



#depressionhurts

My Story— Emmet

My name is Emmet, I'm 41, a qualified, Professional man and this is my story

It is a cool day in mid-February. I am alone and parked in my usual spot, overlooking the lake. My life is such that driving here is my only escape from the four walls. Alone, in this car, I can keep warm, drink coffee and listen to the radio or read.

In a week or so it will be my birthday – forty one years since I entered this world, yet today all I can think about is leaving it. Thoughts of ending my life, of leaving this world, of escaping this nagging pain are common place in my life and have been for the last number of weeks. Three years of unemployment has taken its toll on my life. I often spend days and weeks without interacting with another person. The mornings are the worst and Monday mornings particularly so. There was a time when I'd have been showered, smartly dressed and on the way to start another week at work but now the days just hang there, long and empty and I cannot deal with this reality – 24 hours with nothing to do is arguably more stressful than 24 hours with too much to do.

I feel unwanted, unnecessary, unloved and irrelevant – forty one and a 'has been'. This has become so bad that my self-disgust over my failure, prevent me from looking at my face in the mirror—it's a rotten face, the face of failure and I literally make myself sick.

The next morning I wake early and switch on breakfast radio - Newstalk Breakfast or Morning Ireland. The presenter is discussing the topic of unemployed people choosing to remain unemployed rather than take up a job offer, because the rates of Social Welfare in Ireland are obscenely generous. Last week the Department of Social Protection, now headed by a Labour Party Minister, released numbers in relation to social welfare fraud – completely meaningless and simply put out there to generate a good headline and create the impression that those on social welfare are generally fraudulent. Meanwhile, there are rumblings about unemployed people being brought before Department Officials for "challenging" interviews, following which they will be given a target date for returning to work or have their entitlements reduced. All of this is in the context of knowing, that day after day, I am among the thousands who apply for one job after another only to receive a rejection - if indeed a response at all.

I have just been told by the Department of Social Protection I must vacate my home and find an alternative place to live that is within the new, reduced rates for Rent Supplement – no such accommodation exists at this price range. As I lie listening to the radio with all of these things whirling around in my head I am acutely aware that I am no longer in control of my life or destiny but subject to the arbitrary decisions and whims of this awful Department. It seems that the word 'protection' in the name of this Department, in fitting with general Government Policy, must be the protection



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of bankers, bondholders and other vested interests – they most certainly are not protecting me or the many others who are in the unfortunate position of having to deal with it. I suddenly realise that I just can't win here, I don't have a voice, I'm poor, I'm on the margins, my mind races, my heart pounds, the tears are trying their best to find a way out. I don't know how I've ended up here, I really want to die, it's the only thing, at this point in time, over which I can exercise control.

Soon after, I am persuaded to attend my GP and seek help because I'm depressed or, to be more accurate, I'm displaying many of the tell-tale signs or symptoms associated with depression. Predictably, I am prescribed anti-depressants – 15mg of Lexapro. I start to take these expecting some wonderful change in mood but it doesn't come. The dose is increased to 20mg, yet 8 weeks later there has been no alteration to my mood, the only significant change being to the size of my waistline. By now I am struggling to understand what depression actually is and I have started to read books about it. It seems that it has as many potential manifestations as there are people, yet it also has a certain commonality or universality.

I'm beginning to realise that my depression (symptom) has not occurred as the result of a biochemical malfunction (cause) and for this reason the anti-depressants did not make it better. Instead, my living situation and the resulting isolation are at the root of my depression along with painful thoughts from some past experiences. The sporadic yet frequent thoughts of ending my life remain. In the absence of spending a great deal of time in front of a mirror, the only way we can see and know ourselves is through other people – we need the affirmation and interaction of other people for good mental health. Unemployment, being single, living alone in a place where I don't know anyone and not having the financial means to maintain even a moderate social life, mean that I have quite literally fallen through the cracks and ended up on the margins. I realise that no person could live in this way and be healthy so I must take steps to address this.

It is important with depression, as indeed it is with any problem, to focus on the underlying causes once the symptoms have been contained and are being managed. Often, with depression, the causes run deep, often they're fairly obvious and, more often than not, it's a mixture of both. In his ubiquitous book entitled 'The Road Less Travelled' Scott Peck states that "*one of the roots of mental illness is invariably an interlocking system of lies we have been told and lies we have told ourselves*". Depression is the body's way of telling us that we are not following the correct path in life and are not living from a place of truth or reality and therefore, according to Peck, it is "*a normal and basically healthy phenomenon*" – interesting. It is through the process of overcoming these "lies" or illusions - often a painful and lengthy process – that we grow, mature and start to see our purpose in life – this, is a healthy way to live.



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One thing I have become certain of is that the past is nothing more than a store of illusions which I have often used, consciously and unconsciously, to avoid dealing with, or living properly, in the present.

Applying painful aspects of my past to the present has caused a great deal of pain, confusion, dysfunction and destruction, which might generally be termed as depression. In the same way the future, too, is nothing but an illusion. Predicting the future on the basis of the past is nothing more than fortune-telling - a bad habit, a waste of time, a cause of stress and often a self-imposed obstacle to action and free forward movement. As Leonard Cohen puts it, in his wonderful song called 'Anthem', - *"The birds they sang at the break of day, start again I heard them say, do not dwell on what has passed away, or what is yet to be"*.

Through the people in #depressionhurts and others, I have once again started to see myself and who I really am and I am starting to like and believe in myself, once again. Depression is akin to a dark cloud which blocks the sunlight and prevents growth. It steals the warmth from your heart and obliterates the soul.

Instead of melding and interacting with life - you become an object, a rock, an island, a walking body of pain. Above all, it steals hope, which is the fuel you need to move forward in life. It is the most deeply personal of things, particularly the pain and the suffering but for that very reason it is also the most universal and widely experienced. It is absolutely critical to remember that you are not alone in your pain or suffering.

I know, believe me, that when one is in that dark place such a suggestion is utterly laughable, but it is the absolute truth. The poet, Patrick Kavanagh, puts this far more eloquently and honestly than I ever could when he wrote:

*'We are not alone in our loneliness,
Others have been here and known
Griefs we thought our special own
Problems that we could not solve
Lovers that we could not have
Pleasures that we missed by inches'*

Your pain is indeed your pain, but it is the same pain which affects all of humanity - every person who ever lived and who will ever live. It is so important that you reach out, even in your darkest anguish, even if you cannot utter a word and even if it is only to telephone a helpline.



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The voice and words of another person, a hand on your shoulder, just knowing that you are not alone and that someone does care and can help – these are the only things that will help transform the darkness into light.

When I think back to those endless hours sitting alone in my car at the lake, with pain gnawing at every fibre of my being and tears dripping from my eyes, I realise that I needed to move back towards the world instead of leaving it. When I did finally reach out, in my brokenness and pain, there were people there who helped me to realise that I was not alone and that I mattered, irrespective of my situation, history, pain or indeed anything else.

There are still days when I wobble and feel miserable and down – I don't fully understand why, but I do know these are not defining feelings – let them be, be with them and they will pass.