

THE BLACK DOG

by
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The Black Dog is what Ernest Hemingway named it, and he was talking about the deep depressions that he would fall into periodically. Most of these were around his greatest fear, that of losing his talent as a writer. People with COPD are also prone to these depressions but I feel our reasons are more realistic. It is not a case of “perhaps” something *might* happen to us, but more of “will.”

Left by itself COPD will be a wasting disease since sufferers begin to do less and less, an action that will then make them unable to do anything more until they are at the stage that they can do nothing at all. Obviously, when this happens, depression is about all they are left with.

But the reality is that if you recognize your depression there are a great many tools that you can use to defend yourself.

Depression can best be described as a feeling of hopelessness, that nothing is worthwhile, no one wants you and there is nothing that you can do about it. This is all pretty well nonsense since there are many things you can do, but first you must recognize the symptoms.

- Feelings of low esteem
- Always tired
- Continuously sad and depressed
- Lonely
- Wishing to be left alone
- Helplessness
- Insomnia
- Lack of appetite
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Impossibility to concentrate or make decisions

There is a downward spiral in depression and, should you begin to feel this way, you may be starting with it. Once this cycle begins it gets harder and harder to break out and so it is VITAL to take the correct steps. When any of the above start to creep up on you there are many steps you can take.

The very best step is to **talk to a friend**, either face to face or by telephone. Quite often this mere action alone makes you forget why you took it, as you immerse yourself in the conversation.

Take a walk or a drive. Either of these things can make things easier and more bearable and, if you have any sunshine, the vitamin D you obtain from daylight is a great

antidepressant. The mere action of doing something and getting out of the house makes you feel better and observing your surroundings often takes your mind off yourself.

Join any type of Social Club you can, from book readers to knitting. The wider you can make your circle of acquaintances, the better. **Volunteer** for anything BUT the Hospital... We have enough problems already. I (and my wife) work for our local theater group and she also knits afghans for people in retirement homes. Anything to **keep busy**.

Hobbies can be a tremendous help since many of them force you to interface with other people. Socialization is the point.

One trap I think we should all observe is the playing of solitary games. They do not occupy your mind and allow for too much introspection. COPD I rather look at as a plant. If you keep on taking a plant out of its plot to look at the roots, it dies. If you keep stopping and looking at your life under COPD I doubt that you will fare any better. Solitaire on a computer or with a deck of cards is an example, where you play almost mechanically and leaves you mind too much time to fret.

Now one thing that can do away with 90% of depression is **EXERCISE**. Walking, swimming, weight lifting, biking, anything that puts a physical demand on your body will help you build up your strength, allow you to use oxygen more economically and make you feel good. The fitter you can get, the more confidence you gain, and the more your outlook improves. Almost anything will work, but tell your Doctor first. As a matter of interest, it was discovered in many retirement communities that enormous medical costs could be eliminated by getting the so-called bedridden on their feet and exercising. Very few returned to their beds and nearly all restarted their lives by participating in all sorts of social activities. And they were 70 to 90 year old patients!

I have told you what depression is and how some of it is caused, but there are many other external events that can create the right atmosphere to advance you into depression. Certain external events are uncontrollable, such as a death in the family, or financial problems are things that we cannot help. But the following we can.

One major cause of stress is "Performance Anxiety" - the panic when faced with a task or a new action. Its cause comes from hundreds of events and can only be fought by keeping calm. A sudden telephone call or knock on the door will call for a tiny panic reaction. Thoughts fly by. Can it be bad news? Who can it be at the door? Suddenly your heart starts to race and you get out of breath. This is your body going into "fight or fly mode" where it goes into emergency drive. It is not serious, but each time it happens it puts a tiny strain on your system. Do this a dozen times a day and you get very tired. At bed time you flop into bed, exhausted.

You must train yourself to stay calm at all times. None of the emergencies your mind invented during the phone call or doorbell occurred but it did make a great wear and tear on your system. You must try to make your life as serene as possible. **Do not play the "What if" game.** Thinking of what might happen can hurt the healthiest of people. It can cripple us.

One example I always cite is the rigid rule in our house -- the complete ban of the phrase "Hurry up, we are going to be late." Originally, when I heard this, my heart would race, I would get out of breath to the degree I had to sit down and whatever we were late for became a lot later. You never hear it at my house and whatever I do every day I plan for it first. That way I don't get surprises.

Planning is one of the very best things you can do for yourself. Knowing what you are about to do can make for a much better life.

In retrospect I must add that the above is exactly the reverse of how I lived my life before COPD. In the beginning I was a newspaper reporter, up against deadlines every day. Then in the magazine business, fighting deadlines all the time and then a show producer, which has to be one of the most stressful occupations there is. To change into what I am now has taken a lot of dogged determination.

But then COPD has forced me to turn my life around. Pre-COPD I never exercised, drove everywhere, drank almost every day, had the most terrible diet imaginable and lived my social life in smoke filled taverns and bars. What I'm trying to say is, if a reprobate like myself can do it, so can you.

But depression, like COPD, can be held at bay for years. My family (on my father's side) has had several suicides and a plenitude of breakdowns so I know of which I speak.

I once created quite a furor by suggesting that psychiatrists might not be the way to go and got a whole pile of letters of complaint. My reasoning was that our depression came from one source - COPD - and if that could be removed, then we would lose the depression. Since psychiatry could not remove the root of the problem I couldn't see what help it could be. But what I hadn't considered was that many patients' only place to vent their problems was to their psychiatrist. I had forgotten that so many of us live alone or have families who are not supportive and have little or no other outlets. So by all means, **try psychiatry.**

On the subject of families I would suggest that you contact your local Lung Association and ask for whatever printed material they have available that describes what you are going through for your relatives' use. Too many people have no concept of our problems and often feel that we are exaggerating our problems. A little external **education may help.**

The above material is from my book "It Takes Your Breath Away. Copyright 2004. It can be purchased by using this link: <http://www.ittakesurbreathaway.com>

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