

4 Inside Help

I have called this chapter ‘inside help’, because it is about the kinds of help it is possible to craft for ourselves, using what we have learned from others but adapting it to suit our own inner weather. As I tried to describe the various remedies I improvised or stumbled upon, I realised that all the mechanisms I used have been based on ways of rethinking my emotions, not because depression is about being sad (sometimes it is the impossibility of being sad), but because the way through it has to do with understanding how we relate to our emotions, those forces that give rise to our inner weather.

I think it was Proust who said he was reborn when the weather changed – a dull day gave him permission to be a different kind of person than a warm, clear one. For depressives, though, we must learn how to withhold that permission from ourselves. We cannot afford to go with the flow, because left to itself the flow leads over a precipice. But fighting it or refusing to acknowledge it uses precious energy. It is learning, in a sense, not to believe in negative feelings (and perhaps, ultimately, not to experience feelings negatively) that is important.

But (to change the metaphor) the emotions, though powerful, are not skilful in themselves. They are recalcitrant, sometimes sullen; they want their own way, and the more we are conscious of them, the more powerful they become. So if we want our emotions to support us rather than to rule us, we must learn to apply our reason to them.

Getting inside our emotions

It is not easy to think about emotions from the inside, that is, from within our own experience of them. They are often too fleeting to interrogate directly, but by the time they have joined hands to form moods, they have become too ingrained to shift.

Moods are deeply personal, evanescent (although often recurrent), difficult to pin down, but utterly unmistakable. They are more versatile than feelings. It is possible to have a mood that goes with a particular colour of the light, or a time of day, or a day of the week. Although I am much more pragmatic about it now, on Sunday evenings, still, I cannot feel quite at ease. The week approaches and I am never sure I am going to be able to survive it.

Moods and feelings have a complicated relationship. Feelings are like tendrils of emotion that twine around particular places, objects and people. Moods feed on feelings but they can also choke them out. Feelings, at least, look outwards, whereas moods tend to be more autonomous, more self-referential. Moods seem

elemental, while feelings although personal, are more personable – we have feelings towards our country, our work, our neighbourhood. But that mood of drifting sadness that comes unbidden, perhaps activated by the scent of wattle or cherry blossom on an early spring evening, or the way the buildings line a particular street – that is yours alone.

Over time, we develop our own way of understanding these overlapping worlds of emotion, mood and feeling. Their architecture becomes the structure of our personality, reinforcing certain responses, marginalising others. Now, in depression, much of this emotional architecture implodes, and we are left with a strange kind of non-feeling – not quite belonging in a particular world, not quite belonging to oneself.

So – what to do? We need to get our rational selves – still there, grinding out their old litanies – onto the job of emotional reinvention. In the vernacular, we talk about ‘cheering ourselves up’. What I am suggesting is a more considered, deeper version.

We have to accept that we cannot control what happens to us by rigidifying our internal world. This is not to say that our efforts are not estimable, sometimes even noble. My Sunday night mood of uncertainty and fear was where my conscientiousness came from, because I was not confident enough just to let the week sort itself out. But it makes more sense to learn to sit comfortably with ambiguity.

Overcoming negative emotions

The task of reinvention starts with the negative emotions. How resilient they are, like weeds in bushland! They keep coming back, never fully eradicated.

To tackle them, of course, you have got to want to do so. Feeling happy should be its own motivation, but for depressives, it is rather that we cannot afford *not* to work at happiness. Some people seem to be able to internalise any degree of hate, envy and malice. Depressives, however, do not have that luxury. We do not have good emotional shock absorbers, so we cannot field the dark side without succumbing to it. We have to learn to conquer it within ourselves.

Whether we like it or not, we are forced to engage in a journey that is as much spiritual in nature as it is practical. This may seem tedious, not because it is necessary to embrace religion of some kind (it is not), but because turning, deliberately, towards love in the sense I am describing, is to change the habits of a lifetime. It is a task rich in rewards, though not of a truly tangible kind. We make as many mistakes through love as through hate. Love distorts as much as hate, and leads us astray just as easily. But love is creative, whereas hate only destroys. Love is the ultimate self-acceptance – hate represents what we cannot accept in ourselves.

There are many guidebooks around for this particular journey. The difficulty lies not so much in deciding to set out, but in recognising the landmarks when you come

to them. To understand – I must work on this, now – is the first step.

But do not make this realisation a burden. Think of the Bradley sisters, the two Australian experts in bush regeneration whose practical experience in trying to reclaim weed-infested bushland near their home in Mosman in Sydney during the 1960s turned the conventional approach on its head. The natural impulse when trying to remove weeds from bushland is to go for the toughest parts first. But that requires huge expenditures of energy for results which are often disappointing. It is far more effective to start where the weeds are least, and gradually let the native vegetation reassert itself.

Or, if you prefer, take an analogy from Australian history. The first explorers found that crossing the Blue Mountains, to the west of Sydney, was impossible. They would start out following the valleys (because in their experience, valleys ultimately led through mountains) only to discover their way forward was blocked by huge vertical walls of rock. It was only when they changed their plan of approach and stuck to the ridges that they succeeded in reaching the other side. The reason for the confusion was that the Blue Mountains were (as my father, an electronics engineer, used to say) inversely modulated. They were created when an uplifted plain began to be worn away by rivers, rather than by massive earth movements from deep within the earth. So the

way across lay in trying something different, rather than bashing hopelessly away at an impossible situation. Similarly, the path out of depression may not be the most obvious one to take, nor will it necessarily be the most arduous. It is important not to cheat, but neither should you be engaging in a constant battle with yourself.

Emotions and reason

Somewhere, in western philosophy, we separated reason from the emotions. In the semi-popular literature, Descartes is usually fingered with responsibility for this separation, although his much-quoted observation ‘I think, therefore I am’ does not mean that he thought mind and emotions were wholly separate, simply that he believed that it was thinking that made us who we are. Nevertheless, if mind was what made us human, said Descartes, then body must be the seat of all the other stuff.

It was a distinction that proved to be scientifically inaccurate, as well as practically misleading. As even the barest introspection shows, all emotions are accompanied by thought – there is thought-emotion, and emotion-thought. Indeed in Buddhist psychology, emotions do not exist as a separate category – they are states of mind with powerful consequences, both moral and practical, for the person experiencing them.

For depressives, it is the negative emotion-thoughts that are both danger signal and siren song. I call it

the power of negative thinking. It is the usual human experience that anger, resentment and fear are far stronger than their opposites – love, gratitude and compassion. For depressives, the negative emotions bite deeper and are harder to shift, but at the same time, they are necessary as a form of self-validation. And there is a vicious circle at work, too. Others sense this odd jaggedness about us; they do not consciously exclude us, but at the same time, we are not the person who others instinctively gravitate towards. So there is a measure of isolation and loneliness that is real, and unfortunate, and unjustified.

The point is that these feelings do not help us. Indeed, the more justified they are, the more important it is to get rid of them or, better still, to use them to bring about change.

Cultivating positive emotions: the store consciousness

If we are going to garden with our emotions – that is, deliberately cultivate some rather than others – we need a way of imagining them: one that comprehends what happens to them in depression, but also allows us to bring about change.

Buddhism, considered as a form of practical psychology rather than as a religion, offers some useful models. Buddhists believe we have a store consciousness existing beneath our day-to-day consciousness in which the patterns of all our emotions, both positive and

negative, are lodged. The store consciousness is both individual and collective, in that it is formed from an interaction between our own experiences and the socially created world around us.

The store consciousness contains the origins of both positive and negative emotions. It is wound around with the habit energies of our negativities. But it also contains the seeds, the possibilities of the positive manifestations, of warmth, compassion and love. With the appropriate admixture of will, mindfulness and understanding, these emotional precursors can be turned into a form of wisdom.

So we can choose our emotions, provided we have the technique to do so. To use the analogy of an emotional economy, we trade busily with the world across the boundary of our personality, but also, and more importantly, we trade with ourselves. Nothing is wasted in this economy, but neither is anything comprehensively disposed of. In practical terms, this realisation opens up the possibility of building up a more positive personality by exchanging bad emotions for better ones. Buddhist techniques for doing this are well described by Pema Chodron in her wonderful book *Start Where You Are*. As breathing is the physical activity that links us most clearly with the outside world, it is the breath that is the focus of the exchange. You can breathe out the bad and breathe in the good or, if you are very brave, breathe in the bad and breathe out the good.

The emotional economy

Investment in this economy requires the application of energy, diligence and patience. We strengthen the negative emotions by thinking the thoughts that awaken them. Similarly, we can strengthen the positive emotions by thinking the thoughts that awaken them. It is a simple philosophy, propounded in many works on the power of positive thinking. The trick is actually to do it. There is a certain safety in defeat, an insurance policy against being found wanting.

Part of the problem is that we do not have a good model to use for implementing this kind of change, so we tend to give up or forget how important it is. Or alternatively, we come up with quite good ways of re-grounding ourselves without realising that that is what we are doing. So we are able to alter the flow, but not reliably.

Of all the negative emotions, the terrible twins, anger and fear, are probably the hardest to deal with. We know that they are accompanied by certain physical states because our physiology is hard-wired to take action in response to them. But the physical states do not come first – the thoughts do.

The problem of anger

We all have a well-developed sense of justice about ourselves, and anger is its warm fire, its red tide of energy. We can make something of depressive anger, but only if

we are able to gain that reflective ‘jump’ on it, to use it, rather than to be consumed by it. For depressives, it is inturned and hoarded anger, repressed anger that wipes us out emotionally. Dealing with it positively requires a good deal of imaginative effort.

Acknowledge that you probably cannot change what is causing your anger. Nor is it possible or even desirable to ‘get even’. If you are able to remove yourself from a situation that is actively making you unhappy, and you have thought carefully about the costs and benefits, that is certainly one answer. But you do not have to be a solipsist to appreciate how much of the perceived behaviour of others, and the characteristics of particular situations, are internally generated. When you leave, you take yourself with you.

This does not mean deciding that we have created the anger in our own minds, and must uncreate it. There is always a moral dimension to anger – it is a way of saying to ourselves, ‘What did I do to deserve this?’ It is a form of assertion, a way of saying I deserved something better.

It may be that the object of your anger is not worth your angry attention. It may be that you have every right to be angry, and the expression of that anger is necessary. But doing so, while it may be important to draw boundaries as an act of protest and to maintain self-respect, rarely solves anything. We need to prevent the anger from going ‘in’. I use a number of techniques – perspectivising is probably the most useful.

Techniques for dealing with anger

Perspectivising

Perspectivising does not mean glossing over situations with 'this is not so bad', or 'there are others worse off than me'. By all means think these thoughts if they are useful to you. But perspectivising, in the sense in which I mean it here, means detaching the world from the unreasonable expectations we have of it.

Let me give you an example from my own life. In my early forties I joined the workforce of an academic institution, one that was certainly not among the elite. I never felt comfortable being there and found it almost impossible to understand what it was trying to achieve, but at the same time, I was unable to get out. I became trapped.

As with many institutions that struggle, its difficulties were not caused by its people (many of whom were excellent), but because it had lost (or never had) practical ways of defining what it wanted to be. And rather than defining and developing what was best within itself, it took the easy way out and allowed its circumstances to dictate to it. Senior managers tried their best to make a difference, but never seemed able to hit on the right priorities. They were distracted by how to divide up the power and how to allocate the paltry sums of money that went with it, instead of working on the many obstacles (generally human, rather than material) that stopped people from doing better.

I found the work hard and draining. The university was small, so we each had to teach a large number of different units, and it was also financially fragile, so there was never enough money to go around. To keep research going while preparing new teaching units took plenty of energy. And of course, over time, as these circumstances started to become part of me, they changed my sense of myself, of what it was possible for me to achieve.

I sought feedback from the students on my teaching, and about a third of them lambasted me for being boring. I simplified my lectures but they ended up being somewhat jejune. I gradually lost confidence in myself. Academia is full of depressives (as Burton put it, melancholia is characteristic of ‘scholars and dizzards’), but it is probably the worst possible environment for us because it requires resolute self-belief and a clear understanding of self-interest. Teaching is a punishing world because, while it is the most social of all activities, it is also the one in which we are most alone.

Apart from this, academia is a very competitive world, tailor-made for resentment when others succeed, and for *schadenfreude* when they fail. I found myself falling frequently into anger and despair, unable to distance myself from what I was doing, but also unable to feel part of it.

I applied for jobs outside but missed out on all of them. It was not that I was not well-equipped for them. It was simply that there was always someone better-placed than

I was. I was unlucky, but luck was not the whole story. Absorbed in my work, I had not done the networking necessary for success.

Remember, too that during this period I was battling with post-natal depression and the tiredness that goes with it, while trying to write and to teach. There was little opportunity to form relationships with students because the classes turned over very quickly. And the best students were always taken over by one of the senior academics in the department, a consummate networker with a vindictive streak who nevertheless had an appealing side that made people want to help him. His rise was inexorable.

Gradually, I realised that resentment was feeding tiredness, and that the institution was simply being itself. It was as pointless to criticise it for not being a sandstone university, as it was to criticise a bitzer for not being a pedigree.

On the other hand, there was a warmth there that was absent from many universities. And the students, at least a substantial number of them, were intelligent, good-hearted and hard-working even if disinclined to do much reading. While at first (in the mid-1990s), there was a long 'tail' of disaffected and poorly prepared students, the quality gradually improved as the labour market picked up. I decided I loved all these students and wanted to share with them the best that was in me. I gave up 'what if' and 'it might have been'. I eschewed

comparison and lightened up. I am not sure if I taught any better, but I certainly felt better within myself.

Then, as sometimes happens in universities, there was a change in the senior management and a truly appalling senior person took over. This person's influence was pervasive and corrupting. Power was what he craved, and power was what he exercised. The university's silly, bureaucratised human resources procedures were quickly bypassed. A phalanx of minions was soon installed. Bullying became the order of the day. Those who 'went over' to the new power source were favoured and promoted. Those who did not, were sidelined and traduced. The vice-chancellor, as vice-chancellors often do, declined to become involved. The general gutlessness of senior managers in the public sector (and probably in the private sector, too), has to be experienced to be believed.

In the earlier era, when I began to realise that I had probably made a mistake, I was able to keep going by savouring the rich comedy of the place. This new malignant era was more difficult, because it required not only moral resistance, but resilience of a fairly high order. The boys who stood up to the tyrant were distraught because they had lost all their power. I, who had never had any, nevertheless found myself as marginalised in the new order as I had been in the old. I was forbidden to attend meetings, I was maligned in emails.

I considered, with some justification, that it was all

most unfair. At one point I made my dismay apparent to the vice-chancellor, who helpfully pointed to the wonderful counselling services the university had in place, and suggested I should take sick leave. When I pointed out that it was his job to put an end to the tyranny we had undergone, he made no comment, and in fact this was the attitude of the whole of the university's senior management. Ultimately, people power prevailed and the offending academic was removed, thanks in large part to the union acting as a focus for dissent, but not before an enormous amount of damage had been done. And the damage continued to be done, because the particular brand of poison exuded by the managerial cane toad we had managed to evict continued to poison the body politic long after his departure.

Now the important lesson here is – you have to deal with this kind of situation at the substantive, practical level, but at the emotional level, you have to let it all go. The more justified it is, the more important it is to set it aside. And the reason you have to let it go, is not to devalue yourself but to vindicate yourself. Just try it. You feel light, more sure of yourself, not less. In this way, you create much less internal anger.

Breaking down walls

Being walled-up in a world of one's own may seem like a safe place. Such worlds can also produce great creativity, with the obsessiveness that underlies most achievement. But for women particularly, these walls cannot be

sustained. They come crashing down, because we have to come to terms with the male world, and all the mistakes and compromises and exploitations that almost every woman experiences. Too late, we realise that we should have had it all figured, to be able to 'yes' and 'no' and 'maybe', to play the game, in fact. But the game is learned best by shrewd intelligences, not those that are caught up in worlds of their own making.

We may try to rebuild the walls, using the pain we have accumulated. And sometimes we succeed. But those against whom we are protecting ourselves must at some stage be acknowledged and understood as beings more successful because they are much more outwardly directed than ourselves. Some are genuinely good people who truly believe that their role in life is to serve others. Others are self-interested in a way that is quite staggering, the kind of personality the economists have put at the centre of their social psychology, the rational utility-maximisers.

It takes a struggle to realise that the world outside ourselves does not, generally, operate on principles of intelligence and goodwill, and having realised that, to overcome one's resentment of the placemen (and placewomen) and fixers who seem to succeed in it. But this must be done. Observe them closely – their effortless self-possession, the fact that they never apologise, never explain. And once again, let it all go.