

I've lived with mood disorders for over thirty years. For that entire time, I thought I was destined to die depressed and alone in a creepy apartment where no one would know I was dead until the stench got too unbearable. I felt hopeless.

Now, hopelessness equals desperation in my book. As if life isn't hard enough, becoming desperate and wondering if life is really worth all the crap makes it that much harder – and more urgent.

For me, the whole point of life is to grow and learn, help others, and experience serenity and joy that you can then spread.

Do you know how impossible it feels to be able to do even a tiny bit of that when you're stuck in clinical depression?

Exactly.

The two concepts are diametrically opposed, they are mutually exclusive, they are polar opposites.

## **SURVIVAL**

When you are consumed with mere survival – making it from one moment to the next without freaking out (again) or hurting yourself – there is no room left in your brain for much of anything.

Even though you may be working very hard to make it – going to therapy, talking to your friends, maybe going to a support group, seeing a psychiatrist and taking meds, meeting with a case manager, perhaps even being hospitalized when it gets really bad – it can feel like you're not getting anywhere.

In fact, working hard on yourself – and it is *work*, *hard* work – coupled with little in the way of progress can lead to frustration, more depression, the feeling of being a failure, and a strong desire to walk away from it all.

But throwing away your support system and quitting your meds is a really bad idea. Trust me. I've tried it.

## **REVELATIONS**

I've been in some kind of therapy or other most of the last 35 years. I've been in groups, I've been in intensive outpatient programs, and I've been to chemical dependency support groups and treatment centers. I've had more therapists, social workers, and psychiatrists than I can shake a stick at.

Through the years, I have consistently been depressed to one degree or another, had no self-confidence, no faith that I mattered to anyone. I felt completely unworthy of love and compassion, and have thought very seriously about committing suicide more than a few times.

Obviously, what I had been doing wasn't working. And even though it was a ton of work and I was constantly exhausted from it all, all I was doing was trudging through every day, looking for reasons *not* to kill myself.

But you know what? I recently had a revelation that has changed my life. If you suffer from depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, PTSD, borderline, schizophrenia, or any other mental illness, it may be a revelation for you, too.

This is something I never thought I'd have to work to understand, but here it is: *It's okay to be okay*. Did you know that? Has anyone ever told you that? Then let me say it again:

**It's okay to be okay.**

If you're anything like me, this truth has never occurred to you before. And, strangely enough, it can be hard to accept. But it is true.

Feeling depressed takes a lot out of a person. It changes you. It even changes your brain chemistry. And yet, when it's all you can remember feeling, there's a certain comfort in that. It's predictable, it's something you know how to feel.

After all, comfort doesn't have to feel good. It just means that you're used to it, you know what to expect.

Feeling "good," on the other hand, may feel foreign to you. *How* do you feel good? How do I *know* I'm feeling good? What the hell do I do with it, and how can I keep it going??

I finally started feeling good almost three years ago, after receiving a treatment called [Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation \(TMS\)](#). It has saved my life. Only, now I have a new problem. I very quickly discovered that feeling "good" felt...strange. It felt weird. It actually felt *wrong*.

***After more than thirty years of feeling depressed to one degree or another, I discovered that I was uncomfortable feeling good.***

I was not expecting that.

I expected to enjoy feeling good, experiencing moments of actual joy, and maybe even feeling happy. And, truth be told, I did – until I started to think about it. That's when the doubt crept in. (Damn brain!) After all, new territory is often scary.

But I finally understand and believe that it's okay to be okay, and I want you to know that, too. Even in those uncomfortable moments, I'm glad I'm not depressed.

You don't have to suffer anymore. You don't need to be the one that everyone treats with kid gloves. You don't have to feel fragile anymore, like you may crack at any moment, like you're waiting for the other shoe to drop.

### ***It's okay to be okay.***

It's okay to laugh, it's okay to smile, it's okay to let loose for a moment (or two). The world will not fall apart. The sky will not fall. Chicken Little will be nowhere in sight.

A few years ago, during one of my (many) psych unit admissions, I realized something. All those years, I had been convinced that I was destined to live a shitty, depressing, pointless life and that nothing would help.

You know what I was really doing?

*I was willfully denying the possibility that I could get better.*

I was keeping myself miserable, and I didn't even know it. I truly believed that I would always suffer from this debilitating brain disease and that I would never live even a semblance of a "normal" life again.

Now, I still struggle to believe that I can feel good some days, but I know it in my head – and in my heart.

These revelations gradually helped me change my attitude. They helped me realize that maybe I *wouldn't* be depressed every day for the rest of my life.

They also gave me a small piece of Hope, which is where the real power lies.

### **HOPE**

I just discovered that some people use H.O.P.E. as an acronym for "hold on, pain ends." I like that. Because no matter how I'm feeling, I need to know that my depression, anxiety, fear, guilt, shame – whatever – *will* end.

What's the old adage? "This too shall pass?" Yeah, I hate that. If one more person tells me that, I'm going to bop them in the nose.

"This too shall pass" – yeah, *if* I survive it.

My head knows that my depression won't last forever. My heart believes it too, sometimes. But at times, all logic disappears and I'm left feeling alone and misunderstood. It's hard to be logical about something that is illogical.

But Hope is necessary. For me, it means *possibility*. The possibility that yes, it might get better. The possibility that I may be able to work again someday – part-time, anyway – and help support my family. The possibility that I won't always be fighting suicidal thoughts or urges to self-harm.

### ***Hope is where life lives.***

It gives me something to look forward to, it allows me to set goals. Do you know how important goals are to someone with a mental illness? It speaks of the possibility of a future.

Life before Hope was empty, meaningless, a constant struggle against myself. Know what I mean?

But now that I'm okay a lot of the time, it's less of a struggle. I have reasons to keep going on. I even have some things I'm looking forward to for a change.

*It's okay to be okay.* It's okay to have Hope, to feel it, to expect a future without pain and struggle every day.

*It happened to me, and I truly believe it can happen to you.*

Look, I was living every day with a brain that wanted to see me dead. I neither knew nor believed I could get better. I was defeated.

And yet, I am okay right now. I have been for the last two-plus years. And it's wonderful! I no longer feel like I'm doomed to a life of misery where every day I have to fight for a reason to live.

*I'm okay right now.*

And isn't that the point? To feel better, to feel good even. To really know *and believe* that life actually can get better.

To have Hope, despite the shit.

### **A BOLD, NEW TRUTH**

It turns out that my brain was lying to me for over thirty years. It told me I was worthless, hopeless, helpless. Doomed.

But my truth has changed.

I have many moments of contentment now, where I feel comfortable with myself and my circumstances. It has taken many, many years, and it's hard work, make no mistake, but here I am.

I even have moments when I laugh unabashedly, when I let my inner self out, when I experience joy.

Who knew that was even possible?

People *hoped* it was possible. My family, my friends, my employers and coworkers – they all wanted me to feel better. I don't think anyone in my life has ever wanted me to fall prey to the worst of my thoughts.

It's also getting easier to accept where I am. I am now able to notice when I am fighting myself, my feelings, my reality. Only now, I understand that ***fighting does nothing except suck the life out of me and make me feel worse.***

Actually, that may be the most important truth I've realized – I don't have to fight anymore. Do you know what a relief that is?

I used to say things like, "I've struggled with depression most of my life," or "I suffer from depression." Now I say, "I've been living with depression for most of my life." See the difference? It's a subtle, but important, one.

It's almost like once I finally *accepted* that depression will always be a part of my life – which, again, means I stopped fighting it – I was able to move through it. It no longer permeates every single thought every single day.

I've also learned that the world is not black and white, despite what my brain still tries to tell me. I used to think that, if I was having a bad day, it was a bad day, useless, wasted. Period.

But my previous therapist told me another thing I did not know: That **I can feel like shit and still get something done.**

That means that even when I wake up feeling that hole in my heart, even when I have an emotional relapse – even when I feel like I'm really starting to slide again – I don't have to let it paralyze me.

## WHAT IT'S LIKE TO FEEL BETTER

No longer do I battle intrusive thoughts every day. I don't think about suicide as much. My anxiety has improved. I have gained confidence in myself. I'm even sleeping better. I've started to consider myself an optimist instead of the pragmatic realist (read: cynic) I always thought I was. I'm able to finish some of the things I start, rather than losing interest in them halfway through.

I even laugh out loud.

And yet, life is not perfect. I still sometimes see myself as needing to be fixed, needing to be saved from the darkness that I know is there, lying in wait. I have realized that I often think of myself as a depressed person who is sometimes barely able to function, despite the fact that I haven't actually felt that way for more than two years.

And I still wonder. No matter how many good days or weeks I have in a row, I am frequently pestered by the thought that I'm going to go downhill again. I am still wary of feeling "good", especially of feeling "too good". I am constantly afraid that it's going to go away and my depression will try to pull me under water yet again.

But I do my best to enjoy every moment of it.

The biggest difference is that, now, I believe it can – and will – go away. It might take a day, a week, a month, or even longer – but it will not last forever. What's more, I can survive it and end up in a good place.

How's that for Hope?

*Yes, it's okay to be okay.*

And it's so worth it.

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