

The Road Ahead: Preventing Future Difficulties

Depression is a dark forest. It's difficult to find your way out. So difficult, in fact, that once you succeed you may wish to collapse in a heap, rest, and relinquish all of your efforts. *"Now I can forget all this self-help nonsense, stop worrying about medication, and go back to my old life."* Sound tempting?

The problem is that depression can come back. More than 50% of people who have had a major depressive episode will have at least one more in the course of their lifetime. The percentage rises for those who have had two episodes, and rises again for those who have had three. The vulnerability to relapse or recurrence is greatest in the first months following recovery, but it remains significant for years afterward.

This can sound like discouraging news – just what you needed to hear when you get near the end of the book. In fact, it's not. For you to have a recurrence you have to get well first. The hidden message is that almost everyone gets well, and goes on to live most of their lives being well. They may have a subsequent episode, but they'll get well from that one too.

What most people want when they get well is an ironclad guarantee that they will never have to go through a depressive episode again. No such guarantee is possible. But then, no one anywhere has such a guarantee. Anyone can experience depression, no matter how old or young they are, no matter how wealthy or poor. The next time you walk through town, take note of the people you pass. Not one of them has a guarantee that this time next year they won't be in a major depressive episode.

The challenge ahead is not to make a recurrence impossible. It is to make it as unlikely as you can, while acknowledging that it might still occur and reminding yourself that depressive episodes are survivable – something you have already proven. Should depression recur, the challenge is to intervene early to make it as brief as possible and to see if you can prevent yourself from going as deep as last time. Put another way, once you find your way out of the woods the new challenge is to prevent yourself from going right back into them again. Fortunately, there are strategies that can make a recurrence less likely and that can help you catch recurrences early. One of the most potent is to continue taking care of yourself once you are well.

Why treat depression when you're not depressed?

If you're like most people, you pay the most attention to your well-being when you're feeling unwell. As long as you feel healthy and capable you don't spend a lot of energy maintaining your health or positive state of mind.

Sometimes even a decline in well-being doesn't attract people's attention. They ask themselves "*Can I keep going?*" If the answer is yes, they continue on the same path. The mood gets worse, and the same question gets asked again. They don't use their mood as a cue that something isn't quite right, that there is work to be done. Only when they cannot stand it do they begin to take care of themselves. Even then, they only do so until they reach a point where they feel "good enough." "*I think I can cope now.*" The goal is to get rid of the worst of the pain. This approach has a few problems:

- Waiting until you feel truly miserable before you start coping is a bad idea. The lower your mood goes, the more difficult it is to dig yourself back out again. If you could catch yourself before things got out of hand, it would be not be as difficult to overcome the problem.
- Your emotions and your sense of well-being give you valuable feedback about how your life is going. If you are beginning to feel down or anxious or overwhelmed, you can *use* this information as a cue to take a look at your life. Perhaps there is something more you could be doing to care for yourself. If you ignore these feelings, the situation may only get worse.
- Good mental and physical health is much more than the absence of disease or distress. Caring for yourself when you are already feeling "good enough" can help you feel even better. For most people there is no need to sit on the edge of feeling terrible all the time.

In other words, you can move beyond "good enough" or "not bad" to "really well." You can increase your enjoyment of life. You can realize your potential. And you can reduce the impact of energy-draining crises.

Do you tend to stop caring for yourself when your mood or situation improves to the point that it is "just barely tolerable"? In the past, what has been your signal to stop working on improving your life?

What are some of the things you would like to keep working on, even after you feel well again?

How could you remind yourself to keep up your efforts when your mood improves?
