

Depression: an insider's view

It is never too late to confront the black dog

It is two years since I started enjoying the best mornings I have had since childhood, after finally finding a treatment for my underlying depressive condition.

I was 12 years old when I first recognised that something was hampering my ability to function properly early in the day. I would wake up feeling very negative, lacking confidence, indecisive, and just wanting to stay within myself. But I would find that, after having been up and about for a few hours, my state of mind would dramatically improve. I would become positive, a decisionmaker, happy to take responsibility.

For years, I simply put my malaise down to “not being a good morning person”, but as I got older, the fog would take longer to clear. It started to have an impact well into my working day.

I didn't want to admit, even to myself, that I had a depressive condition. Rather than seeking professional help, I did my utmost to self-manage my condition, to try to get myself going. I employed a range of quite bizarre techniques, including staring at the sun to make myself sneeze, because I felt that would help with the release of endorphins and give me a lift.

I also have the biggest collection of positive-thinking books that you will ever see.

I found I felt better when the adrenaline was pumping, and I think this is why I have always subconsciously been attracted to vocations with a fair share of drama and crises. Business and politics both fit that bill nicely.

Looking at the sun, or my other strategy of putting a pen in my mouth to simulate a smile, was not normal behaviour of course. But back then, I was concerned by the great stigma that was attached to depression, or to any mental health condition for that matter. There still is stigma, but it is diminishing.

Mental health issues were always seen as a sign of character weakness or fragility, particularly in men. Yet I was at my best in a crisis, when the adrenaline kicked in.

It took me 43 years to confront my condition. Initially, I went to see a local general practitioner. I was told not to bother taking pills, as they didn't really work — it's all in the head! I left the consultation feeling deflated and thinking, “get over it, it's something I'll just have to live with”.

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After my condition continued to worsen, I decided to pick up the phone to a friend, Jeff Kennett, who has done so much good work with *beyondblue*. On his advice, I saw a highly respected mental health specialist, who soon discovered that I release serotonin, a hormone that helps kickstart your day, about four or five hours later than the average person. For some people, as with me, this period of chemical imbalance can be associated with a depressive condition.

It took six months of experimentation with different types of medication, but I finally found a treatment that worked. I now combine this with daily exercise. I'm one of those questionable people who jump in the bay at dawn to swim 1200 to 1500 metres, even in the middle of winter. There is no better way to get the heart started.

Once I was confident that I had overcome my problem, I agreed to write a book giving my account of living life with a depressive condition. The book, *Black dog daze*, is really a series of anecdotes based on different memories and events throughout my life, from childhood and time on the farm where I grew up, through to my time working for the Packer family, and then entering politics.¹

I made the decision to write the book after my specialist advised me that, during a regular get-together of mental health professionals, several of them reported a spike in the number of middle-aged men seeking diagnosis and treatment after my battle with depression became public.

I am determined to take any opportunity to spread the word that help is available, and there is no good reason to do what I did and what I suspect thousands of others do — cover it up and suffer in silence for decades. On the other hand, my experience also confirms that it is never too late to confront your condition.

You don't have to tell the world — just go along quietly and get some professional advice, and consult those you love and trust. There is light at the end of the tunnel. Your life can be transformed.

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¹ Robb AJ. *Black dog daze: public life, private demons*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2011. □

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