

Chasing the clouds away

coping with depression and stress

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I am no psychologist, but I have suffered from stress and depression for as long as I can remember. I therefore present the following framework based upon my first-hand experience, observation and reflection in the hope it may in some way be of help to my fellow sufferers.

Depression is something that will inevitably be your close companion throughout the journey of life. It cannot be beaten or banished, but it can be managed and controlled through knowledge and understanding. There is no reason why those of us with depression cannot live fulfilling and successful lives.

Everything is significant. Everything we do does have a permanent effect upon the universe which will continue long after our earthly existence, like the ripples from a pebble thrown into the sea. This is why it is so important to make the effort to do our best at all times, and why every success however minor is worthy of a healthy dose of satisfaction.

Similarly, every experience has a permanent effect upon us. If we are to grow as individuals we must actively seek experiences which will further that growth. Hiding within our shells will lead only to stagnation and frustration, and worsen our depression. Even negative experiences provide an opportunity for growth so long as they are treated as lessons and inspire appropriate responses such as enhanced knowledge that will benefit us in the future.

The perfect human being has not yet been born. What separates the content from the forlorn is how we handle our failings. You are a human being of limited strength and ability. You cannot achieve perfection, for that is not your purpose. Instead, you can and must use what limited capacity you have at your disposal as effectively as possible.

Life is essentially and inevitably a one-way journey to the grave, beyond which we have no way of knowing what, if anything, awaits us. Life, this life, is therefore all we possess. Thus it is our right and duty to make the best of it, to the very best of our ability. To neglect this responsibility is a betrayal not only of ourselves, but of whatever superior power may have gifted us this existence.

There are two possible truths. Either we are part of some greater reality beyond our human understanding. Or we are not.

If, in the most pessimistic case, the latter is true, there is nothing we can do about it. But we at least have the consolation that the things which may distress us are ultimately meaningless and hence they are not worth being distressed about.

However, if there is some meaning, some purpose, to the hoopla of life then we can rest assured that the trials and tribulations of this particular existence are of mere infinitesimal importance in the wider whole that is being. Planet Earth is a mere dot on the canvas that is the universe. A human lifespan is a mere blip upon eternity.

Either way with this knowledge we should be more able to place our particular burdens in their proper perspective. How important this is. What may initially seem like the end of the world often becomes manageable with a little reasoned thought.

Know yourself. Understand your situation. Where you are now. What are your assets and strengths? What are your weaknesses and liabilities? What are your hopes and dreams? How best can you fulfil as much of your potential as possible? Often these are the hardest questions to answer, but without grasping the nettle you cannot hope to move forwards positively.

Is there anything you can do to improve the situation? If there is, do it. If not, then you are going to have to live with it, and you'd better start planning how you can make the best of a rough deal and focus on those things you CAN have an impact on.

Just like you everyone else has also made mistakes, wilful or otherwise, because to err is human. What counts is how we deal with the consequences. To wallow in sorrow and regret is to compound the damage. To seek to learn and make amends is to progress.

Since we all begin as helpless babes and end as piles of dust, emotions such as joy and despair are essentially meaningless. It is not wrong to savour the moments of our successes, or to mourn our losses and failings, but such feelings must be kept in their proper perspective, as mere distractions along the single and one-way pathway to the grave.

Take time out. Distance yourself from the troubles of the moment. Close your eyes, relax, visualize yourself surrounded by the calming influence of nature. What is so urgent that you cannot escape from it for a few minutes. What is so urgent that cannot be benefited from by a few minutes escape?

Although maybe not apparent at the time, nothing in life is all good, or all bad. Extremes of elation or despair are falsities to be avoided. Even the greatest disaster viewed in its proper perspective is an opportunity to learn and grow. And even the most complete triumph must be considered against the backdrop of the transience of our existence and ultimate mortality.

We are born as unique individuals into unique circumstances. Although our early experiences have some influence upon our development, at essence we are unchangeable. Our challenge in this lifetime is to understand our true essence, to be true to it and to make the best of it. To attempt to be something we are not is a betrayal of ourselves that will ultimately result in frustration and the destruction of our very sense of being.

Take a reality check. Life isn't perfect. But it isn't perfect for anyone. Look around, and you'll find those more fortunate than you, on the surface at least. But you'll find plenty worse off. The terminally ill, the sick and crippled - many from birth, those suffering famine, oppressive regimes, unjustifiable discrimination..... and so on, ad infinitum.

Don't try to achieve a permanent state of happiness, for it does not exist. Happiness is like a butterfly, it settles on your hand for a moment before moving on. But to try to possess it is to destroy it. We cannot appreciate happiness without experiencing its absence.

Your self-sorrow is a luxury you can ill afford. Now consider your advantages in life. Are you in reasonably good health? Do you have loving friends and family? Do you have a roof over your head and food in your belly? Do you have the energy to improve your current situation? What have you achieved in your lifetime? What may you yet achieve? It must be a most unique individual that can answer every point in the negative.

We are born helpless, with nothing. We shall all die helpless, and with nothing. Instead of bemoaning all that troubles or afflicts us, how much better to enumerate and celebrate every blessing, and opportunity, we have been gifted. A little reflection will reveal the positive far outweighs the negative.

Take one step at a time, the million mile journey begins with the first step. Do you look too far ahead? Do you fret over things that may never happen? Don't. Sure, it's alright to have a vision of the future, an idea of where you'd like to get to. But stop thinking about the specifics that may never be.

Likewise, put the past in its place. You're here. Now. If you have happy memories, great, treasure them, reminisce on the cold dark evenings. And if you've learned valuable lessons, terrific, carry them with you as you go. But time doesn't have a reverse gear. Direct your energies to where you're going rather than where you've been.

Don't view your condition as a burden, but as a blessing. Your sensitivity, channelled productively, can give rise to far more creativity than is possible from those given to shallower depth of feeling. Experiment with writing, art, design, music... You may be surprised at what you can achieve, and if nothing else your new interest will provide an essential means of expression and release.

All you really have is the moment. Just be sure you make the best of it. If you can do that you'll never have cause for regret because you'll know with certainty that you did the best you could under the circumstances, and there was nothing humanly more you could have possibly done.