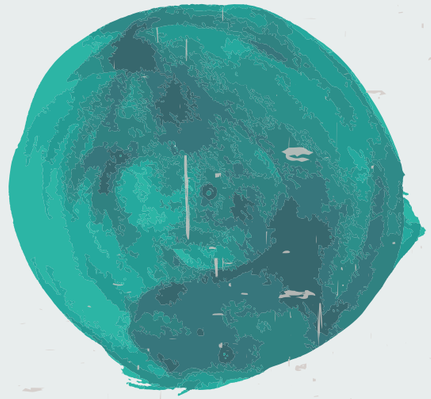

# Walking towards the black dog

**WORDS**

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FEATURE

There is sanity in depression, despite its excruciating nature. Listening to pain and honouring it are crucial skills in therapy

Tim Lott, in *The Scent of Dried Roses*, describes depression as '…a very particular type of illness, in that it seems to hinge on your interpretation of the world, the story you tell yourself'.[1] It is an illness of identity in that, as Frank Kermode writes, '…to suffer it is to be unable any longer to tell… a satisfactory story about yourself'.[2] Your achievements, abilities, health, the love around you, how you see the future, what is currently bad, threatening and uncontrollable in this world – all these simple, yet salient facts, steer a person and leave them bereft or consoled.

Jonathan Dollimore writes that depression attaches itself to the negative in anything.[3] It weighs on people. It contorts and manipulates people's outlook – sometimes harshly, sometimes in an effort to push its way to the front and reveal the world in all its ugly and magnificent manifestations. For that is what many have believed over the centuries – that depression is, as Dollimore asserts, '…the stubborn Western quest for authentic being',[3] and, facing a profound truth, that melancholia is the price of a deep understanding.[3]

## Painful path

Treading a painful path to metaphysical insight was a common, dutiful belief among Renaissance thinkers.[3] Indeed, it echoes Andrew Solomon's words, in that some of us fashion an acute awareness of transience and limitation.[4] We want the truth, but what does one do when one finds it? How does one live side by side with an ephemeral life that is both challenging and precarious? Do we embrace it and accept all the complications and struggles that come with a 'lived' life, or do we walk *towards* depression, the black dog, melancholia (call it what you will), snuggle up against it and find solace of a different kind?

That is the theme, thrust or argument of this article – that some of us actively choose to pat the black dog on its head, feel a sense of calm in its presence and pull away from fighting of any kind; our expectations low, but the possibility of being accepted by this strange, invisible creature, high and reliable. Such a concept is contentious, but I have seen enough cases of depression to want to understand its grip and why some of us might wish to engage in its visitation.

## Solution to inner conflict

Karen Horney talked of a solution to intrapsychic conflicts that is highly relevant. Ultimately, when he is confused, conflicted, unsure which path to take, the neurotic withdraws from the inner battlefield, declaring himself uninterested.[5] He no longer cares, is consumed less by conflicts, and through this attains a semblance of inner peace.[5] Yes, he also resigns from active living, but that is seen as an acceptable trade-off, given the problems and spinning compass that blighted him. All of a sudden, resignation, despite its radical nature, '…produces conditions that allow for a fairly smooth functioning'.[5] It takes on a constructive meaning – one vital to the wellbeing and calm of the neurotic.

Similarly, the depressed client learns to find peace any way he can. He may sabotage his (potential) successful living, but what if success is synonymous with driving *too* fast, feeling *too* much pain, *constantly* being encircled by threats? This way, as Horney observes, he at least has a life without friction, even if without zest.[5]

Paul Gilbert continues the theme around threats and how they prompt one's retreat from the world: 'Depression is a state of mind where the systems in our brain that regulate positive emotions are toned down, and the systems that regulate negative emotions are toned up. This brain pattern may have evolved because it helps animals cope with threatening environments: it's a "go to the back of the cave and stay there until it's safe" response.'[6] And this 'back-of-the-cave' reaction can become more permanent, I would argue. Clients defend themselves against reality.[3] As Adam Phillips states, we numb ourselves to not feel certain things.[7] If restricting and curtailing life means less struggle, then such action is considered necessary.[5]

Gilbert writes about our emotions being organised through three basic systems: threat and self-protection; incentive and resource-seeking; soothing and contentment.[6] When we walk towards the black dog, engine number two falls away.

> How does one live side by side with an ephemeral life that is both challenging and precarious?

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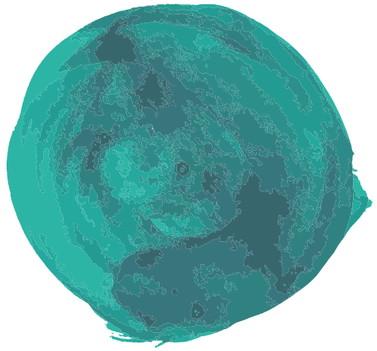

Ambition is no more, but one is soothed by mitigated threats. One lies next to the black dog having renounced 'non-essentials'.[5]

This may sound shocking to some, but stoicism and resignation have their virtues. As Horney points out: 'Many older people… have recognised the intrinsic futility of ambition and success [and] have mellowed by expecting and demanding less.'[5] They don't exactly walk around in a haze. Their life has not come to a shuddering halt. But, as David Smail writes, there are '…only a limited number of ways to react to the blows life inflicts upon us'.[8] If one of those is retreating, then so be it.

## Honouring pain

We can learn to listen to pain and honour it, as Johann Hari concludes in *Lost Connections*.[9] And while I'm espousing something very different to Hari (a cave, after all, is not the collective he proposes), the premise remains the same – that pain can be our ally rather than our enemy. When we are low, finding that safe space is imperative. There is sanity in sadness, despite its excruciating nature.[9] Society can be tough, bleak and unforgiving. It seems to value individual responsibility and initiative above all else.[10] And yet peace can be restored in divergent ways.

Gilbert touches upon a bit of history which is hugely significant in terms of how depression may have come about and expanded its reach – how exogenous or reactive depression may be more valid due to the changes we have seen in society over the last four decades. 'Margaret Thatcher wanted, through her economic policies, to change the heart and soul of the nation. She did achieve a transformation, but not presumably the one she intended… The change was in sensibility. British society became coarser and more selfish. Attitudes were encouraged which… undermined the well-being of a… prosperous society.'[6]

The post-war consensus around welfare, poverty and wealth disparity concerns, in other words, was blown apart. It is a familiar theme in many ways – one still dismissed by a large section of the political establishment – but its ramifications are immense. Moreover, Feltham and Dryden, in their definition of depression, refer to the argument '…that life itself is depressing and that the depressed person is more in touch with reality than others'.[11]

So, numerous things are explicitly and implicitly asserted here: that we're attending to depressed people in therapy, when *actually* they're seeing the world as it is, unlike the majority; that exogenous (reactive) depression rather than endogenous (constitutional predisposition) may be the dominant mode of unhappiness; that British – and indeed *Western* – sensibility has altered so much that some of us are genuinely lost, hurt and floundering among the 'junk values'[11] of the world today.

It is eminently ironic and paradoxical, therefore, that depressed people are still seen in some quarters as forlorn figures or downcast doomsayers – people often shunned, when all they wish to do is have deeper, wider conversations about life. And that pivotal word 'sensibility' is so important when it comes to understanding where we are right now; '…the quality of being able to appreciate and respond to complex emotional or aesthetic influences; sensitivity.'[13]

## Case study

My client, Harry, recently bemoaned the fact that he had no problem forming friendships, but maintaining them was much more difficult – primarily due to his desire to want to talk about the world's problems. His friends in their 20s wished to live for the moment and weren't concerned with things outside their immediate orbit. This understandably affected Harry – made him feel different, perhaps odd compared with people his age, but there was no escaping what he was drawn to: thinking about the future.

Politicians disappointed him in this respect – infiltrating and pervading our education system with their questionable motives and standards, thus arguably making it impossible for emotions and aesthetics (appreciation of beauty) to thrive or flourish. Sensibilities in the next generation (those around him) therefore felt stunted; a wider malaise erupting and the national consciousness not one of connections/compassion, but one of fierce competition/short-termism/uncaring attitudes/flippancy.

This is not to say that people are incapable of handling or deflecting certain disagreeable or perfidious moral codes out there. Indeed, Freud spoke of mankind's principal aim of 'achieving loss'[7] – but when each morning's expectation becomes 'How can I avoid pain today? How can I be understood?', then something overwhelming has taken hold. It's no wonder, therefore, that depressed people attempt to retain their sensibility by retreating to the back of the cave or welcoming the black dog. The world barks enough, but this one doesn't, has been the reaction of many a client.

## Language of ethics

Primo Levy knew that more than most. The survivor of Auschwitz, and author of *If This Is A Man*, moved beyond the language of testimony to the language of ethics, a language that extends his work on the death camps into '…a hypothetical general study of the human mind'.[13] In other words, he wished to make this extreme example of human nature accessible and comprehendible in some way. He wished to stress a moral philosophy which emphasised '…virtue over rules: virtuous acts that have their origins in a virtuous character rather than abstract knowledge of "the Good"'.[13]

This may not mean a lot or appear relevant upon first inspection some 80 years after the trauma of Auschwitz, but what Levy is saying is truly beautiful – that we need to *always* go beyond rules and become an incorruptible and virtuous land; laudable in some way, with good intentions at our core. It is because man's nobility flags, falls and fails that depression largely arises. And because we *still* have to remind our fellow citizens – as Ulysses reminded his shipmates – '…that they [are] men, not beasts',[13] despondency creeps in, sadness gains ground and people whimper and wail.

'Depression is a self-cure for the terrors of aliveness,'[7] Adam Phillips wrote. And it is seemingly the *form* and *shape* of that aliveness that are being held up for inspection, scrutinised and questioned, because they are no longer of our making. The dominant narrative, society's standards, hypocrisy, and panjandrum-like behaviour within corridors of power, taint the larger canvas by which we all live. We see daily egregious acts – war, lies, abuse of power, bullying and discrimination – and despair understandably sets in, pulls a cloak over us, leaves us 'bloody and bowed'.[15] Yet, despite such outrages, most people manage to remain upright, still swinging at life, still believing that beauty outweighs grief and that they are thought about when out of sight;[6] Gilbert's litmus test is central to interconnectedness and us evolving with '…a need to live positively in the minds of others'.[6]

## Protective cave

Some move in a contrary direction to attachment, however.[3] As John McLeod says, they employ a different kind of Velcro, because they find it hard to live in the world.[15] They desperately need to go back to some forgotten safe place which once existed.[15] A protective cave can thus be the antithesis of the crazy pace and technological chaos of life.[3] As the world gets smaller, so do our souls, it seems. Having everything on tap, although viewed as wonderful, miraculous and liberating, dilutes the very thing it claims to strengthen: connections. We scramble for satisfaction in every corner of the globe (clothes, streaming services, holidays, gadgets), all the while neglecting our face-to-face encounters with those we really love and care about.

Hari is eager to touch on the fact that when GPs and big pharmaceutical companies dish out the perfunctory line that depression is a chemical imbalance that needs to be fixed,[9] they conveniently ignore the *power* imbalances that drive many people to distress, anxiety and unhappiness. Moreover, such a stance is the official conclusion of the world's leading medical institutions.[9] The World Health Organisation (WHO) stated in

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> ...I have seen enough cases of depression to want to understand its grip and why some of us might wish to engage in its visitation

2011: 'Mental health is produced socially: the presence or absence of mental health is above all a social indicator and therefore requires social, as well as individual, solutions.'[9] The United Nations (UN) stated in 2017: 'The dominant biomedical narrative of depression [is based on] biased and selective use of research outcomes [that] cause more harm than good, undermine the right to health, and must be abandoned.'[9]

Given the scale and enormity of questionable practices embedded in our health system and wider society, which often overlook the one thing central to mental health (respect for the patient or person's story; ultimately having a *voice*), it's hardly surprising that people lose faith and turn their anger inward. Indeed, self-blame and self-criticism often follow disappointment and result from being hurt and let down.[6]

Such Nietzschean and Freudian mechanisms are linked to powerful *others* and the feeling that we have little influence or control over our lives. And when society's bland template disapproves of the diversification of moods, which is the 'imprint of humankind',[6] then work and relationships begin to feel like a straitjacket; we begin to put on an act; people '...monitor themselves [and indulge in] an "involuntary subordinate strategy"',[6] for fear of annoying the hierarchy above them.

But this is no way to live – self-criticism and reining oneself in, continually stimulating our threat/self-protection system,[6] – and so we have a choice: carry on with our not-so-merry dance or retreat further from the world. Yes, to paraphrase Gilbert, emotions are at the root of our consciousness, yet they are a double-edged sword: happiness and joy, but also fear, anxiety, frustration and anger.[6]

## Final thoughts

I'm not suggesting that retreating to the back of the cave or walking towards the black dog is possible for all – certainly not those for whom it feels like an abyss or is unbearable – or that avoiding painful feelings and emotions is always appropriate,[6] but to attempt to understand why some clients openly greet such a scenario and find relief of a kind is crucial to counselling. What if Baumeister and Leary's famous paper on 'belonging'[16] incorporated such an experience – the befriending, invisible black dog in all its regalia, somehow full of pomp and purpose, sent not to torment, but to soothe lost souls?

My own experience of depression is one of having nothing left in the tank, apart from tears, of examining my life and seeing a complicated and unsatisfactory mess; a story I'm unable to make sense of, which means I freeze, hide or become paralysed. The one thing which sustains me when I feel so bereft is an image in my head of my deceased grandma – her benevolent face representing a simpler time. This safe space I would gladly call my cave, my black dog – a place I retreat to for hours via my mattress and duvet.

The implications of this article are wide ranging. Current mental health provision still puts the emphasis on the individual in terms of their 'crooked' thinking or broken machinery, when in fact there are many reasons why distress, anxiety and depression creep into people's lives. Levy's 'virtue over rules' is a way of pushing the tide back, of embodying each session with respect, integrity and dignity. Only by truly seeing pain and not attributing it to weakness or abnormality can we hope to understand why people retreat and protect themselves. ●



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### YOUR THOUGHTS, PLEASE

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