, and power of flight. Putting your thoughts in writing helps, too. Write down the things that are bothering you, then write down what you might do to change your situation, even things you might dismiss as silly; sometimes the silly things end up being the best ideas. Journal; let it all out on paper. Write your woes onto index cards and push them away, symbolically distancing yourself from them. Use your imagination to plan what you'd like your life to be in five years. I don't mean the imagination that's going to take you down the road to becoming a homeless bag lady with a never-ending bad hair day. Try to be hopeful, and write down all the baby steps you can think of to reach your goal.

Play is also a good way to reset your thoughts. Play with your dog or your cat or your child. Get down on the floor and be silly. Pretend you are a monster that gives only kisses. Take yourself out of yourself for a little while.

Another effective tool against the battle against depression is work: physical labor especially. Getting your body moving can counteract that sluggish feeling that comes with depression; getting the blood moving warms you and fights the physical burden that depression can sometimes be. It distracts you, gets your mind off the things that are worrying you. Why work rather than just exercise? You'll be achieving something that you can be proud of or that in turn will make you feel even better. A clean house can lift the spirits. Tilling the soil in your

garden prepares it for new growth. Kneading bread dough puts you physically in touch with your creativity.

Cooking in general can sometimes lift the spirits. Doesn't the smell of chocolate chip cookies just *make* you feel better? Now remember, don't go eating all of those cookies yourself. Depression is also eased by acts of giving: find neighbors or friends who'd like some, or bring them into work for your coworkers. They'll be happier, too.

If you're just all-out too sick and tired to cook or do physical labor, find some other work to do, even if its only purpose is distraction. Crossword and jigsaw puzzles are good. Rip up some magazines and make a collage that shows how you're feeling or how you'd like to be feeling. Paste up some pictures of things you think would make you happy. Brush your cat or dog. If your pets are anything like mine, you'll not be able to miss seeing the pleasure and relaxation you are bringing to them. Realize *you* are doing this; you can make a positive difference in someone's life, even in this small way.

Finally, nurture yourself. Find things that make you feel comforted. What's your idea of an ideal day, of a day when you feel especially peaceful or taken care of? Perhaps you should write these things down ahead of time; when you need these ideas the most, you might not be able to remember them. I like to watch videos; I have gone through all six DVD's in the Oprah Winfrey 20th Anniversary Special Edition boxed set a couple of times. Movies that lift my spirits or relax me are *Remember the Titans* (great music, football, heroism, conflicts overcome, and the sad part isn't too sad), the latest version of *Ocean's 11* (hey, it's fun and nobody gets hurt, not even the character played by Andy Garcia, really), and *Sense and Sensibility* (for the happy ending).

Speaking of nurturing yourself: Have you been eating well? If you're depressed, probably not. Fix yourself or ask someone you know to fix a nutritious, warm meal with some of your favorite foods. Mashed potatoes are a good comfort food for me. If you feel like it, take yourself to a restaurant that serves your kind of comfort food. You'll be getting yourself out of the house (isolating yourself at home behind closed curtains is another sign of depression) and feeding yourself well at the same time. Just don't get too caught up in the comfort food idea: too much of a good thing and you may end up feeling worse tomorrow.

This essay is all about feeling better tomorrow. It's about giving you just a few ideas of what you can do to get out from behind the gray wall of depression, to side-step it, push it back, and tear it down. Remember, though, that depression can be a serious medical condition. If your depression continues, if it's keeping you from working or taking care of yourself or your family, or if you start thinking about death or suicide, go see a doctor, psychiatrist, or psychotherapist right away. You'll get more support, and you'll be given more tools for the fight.

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