

Opening Our Eyes

Helping ourselves: A toolkit for depression

By Nan Dickie

I used to think, like many others who live with mental illness, that the only “help” I could get for my severe symptoms of clinical depression was medication prescribed by my family doctor or psychiatrist, and infrequent consultations with my psychiatrist. I put all my faith in the medical system.

I have revised my beliefs and practices markedly in the past several years.

There are many tools in the MD (mood disorder) toolkit that can assist one during episodes. These same tools keep us healthy when we are in remission from our symptoms (i.e., when we are “healthy”). I divide the tools into eight categories: monitoring tools; lifestyle tools; talking support tools; inquiry tools; educational tools; diversion tools and time management tools. You may have other tools to add to this list. Keep this list as a reminder when you are ill and your brain is foggy. Show it to your supporter(s).

First, an important note: Before employing any of the following suggestions, discuss them with your doctor or therapist to ensure that they are appropriate for your current situation.

Monitoring tools:

It is wise for you to ask yourself the following questions periodically when you feel mostly healthy: Am I feeling more stressed or anxious than usual? Am I experiencing undue self-doubt these days? Am I avoiding my friends? Am I eating or sleeping more or less than usual? Am I having difficulty concentrating? If you say yes to more than a couple of questions like these, talk to your doctor or therapist to find out if you may be sliding into an episode.

Lifestyle tools:

All the time, and especially during episodes, we need to eat a healthy, balanced diet, and be aware of the effects of stimulants (sugar and coffee for example) and depressants (alcohol). Fresh air provides us with essential Vitamin D; moderate exercise generates endorphins in our brains; sufficient sleep, if we can achieve that, gives us energy to cope positively with our symptoms.

Talking support tools:

When we are depressed, we are often too much “in our heads.” We need sometimes to unload, or get help with our inner chatter (which can be as bad as self-loathing). Consult with a therapist or counsellor in either the public mental health system or the private sector. Individual or group therapy may be prescribed. A depression support group can regularly remind you that you are not alone - many others have stories remarkably similar to yours.

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Inquiry tools:

The practice of mindfulness (simple but not easy!), now quite popular, can help calm the mind and keep you in the here-and-now. Investigate one of the many forms of yoga. You can read mental health, self-help or spiritual books to enlighten or inspire yourself. The internet has many useful resources - be discerning in what you choose to believe. Some people, myself included, journal-write to explore inner issues - entries that don't need to be shared with anyone else.

Educational tools:

You can take a workshop offered by Interior Mental Health to learn skills to deal with anxiety; cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can teach you more helpful ways of thinking; a workbook (for depression, anxiety or other condition) can help you work through various challenges you face.

Diversion tools:

Take part in activities that focus your mind on a concrete task. Hobbies and creative endeavours can succeed in doing this. I have recently taken up the new adult hobby of colouring - you know, the kind we did in Grade 1. Colouring calms me, and it doesn't matter whether it's pretty or not.

Time management tools:

We need to create as balanced a life as possible when we are ill. Managing your time well, balancing the above activities with other aspects of your daily life, will help keep that all-important equilibrium.

You may have other tools in your toolkit to which you can add one or more of these described above. List your tools to discover how much you are helping yourself already. Select new tools; try them out. If something works, continue with it.

It's not helpful to tell yourself, "I should improve my eating habits," or "Maybe tomorrow..." or "I'm too depressed..." or "That won't work for me..." If you lean on excuses such as these, you may be depriving yourself of actions that could help to ease one or more of the debilitating symptoms of your mental disorder.

My approach to living with my illness is to do everything possible to manage my symptoms when I am depressed. This means doing everything possible to be well when I am in remission. If we start employing tools from our toolkit when we are well, they will be in place for us when we need them most.

If you are like I was, and thought there wasn't much you can do for yourself when you are depressed, I hope that you have changed your mind.

[Depression support group meetings: First and third Mondays at Askews Uptown conference room at noon. Everyone welcome. Info: ndickie@telus.net; 250 832-3733.]