

Depression: *There Is No Upside*

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In February 2010, *The New York Times* published a remarkable story¹ that was so stunningly off base that my patients who have serious depression actually laughed about it. In this story, the author makes the argument that in some mysterious way, there is an upside to depression. One of my patients, who has severe recurrent depressions, decided to write a rejoinder that is included below, with permission.

"To fully understand the experience of recurrent depression one needs to appreciate that it robs a person of anything resembling their life as it was before depression entered their life. It robs you before, during, and after each and every recurrence. The impact is different during each phase, but in each, the impact is profound.

In the throws of a recurrence it is as if you are living in a different plane from everyone around you; disconnected from all that anchors you to your life. There is a total disconnection from friends, family, and co-workers and from all that brings you joy and a sense of purpose. It takes too much effort to try to communicate, because in truth, there are no words to describe the sense of utter hopelessness and despair, and making small talk isn't in the realm of possibility. You can't explain it because you are so mired down in your own thoughts and feelings, and there are no words that can describe it adequately. So you try to find the minimal words to functionally get through the day, but they are hard to find so mostly you withdraw and hope that the world will leave you alone.

Perhaps the hardest part is the realization that your brain has stopped working. We rely

on our brain to process, to plan, to organize, to know what to do, and to be able to do it. Not so during a depression. It is as if one's best friend has left you alone. And so come the endless hours of staring at piles of papers, lists of calls to make, things that need doing. You stare, being utterly unable to begin to think about where to begin...and so you do nothing; nothing that is except to become angrier and angrier at yourself for not being able to grab hold and do something, feeling like you should be able to control what is happening to you, and being unable to do so.

And then at some point after weeks or months, one day you realize that something has shifted. You register that the depression has begun to lift. At first there is enormous relief at having survived yet another episode. Then comes the realization of all that has gone undone and all that has passed you by during the recurrence. I think of it as the phase where I have to clean up the debris. It is a time of trying to catch up on all of the things you've let go because you didn't have the energy to do them. It is a time of trying to reconnect with friends and your life. But with it also comes the realization that although you have come through the episode, you have not returned to the same level of functioning as you were before the episode began. Relationships are a little less close and you never quite catch up with what was left undone, you feel somehow still disconnected from your life. You are grateful for the relief from the acute depression and you are thankful that things are finally a bit more back to normal.

What then? Then comes the time of perpetual hyper-vigilance; a never-ending feeling of vulnerability. There are the endless questions that arise: Will my feeling okay last? When will the next episode occur? You find yourself crying. Is it just an upsetting conversation or does it herald the beginning of another episode? Your mind is wandering. Are you just tired, or is the cycle beginning again where focusing becomes impossible? You don't want to deal with anyone. Is it the heat, or are you starting to move back to the place you retreat to when you're depressed? How do you know which it is? How do you stop ruminating in the worry that engulfs each day when you finally acknowledge that something has changed for the worse? You wonder how you can find the strength to battle through yet another recurrence if indeed one is beginning. How does one look forward to a future that is so uncertain? How do you try to stay in the present so you can enjoy whatever respite you are lucky enough to have for however long it lasts?

There is no upside to a life punctuated with depression. One could argue that what can be learned is that recurrences, even severe ones, are survivable. But in the thick of the thick of it, no

one can convince you of that. One could argue that it teaches that one must do all the things that are within your control... take medications, exercise, try to stay involved with people, and do things you enjoy. But experience teaches that doing those things in the end offers no immunity from recurrence. One could argue that understanding that one is not to blame for depressions and that it is a biological illness helps. But the reality is that all of these things offer small comfort when they don't change the awful reality of living through a depression, and the recognition that recurrences are, in the end, out of your control and will likely come again.

In the end, perhaps the only upside and the only comfort is the knowledge that one's doctors will be there for you, will hang in with you, and will lend you their belief that the episode will resolve when you are unable to find that belief within yourself. While certainly a comfort, it does not change the challenge and the pain of accepting depression as an ever present force in one's life." **CNS**

REFERENCE

1. Lehrner J. Depression's Upside. *New York Times Magazine*. 2010; Feb 8:38.

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