

Youth Support - Professional Training

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"Fear is the key - the depressed
adolescent"

'Fear is the Key?'

- The Depressive personality -

'Fear is the Key'

The 'depressive' part of our nature allows us to feel the sadness in our world. It makes us sensitive to others emotions, empathetic to their needs and feelings so that, in sufficient measure it breeds carers, doctors, nurses, therapists, aid workers . . . while in excess it renders us vulnerable to every nuance of rejection, disparagement and hurt.

As with all the facets of our characters, having a depressive side to our personality does not mean we are depressed. Each personality type has a positive and a negative side. Each part of our inner self has developed in response to a need to understand the world around us and a need to cope with outer stresses and traumas. Our 'coping strategies' helped us to survive when we were weak and defenceless children - some when carried into adult life will continue to serve us and some will become the millstones around our necks, inhibiting intimate relationships and spontaneous enjoyment.

Some of these 'old friends' can be accommodated in our adult psyche while others must be lovingly but firmly placed on the back shelf like the old Teddy bear with the worn fur, protruding squeaker and torn ear, who we loved and was a comfort in lonely times, who we held tightly under the covers to dispel the fear of the dark, but who we no longer bring out to play. 'Goodbye, old friend, you served me well, but now we must part' . . .

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The word 'Depression' has been incorporated into general usage perhaps more than any other psychiatric term but do those who use such expressions as - 'I'm feeling a bit depressed, today' or - 'Isn't it depressing?' - really mean what they say?. What is the feeling conveyed by the term depression? What do we mean when we say we are depressed?

'Depression' can be feeling low, fed up, worn out and generally feeling that life is not going our way, or it can represent a devastating feeling of hopelessness, profound sadness or utter emptiness. Moreover depression can be a substitute for feelings that cannot be expressed.

Most of us experience 'depression' at some time in our lives. It is the severity of our depressive tendency and the way in which we cope with it that determines the outcome. Some people like to divide 'depression' into a number of types, for instance 'manic depressive' when there are mood swings; 'exogenous' when outside influences are the cause; 'endogenous' when the problem appears to be of internal origin. It is perhaps more helpful to regard 'depression' as a symptom of inner pain whose expression can be modified by a number of factors.

Those with a high tolerance of depression can take a number of knocks, survive a number of unpleasant life events without succumbing to depression - then maybe some shattering event can push them over the edge into what could be termed 'exogenous depression' - whereas perhaps someone with a lower threshold would have become depressed earlier in the sequence and those at the opposite end of the scale appear to be depressed without any external stimulus.

Similarly there is a spectrum of defences and coping strategies used to stave off depressive feelings. Activity and commitment to a piece of work can protect from depression. The mind can be preoccupied with external events so that the inner world is kept at bay. This can be seen as a healthy distraction or a manic escape - is it avoiding reality, a state of denial? - or is it a healthy escape from a morbid preoccupation? Certainly one can see the 'unhealthy' nature of manic activity gone overboard - when over-activity ceases to be a helpful diversion and becomes a consuming compulsion. This 'manic phase' can be even more painful to endure than the black depression which often alternates with it. Nevertheless there is no need for a separate mechanism to be suggested - but rather an understanding of the extremes of a defence mechanism going into overdrive.

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Stephen woke in a strange room, it was dark. He did not know where he was and felt very alone. He called for his mother - no answer. He called again and started to cry. His cries echoed in an empty dark void - no response. Sobbing, he climbed out of his cot and found his way across the room to the door.

Some time later his mother found the distraught toddler wandering in the corridor of their holiday hotel. She had left him for a few minutes thinking he was safely asleep. Stephen however felt completely bereft, abandoned and helpless.

To Stephen, the fact that his mother had abandoned him meant that she did not love him and that, he reasoned, was because he was unlovable - he had done something wrong. If he had been a better child, a child who could fulfil his mother's wishes for him, then he would not have been left alone and undefended.

Stephen spent his childhood trying to please his family, being the compliant child that they would perhaps love; taking care that he did not show his true 'guilty' inner self that they would not like. His first day at school was traumatic. The challenge of coming into contact with the outside world, with other individuals who would all need fending off, whom he would need to appease, was formidable.

"I did not want my mother to leave me there and I just could not bear the thought of all those children around me, all those people that I was supposed to talk to.I just felt myself recoiling away from them, shutting them out. It was torture. I did try to run away one day, I ran out of the school and tried to find my way home, but they found me and brought me back. ... that was pretty disastrous anyway. ... My mother was so anxious about me and I felt so guilty at having worried her .. it just made things worse."

Stephen had repeated his life experience of wandering hopelessly looking for a rejecting mother, for whom he might have justifiably felt anger - anger at having been abandoned, first alone in the dark and then with a group of strangers in school. But the unhappy boy did not allow himself to feel the forbidden emotion, and explained his mother's behaviour away as his fault.

Stephen hated secondary school and he decided to just knuckle down to work so that teachers would not take particular notice of him. "It was sheer purgatory. I just cannot describe how painful I found school. I just shut off from it from the criticism, and the fear of possible criticism ... but mainly from having to be someone I was not."

In early adulthood he coped socially and at work but experienced periods of deep depression when he felt that his life was based on pretence and none of his relationships engaged his real self. This 'real self' he felt was locked away -

"I think I'm so well hidden that I don't even know who I am, and I have a dreadful fear that maybe I'm not worth knowing".

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The depressed person is dependant on other's views of himself. He will seek approval, will have very little self confidence and have a poor sense of self worth. Whenever something goes wrong, he will feel that it is his fault and go through life full of guilt, self reproach and blame. Sadly there are those who are ever ready to provide the expected criticism, to reinforce the feeling of worthlessness and to tune in to a young person's vulnerability.

"..When we grew up and went to school

There were certain teachers who would

Hurt the children anyway they could

By pouring their derision

Upon anything we did

And exposing every weakness

However carefully hidden by the kids .."

(The Happiest Days of our Lives - Waters)

To an insecure child or adolescent, any hint of disapproval can become the pebble that starts an avalanche, a catastrophic thought which sets off a train of 'I am worthless' emotion.

The infant learns about the good and bad aspects of mother in the early months and will feel the inevitable frustration of not always having his every need met immediately. Frustration and anger felt towards the 'bad side' of mother can turn to shame and guilt at having felt that way. The infant is afraid of having harmed his object of love with his anger. This early substitution of anger by guilt can be reproduced and amplified in each subsequent interchange resulting in a hopelessly depressed child who can do no right.

Perhaps one of the most powerful emotions underlying depression is fear. The 'depressed' child fears that he has caused harm with his emotions, he fears he will be found out, he fears the rejection which will be his punishment. Hermann Hesse in his autobiographical novel 'A Child's Heart' uses the word 'dread' -

" ..If I was to reduce all my feelings and their painful conflicts to a single name, I can think of no other word but: dread. It was dread, dread and uncertainty, that I felt in all those hours of shattered childhood felicity: dread of punishment, dread of my own conscience, dread of stirrings in my soul which I considered forbidden and criminal..."

" .. despite his Nobel prize, Hesse in his mature years suffered from the tragic feeling of being separated from his true self, which doctors refer to curtly as depression."
(Alice Miller).

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"I think I have never really been free of the feeling that I have done something wrong and that someday I will be found out.

When I was little I used to have these dreams. Almost every night it seemed, I would have nightmares that I had done something wrong. They would vary a bit, but at the end I was always left crying that I had not done it, I was being falsely accused. There was this strange feeling of being guilty, yet at the same time knowing that I had not done anything.

Sometimes I dreamed that I had killed someone, I had buried a body in the garden, or I was trying to get rid of a body and I was so scared that I would be found out - the shame of everybody knowing that I was a murderess after all!

When I was at school I would dream that the headmistress was accusing me of things - how I hated her for it. It was so intense that when we visited a prison on an educational project I was overwhelmed with the feeling that one day I would be shut up in there for something I had not done.

I've always been a bit of a perfectionist with my work, I suppose. I always try to make sure there are no mistakes. But whenever anything goes wrong in the family, I am driven frantic trying to see how possibly it could be my fault and what I could have done wrong.

When I do a good piece of work I am afraid to show it to people in case they think it's worthless, but I know I need them to say that they like it - I'm always looking for their approval. It only takes a glance to know - and I'm shattered and in the depths or sitting on a cloud ... I don't seem to have any inner resource to keep me feeling good ... no security about who I am, I suppose.."

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This insecure, unloved teenager was actually doing very well at school and was frequently top of her class. Nevertheless she was so vulnerable and dependant on the views of others that she was desperately unhappy, her every waking hour devoted to pleasing her family and teachers while her dream world was filled with her inner fears - fears of her inherent guilt, despair and hopelessness. Her early dreams of murder were interpreted partly as manifestations of her unexpressed anger and partly as relating to the death of a cousin for whom she (irrationally) felt responsible. Later she concluded that they might also have related to the burying of the 'true self' - her not acknowledging her own true value.

In therapy she realised that however hard she tried to please her family, her friends and teachers, she would never succeed in pleasing them all and she was able gradually to let go of the fear of failing in this hopeless task. A slow process of learning her own values, rather than those of

others led to acceptance of herself as an individual and thus to a feeling of improved self worth.

The fear associated with self doubt is not limited to insecure adolescents, we all need to know how to cope with our inner fears and to recognise them as part of ourselves. The 'false persona' that we have adopted must be left behind. Recognition and 'owning' our fears can help us to master our true selves and diminish the power of depression to overwhelm our lives.

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- Kamakura Koans -

Tokimune was Regent of Japan at the age of 18. He ruled with absolute power from 1268 to 1284 and was a very brilliant and capable man. He was however filled with inner fear and self doubt and turned to Zen to try to rid himself of his anxieties. "Grass of the Way", his collection of dialogues with the teacher Bukko was quoted in "Zen and the ways" (T. Leggett).

Tokimune - "Of all the ills of life, fear is the worst. How can I be free from it?"

Bukko - "You must shut off the place where it comes from".

Tokimune - "Where does fear come from?"

Bukko - "It comes from Tokimune".

Tokimune - "Tokimune hates fear so much. How can you say it comes from Tokimune?"

Bukko - "Try and see. Abandon Tokimune and come tomorrow: your courage will be as great as the whole world."

Tokimune - "How can I abandon Tokimune?"

Bukko - "You must simply abandon all thinking."

Tokimune - "What is the way to cut off all thinking?"

Bukko - "Plunge yourself into meditation and wait for the body and mind to become serene".

Tokimune - "My duties in the world leave me so little time. What can I do?"

Bukko - "... going and sitting and lying, whatever you have to do, that itself is the best place (dojo) for training. That is the place to learn profound meditation".

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This extract of ancient writing, although couched in rather stilted language, conveys a similar message to that of the so called 'Twelve step' programme adopted by a number of self help groups from the AA - alcoholics anonymous - programme. Acceptance of inner turmoil and fear; relinquishing the need to control and avoid, 'letting go' and allowing answers to come.

The depressive personality provides a fertile ground for the development of addictions. Alcohol and drugs can be misguidedly used as a way of blotting out the pain of depressive feelings - only to bring an added dimension of anguish to an already troubled mind.

The depressive side of our personality is also well suited to the spouse or family of an alcoholic or addict. A low self esteem is exaggerated by the sense of failure

inherent in not being able to stop a loved one's drinking and reinforced by the addicts 'If only I had a better wife' or 'Who wouldn't drink with a mother like you'. The depressed child who was ever prepared to take blame for her parents imperfections is all too ready to accept responsibility for another's unacceptable behaviour. She thus 'bears the cross' of a husband's drinking, a son's drug taking or becomes a 'battered' wife.

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"I seemed to be always hoping that people would like me. I had a feeling that they would not like me the way I was so I kept trying to go along with them and agree with their ideas to make them feel comfortable. . . I did that with my father too - but when he was drinking it was so difficult because he kept changing. Nothing seemed to make sense. I would try to please him one way, and that was wrong, so I'd try something else and that was wrong too. I just could not win. I ended up not knowing how I really felt about anything - I'd spent so long trying to work out what was right - I didn't know where I was any more - all I knew was that I was always in the wrong!"

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In such a dilemma the once 'protective' mechanism of being finely attuned to other's feelings in order to comply with them can break down under a gamut of contrasting messages. The individual can lose sight of his or her own feelings and needs and gradually lose awareness of 'who they are' - lose themselves in others. In so doing, depressed young men and women with low opinions of themselves will tend to chose the company of friends who they will look up to or accede to who, to the outside view, would seem to be their inferiors. This serves to reinforce their low self worth - when they are let down by such worthless friends, they again blame themselves - 'I'm not even good enough to be his friend'.

The depressed sets his sights low and ensures that he cannot be caught out 'getting ideas above his station'. The wide gap between the reality of his station and his perception of it is sometimes absurdely hidden from his view.

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Andrea was a very intelligent woman who had been an industrious student. She had bouts of depression around the times of examinations when she 'knew' she would fail and was afraid of exposing her supposed lack of knowledge. The exam would show her up and 'how dare she have the inflated idea that she might pass'. Pass she did, generally with flying colours and she eventually established herself in a career in education, becoming a school inspector.

A brief marriage to a compulsive gambler whom she tried unsuccessfully to 'cure' left her financially hard up but with a bright little son, Paul.

Andrea had great difficulty in attending her son's primary school parent's evening. She felt inferior to the other mothers, felt that perhaps her son was not doing as well as he might .. if that were so it would be her fault .. she was not a good enough mother she had been late to pick him up once or twice and the teacher would complain ..

"I tried to get there very early so that I could just see the teacher and get away before the other parents came. I didn't really want to talk to her .. because I knew my son was very good and I didn't want to hear her say he was doing badly .. I somehow knew she would and that it would be my fault. I had entered him in a trial for a special school and knew that the other parents would be jealous and be feeling that I was getting inflated ideas to think that he might get chosen. - That MY son could be good enough. It was agonising looking at his work and pretending to be cool and confident when I could feel those parents eyes boring into the back of my neck thinking 'who does she think she is'"

"Why would they think that?"

"Oh, I can't stand those pushy parents - they were there all dressed up in smart clothes, husband and wife together .. and there was I, a single parent .. I can't afford that sort of thing. ... But Paul DID get into the special school .."

"So you didn't have inflated ideas."

"Logically, I suppose I didn't, but it still felt that way. I remember it was the same for me when I got a scholarship and later prizes in exams - I tried to hide it so that people would not think me big headed."

"Tell me about these parents that you felt so inferior to."

"Well, .. it was a difficult situation for me because there were two members of my staff there with their husbands. Then there was a father who had been a trainee of mine ... and to tell you the truth the school is in my 'patch' and I had visited the headteacher the previous month in the course of my job."

"Listen to yourself ... Do you really think these people are your superiors?"

She laughed - "Oh no, ..I've done it again!"

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For a teenager, life can be an insecure tightrope walk between the dependant need to seek approval and maintain the goodwill of parents and the need to break free and establish oneself as an independant person.

The infant learns of this dilemma in his earliest days - as he crawls off mother's lap to retrieve a lost toy - as he takes his first faltering steps away, always looking behind to make sure she is still there, and later, as he develops the confidence to wander briefly out of the security of her gaze. John Bowlby saw child development and attachment in terms of exploration from a secure base. In many ways all life is an exploration, a venturing forth from a secure base. Every time we move into new areas of life, into new jobs, new relationships we are re-enacting this same first dilemma,

calling on the same inner reserves of strength and emotional security to carry us through.

Those of us fortunate enough to carry within ourselves the security which we acquired at our mother's knee will grow in self confidence with each encounter. But suppose we have no inner security, no safe place to be? Each experience, each relationship provides not only a new opportunity for acquisition of approval and self worth but also an increasingly desperate search for that loving 'holding' safety which was lacking at an earlier time.

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"I never really felt very secure, there was always this fear gnawing away inside.... The only time I really felt safe was with my dog I would curl myself up in some quiet corner with her and bury my hands in her fur .. she felt warm and safe .. I felt protected with her. When I was older we would go for walks and sit together in places where nobody would find us, ... sheds on allotments .. disused buildings , that sort of thing. Years later I still needed a dog ... whenever things were bad I needed to have her near .. feeling her breathing in the same air ... I wonder if that's where the story of Romulus and Remus came from? ...From someone like me?"

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"I think that my biggest problem with friends, and with getting close to people, is that I want to trust them and to feel close - but all the time I am afraid that they will abandon me. I don't know if it's that I don't trust them or maybe I don't trust myself?..

When I was married , there were times when we had a flaming row and I couldn't stand the way he behaved - and I would tell him to get out. .. And, almost as I said the words, I would be overcome by this fear of being left alone.It was the same when he had been drinking and I was afraid of the violence. I would get out of the house and as soon as I was a few yards down the road, I would be in a panic to get back ...it was as if I was afraid the house and everything I cared about would disappear when I was away.

The trouble is that I invest everything in a new relationship, hoping it will give me security. But whenever my boyfriend is late or can't see me, I think the worst. I long for security .. but at the same time I doubt it and despair that I will ever have a close loving relationship. All the time I need reassurance... but I suppose if I keep nagging for it, I will only drive people away..."

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Within the security of a loving environment we can find our 'safe base' from which we can feel free to come and go without fear of loss. We can play away from mother knowing she will still be there when we return, we can go out to work knowing that our wife or husband will not have run away with the nextdoor neighbour, we can take up a challenge secure in

the knowledge that we will still be loved whatever the outcome. We can also find the security and trust required in order to show our 'true selves' to our partner.

Those of us without such a relationship can, as adults, provide understanding and protection to our own 'inner child' and can use the safety of a therapeutic relationship to build up trust in another human being. Conquering our inner fear by knowing our 'true selves' is the key to overcoming depressive feelings.

But which is the 'normal', the true state of affairs? Those who work with depressed people usually take the view that the 'depressed state' is a deviation from the normal. Family members seeing the anguish and despair of a depressive phase are convinced that their loved one cannot really be like this - they pray for the moment when the 'real' bright happy side will re-emerge, believing fervently that the morbid thoughts and self recriminations are the delusions of a troubled mind.

For the 'depressive', however, all life is a sham. All the brightness and coping is an act. A well tried and carefully judged 'persona' is brought out to function on a day to day level and keep the 'true self' protected away from social scrutiny. In a depressed phase, the effort of keeping up appearances, of guarding the inner self every second of the day, breaks down. He feels the poignancy of his unreality, the fear of an absent self, the terror of annihilation. It is only then that the depressive can experience his own inner reality - only in a 'depressed' phase can he come near to the truth of his existence, to dispense with the playacting and face his inner pain.

It takes courage for any of us to fully face up to ourselves - there are always aspects which we do not wish to see, which are too painful and which we would rather keep in the 'twilight area' of our subconscious. The defences of 'pulling yourself together' and continuing to present a false front to the world can stop us from fully committing ourselves to self awareness. But if we can allow ourselves to 'let go of the edge of the cliff' we will find that, rather than committing ourselves to the abyss, we can discover the true nature of our inner child who is lovable, blameless and worth knowing!