

The Black Dog: Understanding Depression

This course at The Gateway was facilitated by Guy Holmes, Clinical Psychologist, and Laura Smith, Trainee Clinical Psychologist, and ran on a weekly basis for seven weeks in the summer of 2005. It followed a similar format to the previous Black Dog Course facilitated by Cai Dunn and Guy (see corresponding report on this website). The sessions were attended by between 7 and 12 people each week, ran for 2 hours each, and followed the following schedule:

6th June: Introductory session.

Introductions. Why have people come on the course? What is it like to feel or be depressed? What does it mean to me to say 'I am depressed'? Is everybody's experience unique or are there similarities between our experiences of depression?

13th June: What is depression like for me? How can I get this across to others? Is it helpful to be able to describe and talk about being depressed? Why do I keep my depressive side secret? What life experiences lead people to feel depressed and get stuck in depressive feelings?

20th June: Is depression the normal state to be in at times of our life when we have very little power to escape from difficult life experiences? Is depression a natural reaction to oppression? How can we map and increase the power we have in our lives?

27th June: How does depression relate to loneliness, separations and losses? How lonely are we, in terms of numbers of people we know and how close we feel to them? How does modern society lead to such loneliness? What are the similarities between grief and depression – between 'mourning and melancholia'?

4th July: Is depression an illness? Is it an illness caused by brain biochemical imbalances? Is depression caused or made more unmanageable by negative thinking patterns? How does cognitive therapy help?

11th July: Is depression something we experience as a defence or (unconscious) coping strategy against feeling an uncomfortable or threatening emotion, such as anger? What is the relationship between repression and depression? Is depression something we feel when we are overwhelmed by a sense of meaninglessness?

18th July: Concluding session.

Review. What are our top tips for living with depression? What have we got from being on the course? What plans have we got for the future?

Feedback on the Course

Each session involved opportunities to explore various theories and ideas about depression and to tap the expertise that we each have gleaned in terms of making sense of our own lives and experiences. Feedback forms at the end of the course indicated that the

majority of people were satisfied with the organisation of the course, the pace and content of the sessions, the level of enjoyment and interest, and the efforts to help people achieve their goals for coming on the course. However not everybody completed the course; a few people were only able to come to a couple of sessions. Written and verbal feedback included the following comments:

“I am fascinated at the many ways in which people adapt and cope. They seem to have an innate survival mechanism. These strategies can be interpreted and treated by professionals in many ways. However unhealthy they may be they must be given respect because they have allowed someone to survive to a point on their life’s journey where change is possible. So what helps?....Having a safe place to fall.”

“I found the course very interesting, well run, informative and a good group experience.”

“ ‘In the early stages of embryonic development a slight wound, the mere prick of a pin, can not only cause severe alterations in but may completely prevent the development of whole limbs of the body...so if near the beginning of life you do only a little harm to the child, it may cast a shadow over the whole of its life’ (Claude Steiner). This seems to fit with the theory that our internal dialogue plays an important part in how we develop and continue to behave. Beliefs that we adopted as a child become unquestionably engrained into our personalities as we make life choices.”

“I haven’t felt able to contribute much to the course but I have found both the material from Guy and Laura and the participants’ viewpoints very interesting. Plus I have found it reassuring to hear about people’s experiences that I can relate to. This reassurance allows me to feel that I am not alone.”

“The course has reinforced the idea that depression must never be seen as one entity since everyone’s experience of depression is individual with similarities interwoven amongst the uniqueness.”

“There is a lot of wisdom in this room; it’s a shame we can’t get it across to more people.”

Participants ‘tips’ for ‘living with depression’

Some of the tips people had for when people feel depressed included:

‘I remind myself that I will get over it.’

‘Every time I spiral down I now remind myself that it is a spiral not the same pit I always fall into – time moves on and so do I.’

‘Try to think positively.’

'Alternatives to conventional treatments can be very useful – massage, reflexology, and other physical and non physical therapies.'

'It is helpful to have something planned and something to look forward to.'

'To plan the week ahead.'

'Having at least one thing to do every day – trying not to have a blank day in my diary.'

'Re-engaging in activities you once enjoyed e.g. music and theatre; this allows you to hope.'

'Trying something new.'

'I've found it helpful to not put myself under too much pressure, and be able to say no or to cancel things without feeling overwhelmingly guilty.'

'Saying 'I didn't ask for this'.'

'When I feel depressed or think of depression I also try to think of repression and oppression... What am I repressing? Who or what is oppressing me? Am I oppressing myself? How have I been oppressed in the past and how is this affecting me now?'

'Being needed.'

'Being gentle with myself and reminding myself that I have value in 'being' not 'doing' – you are what you are, not what you do.'

'Recognising that there are lots of different theories and ideas about why we feel depressed, lots of different ways of dealing with things, and lots of different things to draw on.'

'Not feeling oppressed by having to work.'

'Being in the countryside – nature is the soul's place.'

'Cycling or doing something that has a simple rhythm – you do something requiring energy, get hungry, eat, rest, then cycle again.'

'Finding somewhere where you fit in, that sustains self-worth and is meaningful.'

Recommended Books

A number of books were referred to on the course, including the following:

Dr. Terry Lynch, Beyond Prozac: Healing Mental Distress. PCCS Books, 2004.
A very readable book written by a G.P. about G.P.s' responses to patients who they diagnose as depressed and how listening and talking things through may be a better response than diagnosis and psychiatric drugs.

Solomon, A. The Noonday Demon: An Anatomy of Depression. Vintage Books, 2002.
A personal account of depression with links to various theories and research.

Fiona Shaw, Out of Me: The Story of a Postnatal Breakdown. Viking, 1997.
A personal account of post-natal depression.

Healy, D. (1997) Psychiatric Drugs Explained. Guildford: Mosby.
An informative and balanced book about all psychiatric drugs written by a well-respected British Psychiatrist.

Breggin, P. (1991) Toxic Psychiatry. New York: St. Martins Press.
A critical text on psychiatry and psychiatric treatments written by an American Psychiatrist.

Holmes, G. & Hudson, M. (2003) Coming off medication. OpenMind, 123, 14-15.
A short article advising people on coming off medication.

Paul Gilbert, Overcoming Depression: A self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques. Robinson Books, 2000.
Good in terms of CBT, self-help strategies, and how evolution might have shaped our responses in terms of shame, guilt and depression.

Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky, Mind Over Mood: Change How you Feel by Changing the Way you Think. 1995.
A self-help manual using cognitive therapy.

John Bowlby, Attachment and Loss. Penguin: 1971
Classic text on attachment issues.

Sigmund Freud, Mourning and Melancholia. In On Metapsychology Vol. 11 The Penguin Freud Library, Penguin Books.
Comparison of depression and grief.

Michael Jacobs, The Presenting Past: an introduction to practical psychodynamic counselling, Open University Press, 1986.
Written for counsellors but a very readable book on how aspects of our past can influence the ways we behave and interpret the world.

Dorothy Rowe: Depression: the way out of your prison. Harper Collins: 1983.
Another good self-help book.

David Smail: Power, Interest and Psychology: Elements of a social materialist understanding of distress. PCCS Books, 2005.

Excellent on the wider, social causes of distress.

Newnes, Holmes and Dunn. This is Madness: A critical look at psychiatry and the future of mental health services. PCCS Books, 1999.

Newnes, Holmes and Dunn. This is Madness Too: critical perspectives on mental health services, PCCS Books, 2001.

Two books with chapters from people with a wide variety of backgrounds on issues pertinent to anyone who has had any involvement with mental health services.

Concluding Comments

As facilitators we enjoyed the course and learned a lot from the people who came. The group was able to create a warm atmosphere where people quickly felt safe enough to express their thoughts and feelings and give personal and moving accounts of their experiences. Another course is planned to run at The Gateway from October 31st-December 12th 2005 (Mondays 12.30-2.30) to be facilitated by Guy Holmes and Ruth Howard.

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