

Ah, The Sad Club

Breaking Out

Not Down

John Rooke



"Ah, The Sad Club"
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by John Rooke

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Front cover by Amanda Darton

About this book

I first started writing this book some sixteen years ago, before I left it sitting in a drawer until Covid came calling and the book called out to me.

A lot has changed since I first started writing, with a growing acceptance and awareness of mental health issues throughout the world. What was once an often hidden and even taboo subject has become a mainstream topic for discussion.

Engaging with this book again has been both a stimulating and confronting experience for me. It has opened my eyes to where I have come from and where I am now, in terms of my well-being and my engagement with life.

I have tried to keep it the honest and open story of my experience and observation of the effects of depression on my life that I wanted it to be when I first started writing. It is also a manual of self-help for those suffering with the weight of depression and as a guide to help end depression in their lives.

In rewriting this book after a such a long break, I became increasingly aware of my relationship with my own sense of the weight of suffering in my life. It certainly felt depressing!

If there is a single statement I could make at this moment, that sums up everything that I have written, it is this: "I know now that I do not have to suffer as I once did."

Introduction

This is a story of my own struggle with depression and the discovery of my power to choose to move beyond the depressive power of procrastination and breakdown in my life.

A story of suffering the effects of depression and its causes, the emotional pain of perceived loss, facing my fear and the eventual discovery of life beyond depression.

Like any journey of discovery, it has its share of lost baggage, incorrect maps, dishonest guides and ultimately, arrival at one's destination, a sweet feeling of 'so what-ness', and a recognition of the ending and beginning at one and the same time.

Along my journey's route, I found many true guides and teachers and discovered much inner wisdom as a result. I also discovered that John Donne was right and that "no man is an island" and in truth, my innermost feelings of loneliness and alienation were not real, nor sustainable, when faced with the truth of my true state of being.

Most importantly I learnt that the truth is always and only self-evident. To learn and then to understand the self-evident truth, of truth itself, was the key to unlocking my deepest fears and anxieties and the beginning of my liberation from their depressive tyranny. There was beyond all else an enormous sense of the underlying black humour in the recognition of my own depressed, self-obsessive suffering and the greater universal suffering of all mankind:

Man commits suicide by walking into the sea and

drowning

Man leaves note, "Come on in, the water's fine."

I also came to realise the unique nature of each individual's depression. Not to neatly place each and every person's experience of depression into a series of identical boxes, not to devalue the individual experience of suffering and above all to acknowledge the uniqueness of each human being and to respect their humanity.

Learning to value, respect and love one's self are the very elements, which are not present in a state of depression.

My own search for self-respect and love is the story of my journey to a full and healthy life. I hope that in this book you find some guidance for your own journey, recognition that you are not alone and a growing sense of your own self-respect and limitless courage to journey towards a life unburdened by the weight of depression.

Life is both pain and pleasure

As a child I lived in a house by the sea. From the top floor of the house I would watch the sea constantly changing. As I grew into my teen's I found that I watched it more and more. The constantly changing sea reflected the changes taking place in my own life. It was at this time that I first started to find myself turning inwards and feeling more isolated, even though I had previously been a gregarious child. It was a time when I moved away from the outside world and into my own inner world, where I could feel safe and secure, spending much time alone.

When I think of my family now, I see us as a group of individuals, not as a family unit but as a group of separate individuals.

Remembering my mother now, it is clear to me that she did not want to continue living, was already dying and had closed the door into herself.

My own feelings became more desperate and were increasingly expressed through the anxiety within me. I was desperate to discover my mother's love and to experience its warmth before she died. My father seemed to me to be lost, unable to cope with the truth of my mother's dying, caught up in his own problems and fears.

Sadly, my fears and anxiety were right. My mother died when I was a teenager, the "family" I had been trying to find became the individuals they were and I became homeless.

A man's story, it has to start somewhere

If I have had one saving grace and curse all rolled into one, it is a sometimes careless consideration of life's major decisions. The cost of this curse has been great but the lessons I have learnt have been invaluable.

At school they taught me many truly useless things. They also taught me to read, to write, some basic arithmetic and a fear of woodwork. At school I persevered with the woodwork classes, calmly wading through the construction of a series of exquisitely lopsided chairs and piles of irregularly shaped boxes, which would only open when the moon was full or the neighbour's black cat had given birth or some other equally unrelated event had occurred. My ultimate creation though, was plenty of plain old firewood. Sadly, what they never taught me at school was all about the woodwork of life and the skills I would need to live and learn its ways:

The way of relationships and one's true sexuality.

The way of communication.

The way of men and women.

How life actually works.

The woodwork of life, which I spent a long time making into lopsided chairs, non-opening magic boxes and plain old firewood.

My father took great pride in his knowledge of boat building and

woodworking craftsmanship. Woodworking seemed to be close to a religious experience for him, a place where he could find the best parts of himself in putting other parts together. My brother also became a craftsman in woodworking and boat building.

So it was, that I found myself at the dawn of my puberty, clutching at the magical box of life, which I could rarely open, containing a set of blunt woodworking tools masquerading as life skills. True, there was the comfort at my back from the fire of old wood which I had made and which my family sometimes remembered to randomly stoke but there was little else to provide comfort on my journey through life. Of birth, death, work, career, relationships, women, intimacy, marriage, politics and the general stuff of life I was almost completely ignorant. But had not this always been the way, that men had lived and evolved to learn by experience? To “go out into the world young man” and learn all about life “in the university of life” or “the school of hard knocks”? In other words, learn to cope and learn to survive but never question how to live your life with any real joy or meaning.

So how did others manage to live happily? Did they have a more solid, healthier family background from which to begin? Had I been predisposed to depression genetically? The trauma caused by the death of my mother and loss of my home and family as a teenager? Whatever the direct “causes,” I became depressed anyway.

Into depression

“A state of despondency characterised by feelings of inadequacy, lowered activity, sadness and pessimism”

and

“Mental disorder characterised by unresponsiveness to stimuli, self-deprecation, delusions of inadequacy and hopelessness”

or

“The act of depressing; the state of being depressed; lowering of the spirits, dejection; lowering of energy or activity, slackness of business; an economic crisis”

etc, etc, etc

So? Depression is just so depressing, in so many ways and in so many contexts. So are the expressions we use to describe depression:

The blue meanies, having the blues, feeling blue, being down, the black dog, hiding under the doona...and many, many more.

Sifting through my memories, I believe I found the moment when I first felt myself sinking into depression.

I woke one fine English Saturday morning in spring, I was aged about fourteen. I dressed and walked into the small town near to my home. This was very much a Saturday morning routine and yet on this

Saturday I felt very different. It was as though I carried the night with me. There was a heaviness about me, as though I had the flu but I was not sick in any way I had ever known before. It was as though a ghost virus had entered into me while I slept.

The owner of the cafe where I hung out made a remark about me having taken drugs. This was before the real birth of the 'drug culture' and hedonistic indulgence of the nineteen sixties and seventies had truly been established. The cafe owner had moved from London to enjoy a more peaceful life and was wise to the ways of the world beyond the small island where I lived.

This pleasant spring morning, is the moment I remember as the beginning of depression in my life.

It was not something which at the time I was truly aware of. In fact, it was not until I was in twenties or early thirties that I even considered the possibility that I was suffering from depression. By then I had developed my own DIY way to deal with and survive the effects of depression:

I had learnt to cope.

I had learned how to avoid and deny my own feelings.

I had learned how to self-medicate with exercise, with drugs, with alcohol and sex.

By avoiding long term relationships and intimacy, which made me feel as though I was being emotionally suffocated.

With little self-esteem to help, I accepted whatever life served up

without any obvious complaints.

I had already retreated into my own world. Stopped questioning my state of being in what I considered to be a hostile and threatening world.

In short, I had learned how not to allow myself to feel my emotions, to avoid real self-expression, to close the shutters and find refuge wherever and however I could. Becoming an actor in my own life's play and escaping from it at the end of each day.

Depressed or not, a lot had happened in my life that did not outwardly present as being a life of someone who was depressed.

There were adventures, relationships, work and a seemingly healthy appetite for the stuff of life.

I might even have been the object of jealousy for all that I accomplished but it was superficial. The most pervasive feeling I can recall was that of an intense inner restlessness and constant anxiety.

I was a player in a game with no final bell.

A game where I was the only player on my side, being pursued by a phantom opposition who were always just about to score the winning point. I had to keep moving at all costs to deny the opposing team an opportunity to score. I became increasingly exhausted by this game, spending more and more energy in avoiding my past so I could continue to deny that there was anything wrong in my life.

I had been a teenager when my mother died. When her cancer had been diagnosed it had already aggressively developed in her body and she died within a few months. At the time she died, my father had

recently decided to move from our home of more than 20 years and start a new life.

I have many memories of the time of my mother's death, living in a rented house. My strongest memory is of my own bewilderment at the loss of my childhood, of the death of my mother and loss of my home. My world had collapsed around me. I was a confused and terrified human being. I needed to feel some security, and I withdrew my feelings to find some measure of security within myself.

This was uncertain territory I had entered: hostile, dangerous, uncharted and with few trustworthy guides to help me find my way. Within a short space of time I would go from what stability I had in my life, to the life of a wandering, homeless teenager living on the streets. Support was in short supply and the warmth of the fire made of the failures from my woodworking class was almost extinguished.

In writing this now I am aware of a tangled "spaghetti"-like mess of emotions being shaken around inside me.

There is the raw anger: "why me, how dare they do this to me, this is not fair, this is not how you play the game."

There is self-pity: "if only this had not happened, my family do not love me, my mother deserted me in death, I am to blame, I am guilty, I am being punished."

There is hatred: "I hate myself, I hate people, I hate the world, I hate everything."

And there are also other depressive, hidden, self-destructive, impulsive undercurrents to consider: fear, anxiety and self-loathing,

suicidal fantasies and fantasies of revenge.

The list goes on and on feeding on itself like some great monster of the human spirit.

This is food for depression and fertilizer for the ground in which it grows and flourishes. Once established, the mind will support and protect it until something stronger replaces it. It is part of the collective, creative imagination of artists, writers, musicians, philosophers, seers, prophets, seen in the works of Bosch, Hogarth, Dante, Sartre, Kafka, Hitler, Dostoyevsky, Buddha, Christ, Van Gough, Wagner and Nietzsche.

It is in the vision of the medieval hell of the Christian church, in the twisted features of the demons of India, in the goddess Kali, who is both a destroyer and creator, in the tantric Tibetan Buddhist deities and Balinese Gurudas in the gargoyles of ancient cathedrals, which "hypnotise" the fearful population down below them, with their crazy, malevolent stares raised to the heights from their underworld.

Diary

“Today I am in fear. The fear is all consuming. It is in my gut, in my chest, in my throat and in my heart. It is painful and yet somehow, I do not want to be anywhere else or to be anyone else. It is my journey and I will follow it to the source of my fear and depression. The fear will not consume me. I will not let myself or it do that.”

This is not me (Why would I choose more pain?)

In court it is “The truth and nothing but the truth.” When you are depressed it is anything but the truth! This denial of the truth is a construction to cope with what is painful, emotionally confronting and fearful in depression.

Choosing the truth of reality over continuing a life of depression is at the heart of what I chose to do. At the start of my journey out of depression I acknowledged the true state of my life living with depression. To do this required an honest acknowledgement of the denial I had been living with:

The denial of just how unhappy and depressed I was. The denial of just how “unreal” my idea of reality was. The denial of the anxiety, which sat just below the surface of my daily living and the many ways in which the addictive denial; that you may need drugs, alcohol, tobacco, sex and destructive relationships to help get through each day.

Breaking down

Denial "this is not me"

Like a muscle which has atrophied through lack of use, the nature of my true self will require constant exercise before it can truly function as it should. My personal experience of the power which denial held over me is at the very beginning of my journey.

I was in my forties when the life I had built around the four cornerstones of denial, avoidance, guilt and fear began to crumble. My darkest humour was to joke about how I had gone from adolescent crisis to mid-life crisis without a break. Sad but true, given the depression, which I had successfully hidden and denied, hiding like a tiger in the night, ready to pounce.

This realisation came to me with the breakdown and end of my twelve-year marriage. My two children, a career with little satisfaction, and reliance on alcohol and tobacco to even out some of the bumps.

I came to realise that I was a grown man carrying a frightened child around inside me. I needed that child to go out and play and find a live life without depression.

My diary notes of the time reflect my state of being:

Diary

“These are not the days of wine and roses but the days of bags and yet more bags. At any one time, my wife and I have several bags packed, either separately or together. In fact, the house is littered with bags; my bags, her bags, the kids’ bags and probably total strangers’ bags for all I know!”

“I live in a left luggage office.”

“To put it simply, my life is in transit, I am in transit from where and what I thought I was, to something else, another time, another place, shaking off the skin of my past life.”

Metamorphosis.

“It also occurs to me that life is a lot like sailing a boat; when the wind really starts to blow, do not overcorrect.”

Now, many years later I have a very clear memory of just how disturbed and ill at ease I was with myself. I could say sick and that would also be true. I was sick of living the way I was. Sick, and also angry at myself for avoiding and denying and not living honestly. Once I recognised and truly acknowledged this fact there was the possibility for real, positive change and growth.

Looking back now, the process of change seems painfully slow. Depression had taken most of my adult life to grow and to put down deep roots.

In hindsight, the path I took was the path of the hero's journey, the path of a stubborn and dogged man. Hindsight is the sight without insight, where "If" figures prominently.

"If" only I had been able to allow myself to trust more, to reveal and speak my true feelings, to tell my story to people who knew how to listen, I might have saved myself and others much time and a lot of suffering.

"But," I did not and could not. My denial, avoidance, guilt and fear would rise up and fight me.

So, the story I needed was the path of my idolised hero, rarely straight and often turning back on itself. The story I had played out as a child with toy soldiers on the carpet of heroic battles. The story that kept me going, one step at a time.

In the language of my heroic story "I have scaled a mountain range," in terms of the quality of my life, my self esteem, well-being, mental health, relationships and the simple stuff of day-to-day living. Looking back now, I think my advice to myself then would have been:

Do not let the past control the present

Practice — Learning to let go of the constant anxiety of what is next

Practice being resilient and not being despondent

If you see Hannibal Lector looking back at you when you look in the mirror, start working on seeing yourself as you really are!

Pay attention to and learn to listen to your inner voice

That inner voice, which can carry on a conversation like two neighbours gossiping over the fence:

“He always was a naughty boy you know, stupid as well” and
“oh how awful and I heard that he can’t get out of bed in the morning, just a lazy good for nothing as well”

Practice being aware of and gain insight into the negative thoughts this inner voice can feed you

Start to develop a positive vision of how you want your life to look in the future

Be prepared to take things gradually

It will take time and it will take practice and learning just like anything that is worth doing

You will find, in learning not to avoid the things you have been avoiding, that there will be pain and discomfort

But

that by avoiding something, you may miss an opportunity to learn useful lessons and develop resilience

Taking a 'Good Look'

It was time for me to take a mental stock-take; a “good look” at myself, without the filters of avoidance and denial, which had clouded my perception.

My habits in living in depression were well entrenched and I found help with the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

These twelve steps can provide a basic, sensible approach to helping build a solid base for a better life. They have been adapted in many ways to help many people and in my case, I adapted the teachings to develop a practice, which I found helpful in understanding and acknowledging an authentic state of living. They helped me not only deal with my addiction to alcohol but also with my depression and anxiety.

Practice — Taking a 'Good Look'

For this practice you will need a large mirror

The practice will take approximately 30 minutes

In this practice you will look into your eyes

Looking into your own eyes can be confronting

The first time I did this practice, I found it confronting to meet my own gaze, it took time to concentrate and simply look into my eyes in the mirror

Make sure that your practice place is comfortable and you are

unlikely to be interrupted

When you first undertake this practice, 3 to 5 minutes may be long enough to look into your eyes

Getting started

Stand in front of the mirror and look into your eyes

Maintain your gaze and use your voice to say out loud "I am....." and complete the sentence with the first thing which comes into your head

Here are some examples of how this has worked for me:

"I do not like myself"

"I hide from the truth"

"I have a big head"

"I want to laugh more"

"I often avoid emotional situations"

"I love my partner"

"I feel uncomfortable with intimacy"

"I want intimacy"

"I often feel in pain"

“I am self-destructive”

“I love my children”

Be honest and spontaneous in this practice

If you find yourself censoring what you want to say, stop and start again

This practice can be quite strenuous, so please stop if you start to feel tired or exhausted

We are all individuals

We are all different

We all have our own voice

Everyone will have a different experience and a different reaction to this exercise

My own reactions were emotional and in them I discovered a great deal of underlying anger and self-loathing

The true value of this practice lies in allowing yourself to be authentic, honest and not to deny your own feelings

When you want to stop, either sit or lie down, make yourself comfortable and close your eyes

Breathe deeply from your abdomen and concentrate on your breathing being regular, rhythmical and relaxed. This will have the effect of not only relaxing you but will also help to release any feeling of heaviness you may have left over from the

practice. Feel the strong support of whatever you are resting upon. Feel that this physical support is also an emotional support for you.

Now say to yourself:

“I find assistance and support on my journey to living life without anxiety and depression”

“I acknowledge the depression and anxiety in my life and choose to let it go”

“I no longer need depression to live my life”

Remember to be gentle with yourself at all times

Take time to feel the positive, life affirming benefits of the practice

When you are ready to open your eyes go and stand in front of your mirror again and look for any changes you can see in yourself, in your whole face, in your eyes, in your body posture and reflect on how you feel about yourself now before going out into the world

Fear, what fear? A splendid vision

Diary

“Does the river ask the ferryman why it is flowing to the sea?”

“Last night I was a terrified child, cowering in the corner of my room, petrified of being attacked by someone or something. Not sure if I was awake or asleep. The experience showed me a deep seated fear, that I had never looked at before.”

Fear is that little darkroom where negatives are developed.

Pritchard

When I was at high school, I had a history teacher to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude. He taught me in a way which I believe is very special. He taught with real passion. I knew then that he cared deeply about his teaching and also about us, his students.

Because of his passion and commitment to teaching, I clearly remember the what I learnt from his teaching:

Life is sacred

Each of us is a unique individual

Noble Ideas can transform us

A splendid vision for your life can make your life
splendid in return

He was someone whom I respected as a true teacher. Someone, who still inspires me to this day, to live life not as a spectator but with passion; the antithesis of all that depression is to me.

When you are depressed it is hard to be passionate about anything. It is certainly extremely difficult to be inspired or to have a vision for your life. When you awake to find yourself struggling, in the dark depths, afraid to meet the day and want to crawl back under the doona, you may want to ask yourself these questions:

Firstly, what is it that I am so afraid of anyway?

Is this the way I want to feel until I die?

If the life I have been living is so good, why do I feel so
much pain?

When you confront these questions, be prepared to actually face your fears. When you do, you may find, as I did that it really is the fear of fear itself, of which you are truly afraid.

This could be the time to give yourself a splendid vision for the future. It can be as fantastical or as simple as you wish.

We all have our own individual ways of learning; you may be able to visualise it, to form a mental image or picture of your own splendid

vision. Or like to put it into words, music, poetry, sing it, act it, discuss it with a friend or simply feel the emotion which you attach to it. It really does not matter how you make your splendid vision real as long as it is your personal, individual choice.

The important thing is to make it yours and own it.

In making it yours you will be using your self-expression, which is something not always easy to find when you are depressed and anxious. So, finding your self-expression can be a process of discovery in itself. Particularly when you reach out and involve other people, which involves trust.

Let me tell you about my own splendid vision for the future:

Practice — A splendid vision

I am standing in a valley of extraordinary beauty. Behind me are snow-capped mountains, which I have crossed to reach the valley.

I am not wearing any shoes and my toes are digging into the earth. I am feeling at peace with myself and with my surroundings.

Before me in the valley, a river meanders its way towards the sea. Sailing down this river is a beautiful old sailing ship, with snowy white sails. The sailing ship is carrying my dreams towards the sea and the limitless horizon.

Everywhere I look in the valley there are people at work and at rest, their faces expressing joy and absorption in whatever they

are doing. I realise that the expressions I see on their faces are a mirror of my own.

I have no feeling that "I should be" doing anything else or be anywhere other than right where I am, right now.

Your splendid vision may be far less or far more fantastic than mine. It may relate to everyday life, be a simple image or an extraordinary vision. It is not important what it is, other than that it is your very own splendid vision for the future. What you do when you build your own splendid vision, is to start to change and develop the way you see yourself in a world beyond depression and beyond any fears which you hold in the present.

This is part of the gradual process which is unfolding for you. Remember to be kind to yourself and not see the process as any kind of race against time or competition. This will only reinforce any prevailing anxieties you may experience and can make you feel frustrated and angry.

However painful living a depressed life is, it is still living and your mind may resist any life affirming changes you wish to make. A case of better the devil you know.

When I made my first baby steps towards a better life for myself, I found it both difficult and frustrating. The process was often painful and it seemed like a comedy, where I was the fool saying that his brain hurt. The truth is that it really did hurt! No wonder it hurt, given the years that I had lived with depression. I was questioning the way I lived, which was both frightening and dynamic at the same time. Why would I want to try to

change my life?

Diary

“If this is my journey to a bright future, why do I feel so angry, frustrated and miserable? This is not what the travel brochure promised. I will sue! I want a bright new day and I want it now!”

I had started to understand just how firmly depression was entrenched in my life. There was a struggle going on inside me to create a brighter future, for which I had unlimited hope but no real plan and a great reservoir of fear to overcome. This was not something I could avoid or deny.

Avoidance and denial would not leave without a fight. I had become a magician in developing some very elaborate spells and tricks to deny how I really felt and how to avoid anything which may challenge this.

There were times when I believed it possible, that tomorrow will not only be a bright new day but also the day, which would bring me the end of all life's problems forever. Part of my reliance on the avoidance of the reality of unpleasant problems and the denial of my power to affect my life for the better.

I wanted there to be a perfect time for this happen, a magic wand event when bad would finish and good would start, just as much as I wanted to believe in a perfect tomorrow.

Of course, there was no perfect time and no perfect tomorrow. My life was beginning to feel like an out-of-control train, with a crew who had just jumped to safety. It was time I jumped too.

Breakdown — Who? Me!

The Breakdown I Was Having When I Was Not Having A Breakdown!

Practice can make perfect and so far, I had managed to survive by acting out my part as a coping and fairly functioning human being in the everyday world.

On the surface I appeared to cope with the daily stuff of life. Through years of avoidance, denial and by suppressing my emotions, I had become a good actor.

Looking back now I am amazed at how I “kept it all together,” at least in front of my everyday audience. It was a good performance, honed and perfected with years of rehearsal.

Alcohol and tobacco allowed me time to hide out in their temporary haze. They supported me in avoiding the punishment of seeing the truth, like a child dreading the time when they must tell the truth and accept the consequences.

I had a PhD in Coping, a Bachelor of Arts in Appearing Cool, Calm and In Control at All Times and a Masters in Applied Masks. But I was starting to realize that the ultimate cost of continuing to live my life in this way, may be that of life itself.

Not only was I in “breakdown” but my self-destructive impulses were becoming stronger than ever. Alcohol and tobacco would deaden the pain temporarily, until their effects wore off, which was usually in

the middle of the night when I would awake in a sweat of anxiety, my demons chasing me in another nightmare. I felt an almost irresistible urge to destroy the life I thought I knew. At this point I was in real danger of doing just that, rather than making some very important changes to the way I was living. The question with which I was faced was very clear: carry on living the way you are and face the consequences or make some fundamental changes to the way you are living.

The answer to the question I was faced with seemed simple. Make the changes you need to make and sort your life out. In my father's words the answer would have been to "pull yourself up by your own boot straps" and just "get on with it."

But depression is all about procrastination, avoidance and denial. It is the absolute antithesis of "getting on with it." It is like a great bully sitting in the way of your path and refusing to move.

So how did I create an environment where dynamic, life-affirming change is possible?

I found my answer in the acknowledgement, the witnessing and the acceptance of depression. In this way I could create an environment for positive change, piece by piece.

Looking back to the time of my breakdown I now see it as a turning point, even though I was not aware of it at the time.

In truth, I think this was not my first experience of a breakdown but it was the one which I allowed myself to fully experience. This experience was the beginning of fundamental change in my life, through the recognition and acknowledgement of my depressed state of existence. I

had already started to collect an ark of ideas, information, books and dreams with which to help me make changes. The 'ark' was waiting to set sail on its journey; what I needed to do was cast off the last rope that held it tight to the quay.

So, what was this quay, this life that I was letting go of? What had the life, which I had fought hard, to protect, really been like?

It was good in parts even though the good parts were tinged with a blue wash, as though the lens through which I viewed life was fitted with a blue filter. It was a life of the blue meanies and the black dog, "alone and palely loitering."

There were times when I would long to be under the safe covers of my bed from the time when I left them in the morning until I returned to them at night time. I would tell myself that I was sick, had the flu, that it was a mysterious illness, that I had a rare intestinal bug and worst of all I had my mother's cancer eating away at me, day after day.

There were interludes of brief, erratic joy, as though I had been shot from a cannon and depression had not yet caught up with me. Then there were moments when I would feel myself descending, falling downwards into the dark, and I would ask myself "why do I feel like this? this is not me; this is not the way that I want to live my life."

The blue meanies affected every part of my life including my relationships, spontaneity, self-expression, creativity, just about everything that could help to make me a fulfilled and healthy human being.

I would despise myself for being weak, not being good enough or strong enough to deal with my feelings and hated myself for this.

I felt a constant craving and used food, alcohol, tobacco, exercise, yoga, mysticism, to feed the craving and self-medicate.

I attended self-development courses, tried counselling, medication, in fact anything and everything that would let me avoid actually dealing with the problem of my depression head-on.

As time progressed there was less and less escape for me. Depression was breathing down my neck, threatening to trip me every time I turned to check on its chase. To let go, I had to trust in something that was outside my knowing. Jump! my spirit was saying, jump and trust in yourself to land safely wherever that may be.

I jumped, struggled, survived and now I thrive.

Diary

"I am hanging in 'there' wherever 'there' is."

"I have been depressed this weekend, hard to explain, other than I have been really upset, angry and certainly depressed....."

"This is an episode.. I feel everything is useless and not worth bothering about and I am no good, a useless fat fool, dumb, over sensitive, just plain useless!!!!"

"As terrible as it sounds it is a lot better than it was a few years ago — plus I am more honest and open — and I have more support"

And

"Ahhhh... I can see a lot of change... how often have I said that!! Anyway, it is here. I actively 'want' to make a fresh start — In many ways I have lived my life like a child, waiting for someone or something to look after me."

"Well it ain't going to happen! I need and want to be in control and make my own choices..."

"Looking at my friend K I see myself as I have been or would be and I don't like it. I want to get on with my life and leave the past... behind"

Getting started – I needed to make the barren ground fertile

My eyes had been opened to the great store of knowledge and help that was available to me. But even though I had gathered a lot of useful information I had no clear plan of exactly how to use it. Just a desire to live a life without depression and I needed to make the barren ground fertile.

I had tried anti-depressant drugs but was ambivalent about them as being for “those weak people who could not cope with life.” I saw counselling and various therapies as “interesting” but secretly I believed that they were for people who were seriously screwed up and therefore of little use to someone like myself! My ignorant arrogance and denial were another barrier to overcome.

As I started to let go of my arrogance and denial, I also learnt to listen. To trust in other people and let them help me in spite of the fear which I felt. I started a course of counselling and anti-depressant drugs and my own program of positive, life affirming learning.

I started, above all, to be kind to myself, to learn to listen to my inner voice, to listen to offers of help. It was an enormous relief to find that I was not alone in what I saw as an often-hostile world.

The future enters into us long before it happens in order to transform itself in us.

Rilke

Tracking my path

At this stage of my breakout of learning to let go of and take the first steps to rid myself of the effects of long-term depression, it was important for me to keep my feet “firmly on the ground.”

Creative visualization is a positive tool for changing and confirming the way in which you want to live your life in the future.

I developed this practice to help me in feeling grounded and secure in myself and learn to relax and let go of the anxieties in my life.

When I first tried the practice, I found I had a lot of resistance to it and it took time for me to feel its benefits.

Practice — Being secure within yourself

Allow yourself at least thirty minutes to complete the practice

You will need a blanket and pillow and a comfortable, quiet space where you can lie down and will not be interrupted

To start, lie down and make yourself comfortable

When you are comfortable close your eyes and become aware of all your senses and any images which come into your head

Allow yourself to accept whatever your senses may give you

Do not seek to change or censor anything

Simply witness the ebb and flow of your senses

Learn to be kind to yourself, what you are doing is your own
personal time

As you become attuned to your senses, start to see how your
body is feeling, particularly any parts which may feel
uncomfortable or where you are experiencing any resistance to
relaxing

When you are feeling relaxed and comfortable place your hands
on your navel

Feel the navel area growing warm

Let your breathing become slow and deep

Feel your hands moving gently as you breathe

Know that you are completely safe and that there is an
unbreakable connection between you and the earth

Start to imagine that you are lying in a beautiful peaceful place

Visualize that there is a silken cord attached to your navel
running into the very centre of the earth

You are able to make this cord appear or disappear at will

Relax into the feeling of being supported and connected to the
earth

Let your thoughts come and go without trying to become attached to them

Use your senses to enjoy imagining the beauty of your surroundings, the sounds of nature around you

Take your time to build the environment which you want to be in as you continue the practice

When you choose to stop the practice, concentrate on your breathing and gently tune in to your immediate environment

When you are ready, open your eyes and give yourself time to feel the effect of the practice before you get up

Diary

“I feel I am on a path or track, often not easy to see, but I feel I have to find trust in myself to follow it.”

“I am on a journey out of darkness, into the light, a journey towards happiness. I have learnt and I am learning so much, which makes me feel more alive and energetic.”

A place for the truth, keeping a diary

I had kept a diary at various times in my life, so it was not new to me. What was different was the content of what I wrote and the reasons why I wrote it.

I did not keep a diary merely as a record of particular day's events but as a silent friend. A friend who would neither judge nor offer advice but record faithfully what was said. A friend who could hear the truth and keep it.

Reading my diaries now is both enlightening and revealing for me. It is like the captain's log of a journey, my journey. A record of where I have been, of just how far I have come and exactly where I find myself now:

Diary

“Depressed today, do not want to go to work, do not want to be here, feel as though I am suffocating, do not like myself much, cannot see much good in anything really, do not want to see anybody, feels like it would be easy to kill myself at times. I am angry towards myself and at life in general but not so much toward other people. My daughter leaves for Adelaide tomorrow; the kids are full of games and very beautiful. They keep me going, give me joy.”

“At times there is also an element of drama and of humour in my depression, because it is also such a game; really nothing in life is that serious and yet the fear, anxiety and frustration seem all too much at other times.”

Those words “all too much at times” and “it would be easy to kill myself” are chilling for me now. They put me back where I was when I wrote them but I am not that person now. That was someone whom I met. A sad stranger. An uncomfortable memory.

The words I wrote in my diary are confronting words for me. They make me feel uncomfortable and are not words that sit easily with me. They reveal the truth about the real effect of depression and of anxiety in my life. The truth of the sickness and the truth of what it does.

I understand and feel the pain that I was in when I wrote this. I can also acknowledge what I meant by “such a game,” because depression was such a game.

It was a constant, circular game with myself. A game where the 'circular' motions became ever decreasing, until the circle became a tiny pinpoint repeating upon itself like a mantra of despondency and hopelessness inside my head. Reading my diaries allows me to see the positive state of my current life and just how far I have travelled, how much there is to look forward to and the real joy I feel in living life each day.

Diary

“Oh, I get down. What is it? I go through these periods of darkness and I work through them. I want a life with some joy and light. I know that I am making headway. I know that I am happier, more contented and a more balanced human being than I was a few months ago. I want some real joy in the rest of my life, not this loner’s image in my head. I am dedicated to building a new and positive life based on creative self-expression, love, security, and satisfaction.”

A circular game?

Depression is obsessive?

Certainly, my experience of depression was one of a pervasive and constant internal dialogue with and about my feelings.

Obsession is the word which I would use to describe this dialogue. There is a constant dialogue reflected through my diary about how I felt at any particular moment, a constant accompaniment of frustration, where I seemed to be recycling the same dialogue over and over again.

This was my depressive obsession. How could I break this cycle and find relief from the repetitive dialogue; like Bill Murray as the bitter, depressed television weatherman who wakes each day to the same day being repeated again and again in the film "Groundhog Day." Murray's character eventually faces down his own demons and in doing so lets go of his depression and the constant, cynical dialogue he has about his life.

I seemed to be struggling with this very same thing myself, when I speak of "wanting some real joy in my life" and "being dedicated to building a positive life." I had not let go but I was certainly ready to start. My diary provides me with a very clear record of how I progressed on my journey:

Diary

"It is easy for the 'depression game' to become an 'obsession game'. It became like that for me and I would be anxiously aware of my feelings. Watching and waiting for the black cloud of depression to come and yet it always seemed to catch me by surprise."

"Lately I have been able to identify this more clearly and understand that I have the power and the means to create my own life, my own happiness and my own transformation. I am not a victim of my moods or my fears or my mind anymore."

Brave words. Words can be cheap and words can be powerful. I had a vision and I had a purpose and my diary recorded that. These were the words, which I would come to live by on my journey.

At first there were other words, like change, transformation and action. To read my diary now provides me with a sense of achievement, a sense of the affirmation of who I am, a sense of the positive possibilities that the future holds. I could imagine myself taking in the view from the top of the mountain and yes, the sun is shining and yes, the horizon is limitless. If this all sounds too grand, too big, too beautiful, I am not a stranger to moments of doubt, though these are nothing like those I had when I was depressed.

I find small markers, milestones along the way in my diary:

He has not learnt the lesson of life who every day does not surmount fear.

Emerson

Diary

“I love myself. I like myself just the way I am at this moment. I am determined to have a better life. I cannot live a full life unless I am prepared to make positive changes in my life.”

These changes are fundamental to my wish to find peace within myself. The props I used to support my life in depression, are what kept me from truly moving on. They were in my tears, my addictive habits and all the baggage of my depression. What my diary shows me is the way in which I looked for help, for wisdom and how my thoughts went from those of depression to those of hope for the future. As this hope slowly became reality, then I also learnt how to strengthen my intention.

Diary

“What broke my depression, my black mood, was realizing that I do love and care for myself. It actually does work!”

Practice — Relaxing and releasing anxiety

This guided meditation practice was one which I developed and recorded in my diary. I have found it helpful in relaxing and releasing anxiety, as well as in learning to feel the great benefits of positive affirmation in one’s daily living. This meditation can be practiced almost anywhere, at any time, and is extremely simple to practice.

I have used this practice in all sorts of places; the secluded corner of an airport waiting lounge, a parked car, a park bench and in my own home.

Effort is the opposite of what you will learn in this practice. Too much “effort” is one of the reasons we can become over-stressed, anxious, depressed and unfulfilled in their lives.

Make sure that you have at least twenty to thirty minutes to yourself, in a comfortable space which is quiet and where you are unlikely to be interrupted

Allow yourself to learn by “osmosis”; the process of gradual or unconscious assimilation of ideas and knowledge

Just trust yourself to learn and you will learn

To Begin

Make yourself comfortable, either in a seated position or lying down

If you are seated, relax your shoulders and let your chin drop slightly

Make sure that your bottom is resting against the back of your chair so that your spine is erect without any strain

If you are lying down use a small rolled up towel or pillow to support your head and neck

You may also need a blanket handy to keep yourself warm

Place your hands over your abdomen

Let yourself begin to relax and start to breath slowly and deeply from the abdomen

Let your eyes roll back gently so that you are gazing at the central point between your eyebrows and then slowly close your eyes shut

Feel yourself become still and calm

Continue to breathe slowly and deeply without straining

This is your time, your holiday, so let go of all your thoughts and simply relax

Just be with your breathing, feeling the air around you

Feel the parts of your body which are touching the chair or where you may be lying and be absolutely comfortable

Let your breath become like a sigh, gently coming and going and let yourself be where you are right now

Imagine that you are looking at a perfect night sky of pure black velvet with twinkling stars like countless diamonds. The reason the sky is so perfect, so beautiful, is that you are resting on your own personal cloud, floating in the night sky with your body perfectly secured. Your cloud floats without any effort throughout the universe. You take in the beauty of the universe, the smell of the air, the slightest coolness as you drift and the rhythm of your own sighing breathing, slow and steady.

Just float. Simply enjoy the feeling of just floating. You are floating on your own cloud in the night sky, on and on through the universe, seeing a myriad of stars and planets pass by.

Imagine you are seeing the universe within yourself

There is absolutely nothing else but floating on your cloud.

When thoughts arise just let them go and return to your floating cloud.

Be absolutely present in this place and know that you are part of the universe and the universe is part of you, you are at one with the universe and you are at peace with yourself

When you are ready to finish, open your eyes and take a series of deep breaths and stretch your whole body. You can gently

massage your face if you want to.

Give yourself plenty of time to become fully aware of your environment before you move and carry on with your day

Diary

"I see that I write less and less about pain in my diary. It is a reflection on just how far I have progressed from the days of darkness. I look back now and see how disturbed I was and how much I lived in fear and depression."

"I was fooling myself. There is nowhere to hide from my fears and from my anxiety, pain and discomfort. It is always there and it will be expressed in one way or another. It will stand in the path of the journey and say, "I am here and you may not pass until you have named me."

"It would be easy for me to believe that I could return the way that I have come rather than to confront the fear and name it. I know that the longer I hide from it, the stronger it will become. In my old age it will become part of the sum total of my whole life. The sum of each and every breath I have ever taken."

Fear – A journey through darkness

Diary

“Fear and anxiety, fun-loving little play pals of denial and avoidance know how to reach out and twist my gut until I feel the panic rise into my throat and a sheen of perspiration breaks out over my skin. The pressure builds inside me and I must find release valve before I burst.”

“Fear is pervasive, fear is controlling and fear is part of life. I wanted to believe that if I could ignore and out maneuver it and then it would not bother me.”

This was a game I was playing, a game which I could not win, which only used up more of my depression depleted stocks of energy. The game would continue until I faced my fear and found the light.

This was a dark place I was lost in, with no signposts to guide me and no safe place where I could rest from my anxieties.

Thankfully I found guidance in the intuitive core of my heart:

“As my heart slowly opens, I learn to trust and to care for and love myself. It is out of fear and anger that I have found this love. And because I am learning to love myself, I know I can start to love others as well.”

This was the way I wanted it to be but my fear said otherwise. In the

terms of my own “hero story,” this was my journey through “the dark night of the soul” to find the first light of a different dawn.

My emotions seemed to move about inside me at random. My senses were either dull, or more acute than I could ever remember them having been up until that time. I felt as though I was living in a desperate fever looking for something that would bring the relief of peace and a return to some sort of balance in my life. However, much I wanted to turn back I knew that there was nothing there for me. But something was urging me to go on towards a light I could feel but not see.

I realized that I had nothing to lose, that to move forward I must throw out the old ways. My fear had engaged me in a game where it made the rules and could change them as it chose. I was tired of the anger and frustration of this game and until I became the hunter, I would not be able to turn around to face my fear.

Looking back now I can see how truly desperate I was and how my fear controlled me. I realized again how easy it would be for me to take my own life. It had all the ingredients of a drama but it was real and I wanted to keep living.

Sitting up in my bed in what seemed like a waking dream one night I became the hunter and cornered my fear in a symbolic confrontation. I fought to see the fear that controlled me. The intensity I needed to hold the image of the dark, wispy shape of my fear in my mind’s eye was almost overwhelming. It represented the spectre of my fear, running and then halting, looking back at me, as it crouched in waiting.

Eventually, exhausted, I experienced a surge of energy throughout my whole body. The energy brought a feeling of confidence and peace

within me. It made me feel that I was the hunter and that I was in charge now.

The spectre of my inner fear began to grow smaller the closer I got to it, as though it were trying to find a place to hide from me. By confronting it I had taken away its power. There truly was nothing to fear but fear itself. The confrontation left me feeling drained but more at peace with myself than I had been for a long time. There was a deep compassion within this peace. It was compassion for myself and also for my fear, an outcast from the tribe wanting to be taken back into the fold.

Getting to know my fear was a gradual process, like making friends with an old enemy. This relationship was not one that I had ever imagined having but once acknowledged, never questioned.

This was a long-standing relationship and I needed to give my fear a safe and secure home. It had been a part of me for a long time and I had learnt a lot from its presence in my life.

The change in my relationship with my fear was a gentle process, “the so what-ness” of life, a process of trust outside the confinement of day-to-day thinking. The gates that had been held fast by my fear and by my depression were opening. The gates also contained my past as a series of events, images and memories, often lacking any continuity.

This was a significant symbolic turning point for me. A point at which I started to find trust and compassion for myself. A point at which I was able to start to trust in my process in overcoming depression. To let go of and honestly acknowledge deeply entrenched and irrational fears from the past, which had been controlling my life. The way forward was to learn to trust in the “so what-ness” beyond the confinement of my fears.

I certainly was not travelling first class on my metaphorical journey at this time. Just a poor migrant on his way to a promised land, sharing my space with goats and chickens, feeling every jolt on the road, ever watchful for attack from bandits.

My thoughts tried to ambush me in every way they could:

“WHO ARE YOU KIDDING? YOU DON’T REALLY BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE GOING TO SUCCEED AND REACH THE END OF THE JOURNEY DO YOU? GIVE UP FOOL, THIS IS TOO HARD FOR YOU AND ANYWAY WHY BOTHER? YOU KNOW THAT LIFE IS ULTIMATELY FUTILE, WELL YOUR LIFE IS ANYWAY! YOU WON’T CHANGE IT FOR THE BETTER.”

So gradually, ever so gradually, my journey moved on in defiance of this voice. I had started to prove my mind, which was both servant and master, wrong!

Now that I chose to look, there was unlimited information and assistance to help me along the path of my journey. I had tricked myself into thinking that I was alone; that there really was no way out of suffering. I had been wrong.

I read and listened in a way that made words start to have a new meaning, giving me spontaneous chuckles of recognition at their truth. There was inner joy and outward anger at the wasted life that I had been living.

I wrote in my diary:

“It is fear I write of tonight. My own fear of being cast out and rejected. There is light, so much light.”

“I found the photo of me and an old friend who has died. I wish he was here now to see his photo and talk about what we were and what we are now.”

I listened to music, to the sound of the wind, to my children’s laughter. I listened at seminars and in all sorts of groups, looking for seeds of truth and always for the light. I created mantras, affirmations and practices to the light and recited them to myself, especially when my resistance and anger were at their greatest. I spoke my feelings to others and defied my fear in revealing myself.

Above all, I allowed myself to feel, discovering my humanity and the humanity of others living their lives in defiance of fear, the experience of the courage and the humility of the human spirit:

I celebrate myself. For what I assume so shall you. For every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you.

Walt Whitman

I wrote in my Diary:

“Now there is darkness and there is light, no more shadows and only a memory of what it was that I ran from and finally almost gave way to.”

“There is light. It is my choice to have that light.”

Fear had kept me imprisoned and depression had supplied the guards to keep the prison walls secure, pushing my feelings and emotions deep inside where they would stay in the dark and neither grow nor wither. Facing my fear had let the light into the dark places I had been. It had given nourishment to feelings and emotions, so that they too could grow.

Practice — Help clean out your old, stale fears

For this practice you need twenty to thirty uninterrupted minutes in a quiet, comfortable place

This is your time, remember that you are doing this for your own well-being and health

Make yourself comfortable in either a sitting or lying position

When you are comfortable close your eyes

Place your hands over your abdomen

Start to breathe slowly, rhythmically and deeply from your abdomen

When you start to feel relaxed in your breathing, let your eyes roll upwards and close them gently

I want you to imagine that you are in an old house with many rooms

This house is gloomy but it sits next to a beautiful sunlit ocean

There is an old wharf by the house, where a sailing ship is moored with a crew who sit idly about its deck waiting for the arrival of a cargo

The cargo they are waiting for is the stale air and rubbish you will clean from the rooms of your gloomy house

Choose any room you want and open the door and enter. Go straight to the windows of the room, pull back the heavy drapes and open them as wide as they will go.

Feel the sunlight on your face as you stand at the window and feel the fresh, crisp, sea air as it fills every corner of the room

Your room may be empty or contain rubbish. Not just furniture but your stale old fears and memories of people, events and places you wish to clear out

Imagine that the sailors from the ship will be transporting the stale old rubbish of memories and fear from the rooms in your house, so that each room can be filled with light and fresh sea air

When you have finished cleaning out the first room, find another room and keep repeating the process, until you have

opened every window in your house and cleaned every room
you want to clean

It is a big house, so you can clean as many rooms as you wish

Stop at any time, if you start to feel that you are becoming in
any way distressed or upset in this practice

When you are satisfied with cleaning your house, you can watch
all the activity as the ship prepares to leave the dock

The crew are whistling, singing and laughing as they finish
loading the ship

When the ship is finished loading, it starts to sail out into the
bright, blue ocean under the smiling gaze of the captain

Imagine that while the ship is still close to the shore, the crew
wave to you and the captain leads them in, giving you three
cheers

Take some time to acknowledge and enjoy the feeling of a job
well done, as you look around your house of light and feel a
sense of your own well-being

Stay with the feeling well-being for as long as you need before
you take three deep breaths and open your eyes

The practice has ended

Allow yourself plenty of time to reflect upon what you have
learnt from the practice before you finish and carry on with your
day

Finding my voice

We all want to express what we feel and experience, the pain, pleasure, desire and needs, the whole keyboard of our voice.

Somewhere inside me I knew there was a voice hiding, ready to burst out with captive words and sounds.

My keyboard was confined to the area somewhere around middle C, occasionally moving up or down the scale but always returning to the safety of a few middle notes. The question was: how to release my voice? How to let it go free? How to let it soar?

There was danger that the question would overtake the quest and with it the questioner. There was also procrastination: "Who me procrastinate? Man of action! I will do it, I will do it, I will do it, if I could only remember what it was that I wanted to do."

I was caught up again with denial and avoidance, stumbling along like the old professor, searching through the pockets of his tweed jacket for the piece of string to remind him of the thing which would remind him of the thing which "of course, dear boy" would remind him.

Anger got me started, although I would never have admitted it at the time. I had plenty of anger and frustration ruminating around in the area of my stomach. I had spent years pretending not to be angry or upset and denying it; "You seem upset, are you angry?" in response I would attempt a mask-like smile, while somewhere inside me there would be a voice screaming, "Let me out you bastard, of course I am fucking angry!" and so more wasted energy. More anger. More frustration. More

procrastination, avoidance and denial.

The anger got me started one day alone in a lift. Just an ordinary lift in a city office block. I must have been cooking what was inside me for too long, because I suddenly found the release valve and let it go! Alone in that lift, between the ground floor and the twentieth floor, I found my voice. There was someone screaming in the lift! I looked around and checked. It was me, it was true, and I had opened my mouth and screamed, alone in the lift between the ground and twentieth floors.

Embarrassment and paranoia were my first feelings. What if someone had heard me? What if there was a security camera in place and a security guard was at this very moment reporting me, the crazy man screaming in the lift between the first and twentieth floors?

My jaw ached. It had not been open that wide since I stood on a rusty nail in my bare feet when I was seven years old.

When I sat down at my office desk, my whole body had a pleasant tingle to it. "God that felt good," I remember saying to myself. After the episode in the lift, it was open season on my voice. I discovered more and more opportunities to "use" my voice; there was the acting class where I started to learn what a gift and a joy it was to express myself through the art of acting and using the full range of my voice. There was singing. I kept singing lullabies to my children, even when they were already fast asleep. I sang in the car and stopped worrying about what other people might think if they saw or heard me. I reasoned that if I really thought it was so important anyway, then I would just have to learn to live with the attention.

Through all of this processes, I came to observe my feelings as those

of joy at what was being created. Accepting my joy was a joy in itself. Doing battle against my joy was the reaction of my old, stiff-jawed self who had spent a lifetime holding it all together, whatever the “it” was.

My mind said, “don’t rock the boat, why change what you know and what you are, you will be punished for this you know, this will not make any difference in the long term.”

I listened to this argument but it did not stop me creating and rebelling against depression.

I often felt something was helping by guiding me on my journey, although I told myself it was not possible as I always felt I was alone. If I found it hard to truly trust other human beings then how could I trust something outside me helping and guiding me?

As I got to know my real voice, I found a series of mental and physical blocks standing in my way. These blocks presented themselves in many different ways but their effect was the same; they wanted to deny me the free flow of the voice I was discovering.

Diary

“Trust is a loaded word for me. I have not trusted other people or myself much in my life. Now I feel as though I am learning to let go of the weight of my mistrust and replacing it with something new and much lighter.”

On a physical level, these blocks manifested as a sense of constriction, tightness and pain in parts of my body.

I had learnt to suppress my tears but whenever it felt safe, I let them go and sometimes, when I did not. Unable to contain them they were tears of joy, of release and hope.

Tears would fill my eyes when I heard the sound of a beautiful voice or piece of music. I felt as though I was like a child released from the confinement of school on the last day of term.

My dreams became increasingly more vivid, filled with fragments of memories, places, people, events, fear and anxiety. Through all of this my voice grew in power and expression. I sang in the shower and in my car a lot.

In finding my voice I found the anger and frustration of a child, begging to be noticed, heard, loved and to be respected. A child grown to be a man, who on waking from sleep, rises and catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror, shocked at the stranger he finds staring back at him.

Practice — Discovering your hidden voice

How are you breathing right now?

Is your breath shallow, deep, strong or weak?

Do you breathe a lot through your mouth?

Do you snore at night?

We usually take breathing for granted but breathing has been studied in all its subtle complexities for thousands of years

The way you breathe affects the way you feel, your mental and physical health and of course your voice

The way you breathe changes throughout the course of your day

It can also become constricted at times

If the breath is constricted, then so will your voice and your whole attitude to life can be affected

Changing your breathing for the better can have a significant effect on your voice

Practice — Mirror breathing

A warning: if you suffer from asthma or have any other health issues which may adversely affect your breathing then please consider carefully before you start this practice

This practice involves using your voice and making noise, sometimes loud noise. You may find this process confronting,

with the sounds which you may make at times and may want to tell any people you live with, that this could happen.

My own experience of dealing with other people's reactions to this is to be absolutely open and honest with them

In my experience being open and honest is part of the process in uncovering one's true voice

The first part of this practice can be done when you first wake up in your bed in the morning

The second part is done standing in front of a mirror

When you first start the practice allow approximately five minutes for both parts of the practice and at least ten minutes when you finish to rest

To begin

You are lying in your bed with your eyes closed

Place your hands on your abdomen

Concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly, feeling your hands rising and falling with the rhythm of your breathing

When you are ready take a deep breath in through your nose

Hold the breath for a count of about five seconds without straining and then release it through your mouth as slowly and smoothly as possible

Repeat this breathing for about five minutes

When you have finished this first part of the practice get out of bed and stand in front of your mirror

Continue your smooth, rhythmic and gentle breathing

Relax your posture and concentrate on looking into your eyes

You may find that you do not want to meet your own gaze and want to look away

After two or three minutes, push all your breath out as fully as you can through your mouth without straining

Keep looking into your eyes in the mirror and repeat the breathing process, concentrating on taking in deep breaths in through the nostrils before releasing through the mouth

If you feel discomfort at any time stop practicing and rest

If you feel you are comfortable with the breathing then you can start to use your voice to sigh with each outbreath

As you continue the practice, using your sighing voice, you may want to make different sounds

Feel that you are free to make the sounds that you want to make

In exploring your voice, you may release tension and emotion

If you find at any time that the practice is in anyway unduly upsetting you please stop and rest

When you are ready to finish, give yourself at least ten minutes to rest and relax before you carry on with your day

And we thank Thee that darkness reminds us of light.

T. S. Eliot

Practice — Breath of light

The use of the visualization of light, as a source for healing and empowerment, to help invigorate and reenergize, is an ancient and universal one. It is an integral part of the culture of many different tribes and races, religions, faiths and health teachings.

Either sit or lie down in a quiet, comfortable place, where you will not be interrupted for at least twenty to thirty minutes

Make yourself comfortable and when you are ready, place your hands over your abdomen

Start to relax and concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly

Remind yourself that this is your time alone, a break from day-to-day cares

Once your breathing is relaxed, slowly close your eyes

Keep concentrating on breathing from your abdomen, feeling the hands rising and falling with each breath you take

Start to imagine that every breath you take is one of pure light,

which fills your whole body with healing and regenerative energy

If you wish, you can imagine your breath as thousands of tiny bubbles of oxygenated energy

Imagine that as you breathe out through your nose, you release any stale energy that you have

As you continue your breathing, you can choose to repeat your own particular affirmation, prayer, mantra, verse or words of meaning for you

Or If you wish you can also use these words:

“I let the healing, regenerative and cleansing power of light into every part of my body and being, letting go anything I am carrying, which is a burden and a weight to me in my life”

Discontinue bringing in the light at any time you wish

You can simply carry on concentrating on the rhythm of your breath

When you have finished the practice take a few minutes to relax and feel the full effect of the practice

Letting go of “Letting Go”?

I wrote in my diary:

“I try to make sense of my life, of all this (!) and realize that it is sometimes by not trying to make sense of something, that sometime sense appears. I continue to witness, acknowledge and let go of what weighs me down. I feel my heart`s loss, a sense of some sadness for all those years I locked it away, now reopening, so subtle, so gentle, like nothing I have ever known. It is like a new baby`s eyes opening for the first time to the light.”

What I wrote in my diary was about letting go, something which I mention during the course of this book. So, what is letting go? What does it mean and what does it signify in following my track from a depressed state, to a whole and integrated healthy self?

My experience was one of emotion, frustration and bewilderment in questioning just what in the hell is “letting go” all about. Arrogant anger and frustration at my own inability to understand and finally a recognition and acceptance of the process itself.

As I started to explore my depressed state it became clear that I was indeed carrying around a great deal of unexpressed emotion about the past and just how unfair, how unjustified and cruel my treatment at life`s hands had been. My unacknowledged mantra had become “if only.” This was a universal, one size fits all mantra, best delivered in a slightly whining tone under the breath.

“Just let go,” I kept repeating to myself, as though that was all I would need to do, to release whatever it was that I wanted to let go of. Then I would turn my back and be surprised when nothing had changed.

My dogged stubbornness, anger and frustration kept me going on this track, until I was totally becalmed in my own Sargasso Sea of “not letting go-ness.” This was a perfect opportunity to feel like a failure and follow some well-worn paths of worthlessness. They were all dead ends of course and I was stuck chewing away on the bones of the past once again.

I have an image of myself at this time of not being able to move in any direction, sagging under the weight of my own powerlessness and impotence. The truth was that I did not want to let go of my story about how unfair, unjustified and cruel life was. I did not want to let go of my pain. I did not want to let go of my suffering. I did not want to let go of the idea that “effort” could make a difference no matter what! I did not want to let go of the safety of what I knew. If I embraced the unknown, who would I have to blame?

I would have to own my life absolutely, with no excuses and no past baggage to support my story of just how unfair life was.

What finally drove me to let go, was the recognition of the part my past played in supporting my depression. My past was not the clear track it had seemed to me but a tangled mess of fallen trees, detours, dishonest guides.

When I started to honestly address my past, I found gaps in the sequence of my memory, around which I had built detours. I found this lack of continuity in the sequence deeply disturbing. Trying to piece my

past together was like piecing together an old film, recreating the story by searching for lost, often damaged film.

It began when I went to see a counsellor. In looking at my upbringing I began to get an understanding of the effect that it had had on me.

A conversation that started with me using words like “normal” and “typical,” to describe how I saw my family and upbringing, became a search for a very different descriptive vocabulary, to help make the past clear to me.

As I write this now, I see the process of “letting go” as a crucial part of my search to live without depression. To be able to follow the process, I needed to first understand what it was that I was looking at clearly, with all my senses in play. Otherwise it would be a futile process, a ritual without meaning.

In understanding the process of letting go, I found all “the stuff” of my depressed self: the grief, anger, frustration, fear and denial.

I found the hidden stages, the detours in my life where I had abandoned myself at various stations along the way and never truly moved on.

The more I came to understand and learn how to let go, the more I rediscovered my abandoned self, still waiting to move forward in life.

I found myself as a fifteen-year-old boy, still mourning the loss of home, friends and everything secure that I had ever known. I was able to feel my shock and confusion at this stage in my life, as I moved from childhood into manhood.

It is confronting for me to write this now all these years later. There have been convenient reasons for me to delay completing this chapter, which seemed valid and reasonable. A way for me to avoid the truth of the habitual cycle, binding me to the past and it also reveals a series of questions relating to my letting go of the past:

The question is?

What is it that stops me letting go? If I find it so painful and frustrating, why do I not choose to let go right now?

Where is my free choice in this?

Is it sandwiched between what I thought was my real self - the past self - and the true self I am discovering beyond depression?

Today out walking in the rain and wind, I went through a mental checklist of what I am hanging onto and what binds me to the past.

As part of the checklist, I confronted myself on being depressed: "So come on, feel depressed. This is the perfect time, out here alone on a rainy, windswept day. How does it feel? See if you can remember."

I could not fully remember and I could not inhabit my old depressed self. It had already become a stranger, someone whom I met once in the past.

from "the past-go-round" into "the unknown future-go-round"

Practice — Letting go

This is a practice to release whatever you feel has been weighing you down in life

Have fun with this practice

Make it an event that you remember

Imagine this is your own awards ceremony

You can think of it as a ritual, embellish it with anything your imagination conjures up for you

Give yourself at least 30 minutes to carry out this practice

The first step in this practice is to either sit or lie down in a comfortable place

If you do not have a comfortable place already now is your opportunity to make one

Making your own comfortable place can assist in reinforcing the positive steps you take to improve your well-being

Lie down, close your eyes, relax and start to breathe deeply and slowly from your abdomen

Imagine that you are planning a special event and you are making a to do list

The event you are planning is to celebrate letting go of all those things in your life, which you would like to let go of

There is no need to rush

Take all the time you need to complete this mental checklist

The list may include people, places, events, the actions of yourself and others, spoken words, relationships, memories, feelings, past emotions, pictures, photos, anything which you wish to let go of

You may find some of the things on your list are unexpected

Remember that in letting go of a particular person for instance, you are not necessarily rejecting or dismissing that person

It is often not the person whom you are rejecting but some part of your relationship with them

Something which may be no longer appropriate in some way or you have outgrown

Be kind to yourself and move forward with love and compassion for yourself, your friends, family and all those with whom you have share relationships with in any way

To begin

Start to visualize yourself leading a large procession towards an impressive temple or hall, which sits in a beautiful valley on the shore of an ocean, surrounded by a range of snowcapped mountain peaks

You lead the procession into the building, which is full of light and seat yourself on a throne on the stage, facing the procession, which has stopped in front of you

The procession is composed of all the people and things, which
you want to let go of

Take time to look at the procession in front of you and
remember the reasons why you chose what is in the procession

When you are ready, look out through the open doors of the
building and you will see a sailing ship moored at the oceans
shore, large enough to carry all the cargo you wish to let go of

At your command, all the cargo is loaded onto the boat

When the cargo is loaded, you take your own place on the ship,
seated on your throne and the ship starts to sail smoothly into
the vast ocean

You enjoy the feel of the breeze on your face, the smell of the
sea and the gentle sound it makes against the sides of the ship
as it sails effortlessly out into the ocean

When you are ready raise your hand for the boat to stop and
anchor

As soon as the ship is at anchor the crew start loading the cargo
onto giant tropical leaves which are carefully placed over the
side of the boat to float on the smooth ocean's waters

You stand at the side of the boat watching as the leaves gently
float off towards the horizon

Imagine that as you watch the giant leaves float away towards
the horizon a weight has been lifted from your shoulders

When you are you feel ready, the boat transports you back to
land in the glow of the late afternoon sun

Give yourself time when you have finished the practice to rest
fully, before you carry on with your day

Joyfulness

If we lose something, we look for it.

As I followed my journey, I started to look for the joy I had lost for living.

Diary Notes

“There was a time I laughed and sang a lot. The tune I sang was called childhood. It was a time when I could laugh at nothing, it simply felt good to be alive. I remember that adults would sometimes seem annoyed or uncomfortable with my unrestrained laughter and my unrestrained joy, at being alive.”

“I thought the adult world was a strange place, if they did not like joy.”

“If this is true of adults, then it is certainly true of depressed adults. Along with the whole baggage of depression, there comes the loss of laughter, joy, love, ‘the nectar’ for life is lost.”

“This morning my youngest daughter was full of the joy of living, a pure and spontaneous expression of her absolute joy in life. I asked her to perform a task in the midst of this joy and when she did not do so, I spoke in a stern voice, just as my father would have done to me. Suddenly she had tears in her eyes, a sweet bird with a broken wing spiraling out of the perfect blue of her sky to the hard ground below.”

“I thought I had reason to raise my voice but as I comforted her, I became aware of something else moving inside me. There was the memory of my own joy, laughter and total love of being alive. There was the memory of my own ‘fall from the perfect blue sky’ and although I had not been conscious of any discomfort at my daughter’s joy, it was there.”

“Depression is no fun, just boring and joyless.”

I had been depressed for a long time and I had become the lead character in my own drama of depression. Joy, laughter and love had not ceased to exist but I had ceased to exist for them.

For me, rediscovering joy in my life, was giving up being an innocent bystander to my life; the story, the drama about not being involved, not being part of anything, not being committed to living, just hanging around the fringes, a bystander.

I can hear my own voice now: “I am so tired. I am sick. I don’t have time. It is inconvenient. I need to sleep. I need to hide. I need to survive.”

I had built a library full of excuses for not opening up to joy and for not experiencing the lightness of being.

Poem - Joys Light

I grew older

My teeth grew thin

Day-by-day time's fingers beat upon my bald head

Rat-a-tat-tat

Days passed in hiding

Avoidance and denial

Blindness to the light and the closing of my life

Until I glimpsed an image

A slobbering flasher at life

Rat-a-tat-tat

Rut-a-tut-tut

Merely raised my head at first

then started a crab's crawl towards a match head's
glimmer

Kneeling

At times receding

Then to stumble until stopped

Now standing glimpsed the light

Temporarily was blinded

Rat-a-tat-tat-tut

In silent awe time's beat grew fainter

Rat-a-ta

Rat-a

Rat!

Until a silent contemplation overtook me

Displacing the shallow grave of my thin toothed fear

The whisper of a tear and joy to the sky eyes upraised

When I wrote this poem, it was very clear to me that I was crawling towards a match head's glimmer. The crab crawling towards was often how it seemed, at least that is what my diary tells me now.

My experience of the journey out of depression is of a slow process. I could have made it much easier for myself but my stubborn determination did not like shortcuts.

I reasoned that there could be no denial or avoidance of the truth, if my wish to be a whole and healthy human being was going to be realized. It was no less so when I contemplated the life I lived without real joy. Joy had given up in disgust and become atrophied through lack of use. Creating joy in my life would help me to find a sense of my true self, a sense of choice about uncovering or rediscovering, some childhood

joy, laughter and love of life. Acknowledgement that I was not just an innocent bystander in my life. That I did have the power to make life affirming changes. Something which had not been present when I was most depressed.

The more I let go of my relationship with depression, the more joy I found in my life. As I discovered joy, it also discovered me and brought with it laughter and love.

For someone like me, who had become attached to pain and suffering, allowing myself to feel joy, was walking a fine line between pleasure and pain. It was not that I did not want joy in my life but that I had to overcome my fear of it.

It was true that I was afraid of joy. I had been in an abusive relationship with depression for a long time. I was the chained dog, who when released continues to stay in the same spot, as though the chain is still attached.

My discovery of joy also brought with it anger and frustration.

It was directed at myself for wasting my life and being gutless for not expressing myself. With time, the anger and frustration became exhausted and I began to enjoy a sense of my own freedom in joy.

Fortunately, I had been ambushed by the joy terrorists hiding within us all and was able to let go of another part of the control and judgement of my depression.

So, I went looking for joy

My first surprise when I started to look for joy, was that joy was not

what I thought it was. I had associated joy with loud noise, jokes, alcohol, parties and events. What I discovered about joy was the antithesis of this. I found it reverential. Often quiet, soulful and heartfelt. To me it was the sweetest nectar. It was spontaneous and readily available, a celebration of all the best that life can be.

Finding joy became a beautiful discovery for me, a process of “pure joy.” In the presence of real joy my face would break into a smile through the old mask of depression.

Joy continues to grow within me each day. It is not something that can be forced to the surface. My experience of joy is the less it is interfered with, the better it seems to flourish.

Practice — Finding joy

Take some time to contemplate these questions:

Where is joy present in my life?

How do I express my joy?

When you have finished your time contemplating joy, you can practice it out in the real world

Each day, be aware of the possibility to create joy, in your life

Witness and share in the joy that others feel and express

Exercise your ability to create joy out in the world and the joy you find in sharing your joy with other people

Always remember that you are at the source of your own

joyfulness, just as you are at the source of your own suffering

Let your joy flow

How much of what occurs in analysis is not a sign of therapy but merely facilitated recollections? And what is therapeutic 'insight' but seeing an earlier event in the light of subsequent history? Did Freud simply discover the value of getting his patients to write or speak their autobiographies?

B. F. Skinner

Facing fear and The Warrior

I am here and you may not pass until I am named.

The Fear Bully

Diary

"I have denied myself intimacy and closeness because of fear. I am fooling myself, there is nowhere to hide from fear and discomfort. It is always there and will be expressed one way or another."

Fear is what I refuse to acknowledge

It wants to control me

Fear is nothing but fear of fear itself

Do not turn your back on it

Face it

I wanted to learn the truth and the source of my fear, to be a warrior on my journey, to enter its realm.

So where does the warrior sit in the journey to a life without depression?

As a child I spent hours playing out epic battles on the patterned carpet of my home with my collection of American Civil War soldiers. Each part of the pattern had come to represent a part of the battlefield where a particularly valiant or individual act of heroism had taken place. My toy soldiers were real warriors to me. They represented what I believed a warrior to be: trained fighters, fearless and courageous, true comrades, noble of spirits, stoic in the acceptance of victory or defeat.

I too became a warrior as I acted out my battles. I imagined that I felt what the warriors of the patterned carpet felt.

I would be first to attack and would continue to attack until I collapsed under the muzzles of the enemy guns, bleeding from my wounds.

My comrades would discover me when the battle had finished, still miraculously alive and support me back to our camp where I would amaze the company surgeon by shrugging off the seriousness of my wounds yet again!

My hero warriors were “Boys’ Own” heroes. All blood and guts and tattered flags held aloft over the fallen bodies of the vanquished enemy. I had no awareness then of the true nature of suffering and of the cost to the human spirit in shock and trauma. That awareness came in time with my own battles.

I entered life into the big world outside the battlefield of the patterned carpet as a Boys’ Own warrior and I learnt to suffer in silent stoicism, no matter what I felt inside myself. The “warrior” walked beside me, a symbol of the silent suffering of the noble hero, preparing the ground for depression. Like the sad, lonely figure of a Clint Eastwood or John Wayne film cowboy, afraid to show his feelings: “don’t apologize son, it’s a sign of weakness.”

It was effective in hiding the fear I felt. It was effective in denying me the vulnerability of the expression of my own feelings and of intimacy for myself and others. It was the way I coped with life and survived. But it came at a cost: a place in the warmth of the human fire, of love and intimacy.

I thought of my life as a battle, always carrying my shield and my weapons. There were occasional interludes of peace but for the most part

it was the battle of coping with anxiety and fear.

In my day-to-day living I put on the costumes of the various characters my warrior played out in the real world each day: the partner, the father, the businessperson, friend, lover, confident person, capable person, interesting person, funny person, fit person, creative person and most importantly, the strong, always coping warrior person.

There are many memories for me at various stages in my life, signposts on the journey to come, telling me that all was not well.

There is a memory of myself in my early thirties: stoic, always coping, working overseas under pressure. I received an “Incredible Hulk Award” named after the television and film character, a character that had superhuman strength and used it to help others. I remember being very proud of this tongue-in-cheek award, because I had been recognized for the character that I portrayed in real life. My idea of the strong silent warrior, who always coped no matter what the circumstances or the conditions.

There is another memory of me putting on my business “armour” to go out into the world and fight the day’s battles dressed in a suit. I felt very uncomfortable in my suit and would long on a hot summer’s day, to throw it off and dive into the cool sea.

Instead I did what I did well, cope. I put on my mask each day to meet the other masks and spend our time in convincing ourselves that we were really ok!

People may even have thought of me as cool, calm and of course able to cope at all times. And what was going on inside me, whilst the warrior defended the castle against the enemy? How did I honestly feel?

Well my anxiety and depression were growing more acute. I looked for temporary escape, with alcohol, tobacco, exercise, hiding under the doona and exhausted sleep.

I grew increasingly desperate spending more and more energy in a desperate attempt to cover up the cracks in my life. My relationship with my partner becoming more and more strained.

She was, in equal parts angry, frustrated, fearful and concerned for my well-being.

I in turn, experienced deeper and deeper attacks of depression and anxiety. Even now writing this, I feel the memory of the darkness I felt then.

I feel it now, as I felt it then, like a sudden drop in the barometer of my well-being; a slump into a depressed state of being, coupled with the anxious panic which I would experience at its coming.

What I most needed to do was what I was most unable to do: express, communicate and give voice to my fears. The warrior I had become would not allow it. Would not allow the intimacy I needed to share with those I loved and knew best, my family and friends. To visit a doctor, to find a counsellor or psychologist and start the real process towards good health and well-being.

With my male friends at that time, I found that I could least communicate my fears. We were all warriors were we not? Brothers-in-arms, defending our right to not express our true feelings and fight our battles in the same silent way, sworn on our swords that all was well, even when it was obviously not.

Diary

“What is not being said here? Why do I feel that there is a lack of honesty in my relationships and yes, a lack of any real concern or compassion for myself?”

I refused to acknowledge that my strong, silent and always coping warrior had become the strong, silent and ever-vigilant jailer of my own self-expression. I was locked inside a jail in a castle of my own creation, a prisoner to my own fear. But this imaginary jail was no less escape-proof than any real jail. I had built it to be security-proof and I was its only inmate.

What had worked for me so far with my strong silent warrior, no longer worked. Denial, avoidance and escape through the rituals of self-imposed regimes were not going to work any longer.

I was looking to cut some corners and find an easy way out. The conditions under which I lived and existed were not about to change. And if they did, what difference would it make to the context of my life?

What I was really looking for was a magic cure. A way to escape my fears and my depression and myself.

In reality there was no magic cure. There was no escape and in fact, there was no jail either. What there was, was my “Boys’ Own” warrior concept which had well and truly passed its use by date. This was the foundation on which I had built my prison’s walls. For these walls to disappear, I had to find and create within myself a vision of and hope for my authentic warrior.

My heroic “Boys’ Own Warrior Kit” had contained all the pieces, tools and manual to build and maintain the now obsolete model. I would use them, to build a new model.

Before I could build this new model, I had to dismantle and dispose of the old model. The only way to accomplish this was to simply do it. Like the process of letting go, which is a process of witnessing, acknowledging and then letting go.

I looked for a new model for my hero warrior and found him in a man dying of AIDS. He was nothing like my old image of the hero warrior.

In him I found a real courage, a real strength and absolute vulnerability. Deep within him his body was dying, closing down each day and yet his spirit shone out. He showed me what a gift life could be. He showed me where true humility was to be found. A humility that silently humbled me and left me to face my own mortality in a way which I had never imagined could be possible.

I found great respect for my fellow men and women in this process, “the day-to-day warriors of life.” My eyes were opened to the light of the universal truth of suffering of all people. This was a measure of just how far I had travelled on my journey. I no longer sought to escape anything I discovered along its route. I no longer wanted to live in ignorance and fear.

For all the beauty there may be, I’ll never throw away my soul, only for something I don’t know that one may come on randomly. In savouring a finite joy, the very most that one can expect is to enfeeble and destroy our taste, leaving the palate wrecked. For all the

sweetness there may be, I'll never throw away my soul, only for something I don't know that one may come on randomly. On earth you never must rely on what the senses understand or all the knowledge you command, although it rises very high. No grace nor beauty there may be will make me throw away my soul, only for something I don't know that one may come on randomly.

St John of the Cross

I thought or even cared less about my so-called prison. The fear which had accompanied my depression began to lose its power. I no longer wanted it.

The Warrior Practice – Designing your own Warrior

This is a practice about finding resilience and inner peace in yourself, through the process of designing your own warrior

Allow yourself at least 30 to 40 minutes to undertake this practice

It is your time to practice being kind and supportive to yourself

Lie down, make yourself comfortable and relaxed

When you are ready place your hands over your abdomen

Start to breathe slowly and deeply from your abdomen

Allow yourself to feel secure, relaxed and comfortable

When you are ready, let your eyes roll upwards and close them

Imagine that you are going to design and build your own
warrior

Your warrior can become a guide with you on your journey to a
life without depression if you want

Take time to think about what physical, mental and emotional
characteristics would make your warrior real for you

Be thoughtful and skillful in designing and building your warrior

Take pride in what you build

When you have finished designing and building your warrior you
can take some time to think about how it felt to make it

You can write, draw or record these thoughts

If you want, you can share these thoughts with someone with
whom you feel comfortable and trust

Give yourself time at the end of this process and before you go
out into the world.

Anger

Diary

"Why is it I go through these periods of absolute darkness and I work through them. I want a life with joy and light. The anger I feel is in the frustration of my depression. The feeling of impotence at the darkness I feel about life. As I write I can feel myself getting angry, an unpleasant feeling in my stomach because I cannot get what I want. I feel like I am a frustrated angry child screaming for his mother's attention."

A short five letter word full of meaning and I am aware that I have been avoiding starting to write this chapter.

Anger

The dictionary says anger is: "strongly felt displeasure aroused by real or supposed wrongs, often accompanied by an impulse to retaliate."

To start at the beginning, I was never angry. I was not even angry when I was angry. Anger was very simply not allowed! In my depressed life, anger was absolutely censored, because it was dynamic and therefore stood outside the walls of my depressed prison. It was a threat to the existence of my depressed life and I denied it. Anger is an intense expression of unexpressed emotions and any expression of my emotions was most definitely not part of the control which depression held in my life.

In my family there was a great deal of both expressed and unexpressed anger. When it was fully manifested, I would feel powerless to face its force. I sensed its presence, sheltering somewhere in the hills surrounding my childhood, ready to blow in again. When the storm did blow, it would come from several directions and leave me feeling emotionally battered.

As the third and youngest child I seemed to receive only part of the whole family story. This made me feel excluded from the inner circle formed by my father, mother, brother and sister.

I have a picture in my mind of a very small me trying to break into the circle formed by the rest of my family, without success. I wanted to be part of the circle and its secrets that I was not allowed to know.

In my child's mind, feeling left outside the circle of anger I felt responsible for the mysterious origins of the anger in my family.

I was fearful of the unpredictable nature of anger, my powerlessness to face it and have any control over its outcome. With anxiety building up within me, I became an expert at the game of avoiding, denying and suppressing anger, not only within myself but also in situations where I sensed that there was the possibility for anger to arise. I felt responsible for other peoples' anger and possible violence, which might be directed towards me.

Later, when I read Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, I recognized this story, as one I knew from my own childhood. A story of the secrets of my family.

In *Macbeth* the secret knowledge is revealed in a story of brooding anger and threat. The witches, brewing their magic potion as they hunch over the fire, were the brooding, "anger storms" of my childhood,

waiting just beyond the surrounding hills ready to break out without any warning.

My own anger was hidden, as my depression was later hidden and denied. It was anger at those who were stronger and older than me. The very ones to whom I looked for security and love. The ones who would not let me into the inner circle.

The anger I felt and denied became bottled up inside me in the cellar of my stomach, slowly popping corks now and again throughout the course of my depression.

I wanted it to magically disappear but it would not. It just kept on fermenting, popping corks, leaking and causing a mess inside me.

As I grew up, I found many ways to help to cover up and to express the mess anger had made inside me.

Silence was an important one, which I felt would show that I had reached a state above mere anger. In fact, of course, the truth was the exact opposite.

There was also a sincere kind of procrastination that I believed might be seen as patient discernment.

I thought talking earnestly and softly might be seen as a kind of meek sensitivity but I think it just made a lot of people feel frustrated and angry trying to hear and understand me!

I became skilled at avoiding or withdrawing from situations or groups of people where I felt anger might occur.

This behaviour only helped to create increasing anger and frustration

in my relationship with my partner. Something which was deeply destructive to our relationship.

More subtle and passive but just as destructive was the point at which I would disengage my emotions.

The more I denied my own anger, then the more that anger was turned inwards against me. I was punishing myself as I had learnt to do as child when I felt denied a true understanding of the family story. My child's logic said that I must be the cause of this pain and must be punished at all costs, no matter what.

I felt I could not win and that I was increasingly powerless to affect the downward spiral I was taking. Like the coach of a team that almost but never quite wins; a team which literally snatches defeat out of the jaws of victory.

Somewhere inside the cycle of frustration of anger and denial of anger I came to believe that I would always be frustrated in what I tried to achieve in life and would never experience any real joy.

I looked for confirmation and reinforcement of my depressive state: "creating a negative situation where a positive situation may have been a possibility." This could have been my motto. It was at the root of my anger and my projection of the way I felt about anger.

By turning anger in on myself I had created a perfect breeding ground for negative and self-destructive thoughts and actions.

When I finally saw the light and came to and acknowledge my own anger, I saw just how pervasive it was in my life.

It was far too heavy a weight to carry. I would need to let go of my attachment and fear to anger.

Letting go seemed like an impossible Himalayan mountain range to cross. It was not just one peak which confronted me but a whole range receding into the distance. These mountains made the option of climbing seem absolutely daunting.

Looking at the mountains, I began to be less and less concerned with them. I found that I was looking inside myself. I was not looking at the mountains any more.

I shut my eyes and saw myself sitting very still, with my back against a smooth rock. As I continued to sit, I became aware that I was not even concerned with the mountains any more. All my attention was turned inwards. I was in a relaxed state of attention on the source of my anger.

I thought I knew a lot about anger and particularly my own anger by this stage. There were many "how's" surrounding my anger and the story I had built up around it; how it had grown, how destructive it was, how frustrated it made me feel. They were like the mountain range, they were not important any more. I could not find a way to navigate the mountain range of my anger. It presented itself to me as impenetrable, forbidding, frightening and utterly impossible to cross. All I could see were mountains but each time I opened my eyes, the mountains seemed more distant, as though they were not mountains at all but in fact, hills. Then not even hills but gentle slopes.

Then there were no mountains, hills or slopes and my anger had grown less. It was just something I had struggled with for much of my life.

As I continued the process the well of anger diminished until it was just a good stomach belch to be enjoyed with a feeling of satisfaction.

This was an important place along the track of my journey:

I learnt that I was not powerless.

I could be a good coach to myself.

I did not have to keep carrying the weight of anger.

I had the freedom to live life and make choices without the grind of depression.

The heart of the matter — Discovering the gentle heart within

Diary

“Love and my children’s eyes. They opened my heart to being loved and to giving love in return.”

As a teenager I built a protective wall around myself after I experienced the death of my mother and the breakdown of my family. It protected me from the pain and uncertainties that life could bring and the possibility of feeling intimacy and love with other people.

There is a memory of a woman I was in a relationship with, who asked me one day if I loved her. My answer was that I did not know what love was. At the time I honestly believed that this was the truth about the way I felt about love.

It was not that I did not know what love was but that I denied myself feeling what love was. I denied love because its intimacy could make me vulnerable to feeling pain. Depression is about control, maintaining its own existence and survival. There is no place for the heart and for love to breathe in the dark of depression but somewhere inside myself I knew that it was there.

It was my desire for creative self-expression which first helped me on my journey. There were two big questions of suffering and desire which it posed for me, questions that kept biting at the skin of my depression:

“What is life without self-expression? What is life without a love for one’s own existence?”

In my hero’s journey looking at the story and history of suffering was a sobering comment on my own struggle with depression. Where I struggled with the power and authority of depression, other people had struggled with the authority of the repression of their self-expression, ideals, beliefs, religious convictions and their right to live; freedom purchased with their lives.

It changed the way I saw my life. I could not be alone in my depressive self-pity and self-obsession ever again with the knowledge of this shared suffering.

When I started to look for a way to repair my heart the process seemed to occur quite spontaneously. What I learnt was to let go of my attachment to the outcome. To be vulnerable and open to intimacy, to trust in something beyond my own understanding to provide an answer. This in itself was a process; a process that allowed me to let go of my fear of not being in control and trying to contain my feelings.

Practice — Tending to the garden

Tending to the heart is a practice much like tending to a garden

If you do nothing, then the garden becomes overgrown until
you are unable to move freely

Take the time to tend it and you will be able to gain pleasure in
its beauty

There does not have to be effort in this process

Think of it as something to look forward to
Like taking a break during the ebb and flow of the day's events

Learning to love and tend to the heart is like this

If you are ignoring the heart start to engage with it

It can be an island of peace and security when the worldly
winds are blowing around you

A centre for your emotions and sense of well-being

The path to my own heart was overgrown and almost lost when
I started to uncover it

I learnt to be patient and not become frustrated in uncovering it

The way that I tended to my garden would be a reflection of
this patience

A reflection of nurturing for myself

An expression of the future I was creating and not the past

I was rewarded by what I uncovered

The man I was, had often wanted to push through, pull down
and destroy in life

I had denied this and imagined that I was different

That I was sensitive to and aware of my own and other's
feelings

Whenever I felt I was getting lost, I kept bringing myself back
to the heart

There is surrender in this

I know that real men don't surrender, ever!

Well I did surrender

The heart teased me out like a sad child being asked to play

Practice — The colours of the heart

You will need at least thirty minutes or longer to undertake this
practice

Make sure that your practice place is quiet, a place where you
can feel secure, relaxed and comfortable

Take up your practice position lying down

Make sure that you are not too cold or hot or uncomfortable in
any way

When you are ready close your eyes and concentrate on
breathing slowly and deeply

Follow the flow of your breath, gently in and out

Let your breathing take your awareness to the middle point of
your chest and place your left hand over your right hand there

Focus on this point in the middle of your chest as your heart

centre

Let go of any expectations you might have about this process
and allow your intuitive heart do its work

Start to imagine a softly glowing light at the heart point, like
the light from a candle

Imagine this light as a soft and misty pink colour

As you continue the process, you can change the colour of your
light and gently start to let the colours spread out into every
part of your body

As you learn to let the heart do its work, you can start to
experience the beauty of the colours you create

By visualizing these colours, you can enjoy the power of the
loving heart

Take your time in this practice to visualize as many colours as
you wish

When you feel ready, open your eyes and give yourself time to
feel the benefits of this process before you finish the practice

Finding my centre

As I grew older my depression grew stronger. It was a constant and anxious possibility in my life, like a thick mental fog which could descend at any time, seemingly without warning. A state of being where the fog of depression shrouded the landscape, leaving me disorientated and lost in the anxiety and panic of not being able to find my way out. A desperate kind of search for a place where I could be at home. A place where I could be at peace, where I feel secure, warm, loved and loving in return.

All I want is a room somewhere far away from the cold night
air, warm face, warm hands, warm feet, oh wouldn't it be
lovely.

From My Fair Lady

I would try to imagine it in the time between sleep and waking, this place I was trying to find, the home inside me where I belonged.

It was a burrow where I could hide like an animal. A burrow under the roots of a fallen tree where I could make my home. I could cover this burrow in a piece of builder's black plastic sheeting. This black plastic sheeting became a symbol of my depression.

My partner grew to recognize these descents into the fog: my moods, the blackness, highs and lows, my need to escape. She even came to learn the secret of my black plastic world.

I seemed to live at least two lives in my depression: there was the

depressed me, the black plastic sheeting me, hiding under the denial of my depression. Then there was the face I put on to meet the other faces, as I lived my life in the outside world each day.

Suffering, I lived my life in a bubble of loud silence, screaming in a whisper. I had learnt the lessons of denial and avoidance, believing I was able to present myself as a 'normal' person — at least, I hoped I did.

I lived by a stoic depressive's rules: do not admit 'it', do not let 'it' be seen, deny 'its' existence. Depression can be like that, accepted, even encouraged in a tacit, underhand, dishonest sort of way.

The route of the track I took out of depression was to discover where I truly belonged. If my depression was in a burrow in the roots of a tree, then finding the true place of my being would be in the uppermost branches of the tree: the branches which reach out to touch the sun by day and the stars by night.

Practice — Being at your centre

There is a 'sweet spot' which exists for me somewhere in the solar plexus behind the belly button and is connected to the sacral area in my lower back. When I am connected to this place, it is a subtle, sensitive and gentle feeling, I am at home.

If you are prepared to work on yourself consistently, the
benefits will start to flow

It is important that you allow yourself plenty of time out for this
practice

Find a time when you are not likely to be interrupted in any way

in a quiet place, either inside or outside, where you can sit or lie down in complete comfort

When you are completely settled in your spot pay attention to the following things:

Posture — sit erect with your shoulders and neck as relaxed as possible, with your chin slightly lowered to take any strain away from your neck

If you lie down make sure you are comfortable with a small pillow or folded towel to support your head

Hands — make sure that your hands are as relaxed and open as possible. Simply let them rest in your lap or on your thighs if you are sitting. If you are lying down have them at the sides of your body, palms up, placed slightly away from your body.

Breathing — let your breath start from your abdomen. Let it be calm and rhythmical. Remember not to effort or strain. This is not a test. It is something which you are choosing to do for yourself and your own future well-being.

Once you have relaxed in your posture and are breathing deeply and rhythmically, smile!

Enjoy how it feels to smile

Feel the muscles in your face begin to soften and relax

Jaw — let your jaw relax. The simple act of consciously relaxing the jaw can release tension and stress.

Eyes - let your eyes slowly roll up into your head. This will help you to relax fully with the process.

Close your eyes slowly and imagine that you are an explorer looking for treasure in a deep cave

This treasure spot is located in your body at the sacrum

Follow your breathing and to relax fully into this spot at the sacrum

This spot is your centre for well-being

The place where you belong, your home

Enjoy the feeling of being at peace in your centre

Continue to breathe calmly, deeply and rhythmically

Continue the practice until you are ready to finish

When you are ready open your eyes

Give yourself time to stretch and feel the benefits of the process before you get up

Diary

“Today I am in fear. The fear is consuming me. It is in my gut, in my chest, in my heart. Even though this sounds painful, and it is, I do not want to be anywhere else or anyone other than who I am right now. Right now. This is my journey. I will follow it to the end... to my fear. It will not consume me. I will not let it do that to me. This is a strange thing this fear, how it eats away at me like an acid... destroying strength, joy... It is not good!”

Just being

There are some notes which I made when I first planned this chapter for the book: "Next chapter - Finding the Centre? - Diary comments etc, etc. Being as you are - not having a place where (I) belonged - searching for security, peace - a place to be myself - a place where I felt at home - being restless - never at peace with myself, where I am – self-medication? Obsessive reactions to stress – depression - stimulating the system - trying to feel 'good' - feeling trapped - never feeling as though I was in the right spot - a kind claustrophobia, suffocation – also being frightened of too much space!! - Never having 'enough' of me to share around - not being able to use the rational mind - thinking too much and then... Wanting to lose my mind."

Being 'in depression' is all that and more, the being of not being, a feeling of being lost. It is a state of anxiety and considerable pain at times. It is a feeling of fragmentation, discontinuity, of not belonging, of being an outsider, of living a disharmonious existence.

The hardest thing for me to do in my years of depression was very simply 'to be'. As I came to recognize the fact that I was depressed, then I also came to see the lack of simple being in my life. My strongest memory is of rarely feeling as though I was in the right place.

There was a restlessness, which would not let me be at peace. In fact, I was at war with myself and there was a fully functioning propaganda department. It was impossible to be at peace, when the propaganda department was constantly creating lies, half-truths and denying the real state of the war.

Statement to Self

“I will not avoid or deny any situation or person, for any reason, however uncomfortable or unpleasant I may find this to be. I will honestly acknowledge my thoughts but I will also not judge myself harshly in what I find to be the truth.”

It was not an easy statement to make, not a quick fix “just believe in yourself” recipe, wave your magic wand and wait for the spell to work.

No, as much as I might have wished for magic wand thinking to make everything better, the reality was awareness of my state of being each day. Of bringing myself slowly back towards my centre, like a fisherman patiently reeling in his nets, all his focus and attention on the catch that the sea was about to reveal to him.

This process was punctuated by wild gyrations at times. They were like the visit of someone from your past who arrives unannounced as a stranger, proceeds to eat your food, drink your wine and is gone in the morning, leaving only a hangover and a message: “see you soon, buy better wine.”

Practice — Make a shopping list

Things can get better — make a shopping list for yourself!

A shopping list created not out of depression but from the possibilities that life can present

My depressed shopping lists had always been small and mean. I took pride in seeing how small, mean and joyless I could make

them.

Now I would use the finest paper to write my shopping lists on and use every colour available to illustrate them if I wanted to

I would not have to shop at the run-down collection of shops with their nearly empty shelves where I used to shop but in the beautiful avenue of shops they have become in my imagination, selling every imaginable type of merchandise from every corner of the world

This was part of the process of my choosing to learn the possibility that life holds, a process of opening up to my self-expression and of being prepared to learn from this opening up in an honest way, to choose expansiveness in my imagination rather than to continue to reduce my life to the narrow vision of depression. Making the journey of discovery and the possibility for a better life real.

Self-massage and self-healing

I discovered depression was a fertile ground for illness. In the depths of my depression I was never 'quite right', which meant that I often felt I might be suffering from some kind of ailment or other. Although I later found out that I had in fact had glandular fever.

This only helped to confirm the depressed view I had of myself, as being a pretty worthless and weak human being. To support this view, I manifested a range of maladies, from colds and flu, to viruses and fevers to keep my depressed self entertained.

I was a student of sickness and my mother, who had died of cancer when I was a teenager, had been one of my teachers. I am sure that she too had had some excellent teachers in her life. My fear of cancer, my mother's cancer, was the most insidious and hidden of all my fears of sickness. It seemed to be lurking in the background, ready to take advantage of any particularly deep troughs of depression which I experienced.

I would seek out various health treatments to reassure myself that I was ok. The treatments would give me a sense of relief and a short period when I could feel that I was actually healthy.

I sense that I also might have experienced a strange sense of failure as well. That I would have felt vindicated and satisfied if cancer had been found. Supporting my depressed state was what was important at the time, not that I may have died.

Learning to use self-massage allowed me to start living a life without the pervasive threat of sickness. It had a positive effect on my overall well-being and good health.

The very first step I took was to acknowledge the possibility that I might, just might, be ok! That in the deepest part of my heart there was love for myself and I could give that love to other people, even though it seemed far too big a step to make from where I stood. “Liking” could be enough for the moment and love may follow. The important thing was that the process should begin.

Small steps were what I needed to take. I had spent years avoiding intimacy and honest relationship with myself or other people. Even being fearful of looking into my own eyes, because of what I thought I might see. The possibility that this may not be true was a big step for me to take, so I decided to be kind to myself and take it slowly.

The first step was to shine a powerful light into the hidden places, where it might find pain and discomfort. Then I could use self-massage for healing.

Sometimes it was as simple as massaging my neck when I took my morning shower to release the pain and tension I may feel there. I could support the massage, by visualizing images of nature, which were full of natural beauty and colour.

With practice self-massage became a useful practice to release stress, discomfort and to help me to nurture my own sense of well-being.

Practice — Developing self-massage and healing

Self-massage is a simple, effective way of getting in touch with the physical and mental tight spots and learning to release them

The key to this process is a willingness to be clear and honest with yourself about how you feel

Learning to massage yourself is learning to accept yourself and your body exactly as you are

The shower or luxury of a warm, fragrant bath, is a good time to work out any "knots" in your body helping to release tension and stress, relaxing the body and mind

Learn to become comfortable with the process so that you start to enjoy its full and positive effects

Diary

“Stuck in traffic this morning I was feeling anxious, making my breathing become shallow as I held my breath in. I started to take deep, slow breaths and continuing to breathe deeply made me feel so much better, so much less anxious. Such a simple thing yet so effective.”

Dig deep breathe deep — The breath and depression

Out walking this morning, in the cool of an early autumn day, I was once more reminded of the power and the subtlety of the breath; its ability to change the way I feel and think, to relax my body, my mind and still my anxieties.

My experience is that it is not something which we should take for granted. When I started to learn about its effect on anxiety and depression, my breath had become a shallow ghost of itself.

My chest and diaphragm were unable to let go and to relax. I would find myself holding my breath more often than not, certainly in any situation where I could possibly feel anxious.

There were many of these situations it seemed. I was left with shallow breathing, which in turn meant that I was denied a proper supply of oxygen, which again made it easy to become anxious and panic.

My breath had become shallower and shallower with time. What was once a free-flowing river had become a mean trickle. I wanted my breath to become free-flowing again to help support well-being.

My dominant memory of this time is one of frustration. It was the frustration of trying to learn something which I felt I should already know.

Experiencing the anxiety of sleepless nights, struggling to breathe easily. Struggle and effort which would lead to exhaustion and the too

short sleep of exhaustion.

I would wake in the morning feeling the familiar feeling that I needed to sleep. Find a quiet place where I could hide and escape my fears, my anxiety and my depression.

This was the time when I always seemed to be tired and would find myself nodding off to sleep during the day, if I could find the opportunity. It is hard to breathe properly when you are tired most of the time and it is hard to sleep if you are not breathing properly but I gradually learnt to exercise my breathing; finding, adapting and creating various exercises to enliven and improve my breathing once more.

I repeated the mantra, to “be gentle with yourself,” when it would often seem as though nothing was improving in learning to accept myself as I was, and not as “I should be.”

“I should be” was the master who wanted to rule my life!

Being aware of my breath was a way to get in touch with and gradually learn to use the power of my breath for well-being and help to silence the voice of “I should,” that often wanted to dominate my life. Keep remembering to breathe with consciousness.

There is no “should” in this.

There is no authority which is dictating how you should breathe. It is entirely your own choice.

Remember to breathe

I visited a friend who I have known for several years. Although we have been good friends, we have never shared much about our own problems with each other until lately, when my friend started to talk about the depression he has been experiencing.

He has been a fit person, who enjoys taking exercise and the positive effect it has on his well-being. He told me that since he has become increasingly depressed, he feels he has not had the energy to take exercise and is really missing its positive effect. The anxiety which he feels further constricts his breathing, causing him to feel even more anxious and depressed.

The experience talking with my friend confirmed my own experience of the importance of the effect of the breath on depression. Just as importantly, it allowed both of us to open up and discuss the reality of our depression openly and honestly with each other.

Depression is no friend to life and it is certainly no friend to the breath. Shallow breathing is another signpost along the track towards well-being.

When I started my breathing practice, I was excited by the idea of doing something positive for my well-being. Something which required my fully focused attention. Doing something which helped me take charge of my own well-being.

In the simple process of breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, I saw my breathing begin to develop. Like learning the full range of

a musical instrument, with my attention gradually deepening the breath and finding its range, I began to learn the instrument of my breath. Sometimes I would feel my breath “go out of tune,” when it would constrict in response to feelings of emotion and anxiety.

Letting go of painful emotions would bring feelings of relief, creating energy, spreading out like the circles of a stone thrown into a still pond.

Practicing helped me to smile and to enjoy the positive effects that the practice was able to create inside me. To appreciate the benefits of a life without depression, the recognition and desire for the new life I was creating.

My statement of how I felt at this time might have been: “It is my choice to live my life without depression.” Breath awareness helped me to identify this choice. Its positive effects made me want it more than I wanted depression.

Practice — Morning breathing

There is no better time to practice breathing than in the morning at the start of a new day. The morning hours can also be the most difficult time to undertake practice. This is the time when the seductive sirens of the doona can call out to you: “come back to us, hide safe and warm, danger awaits you beyond our protection.”

It is a seductive message to stay in the protection of the greatest sanctuary of all, the womb. But it is a depressed womb, a womb of shallow breathing. My advice is not to listen to the sirens but to choose to release yourself from their magic.

This practice is an affirmation of the life which you are creating.
Remember above all to be kind to yourself.

Allow the future its opportunity, by providing a kind and
compassionate environment for its growth

First thing, out of bed!

Morning Breathing Practice

Before you start consider your current state of health

If you are a smoker, use alcohol or drugs, have heart or blood
pressure problems or any health issue which may compromise
you, then please carefully consider whether it is safe for you to
start this practice

If at any time you feel in any way nauseous, faint, dizzy, sick or
experience any sharp pains stop immediately

Allow yourself at least fifteen to twenty minutes for this practice

Only practice for as long as you feel comfortable and stop
practicing as soon as you feel you need to

Leave the sirens of the doona behind and get out of bed

Go and stand in front of the mirror and look into your eyes

Take a deep full breath from your abdomen and then release it

Now continue, taking slow, deep breaths maintaining the focus
on your eyes in the mirror

Continue to breathe deeply and slowly with complete awareness
on what is happening when you do this

Feel your abdomen expanding with each incoming breath and
deflating with each outgoing breath

Keep looking into your eyes observing how you are feeling

When you have finished the practice, take time to lie down and
relax

Make sure that you are warm enough

Take time to check how you are breathing and how you feel

Finally congratulate yourself for choosing to leave the protection
of the doona before you start your day

Self-pity

My internal, self-pity conversation, may have been something like, “Alright, I don’t care anyway, it is not my fault. I am not to blame. This is not fair. I am never, ever going to get what I want. I am never going to get any satisfaction in my life. The odds are stacked against me. They are out to get me. They will never let me win. They will never let me succeed.”

All of this is, of course, true. I made it true. I was a slave to self-pity. I “allowed” it to exist. I worshipped at the altar of “they” and paid “them” tribute with the most valuable thing I owned, my life.

I am aware of the avoidance, denial and procrastination I have been using, to delay starting to write this chapter.

Self-pity has been one of the main supports for depression in my life.

Self-pity is about not taking responsibility for one’s life. Self-pity makes life-affirming change difficult to happen.

My self-pity was one of the most singularly self-destructive elements of my depression. It hid so perfectly that I rarely heard it, let alone acknowledged or even thought of defying it.

While ever I had the opportunity to feel sorry for myself, I had the opportunity not to fully embrace life. Self-pity was at the centre of my depression and depression was the centre for the control of my life.

There could be little possibility of much joy in living my life, whilst

this state of control existed. I was tied to a wheel and whilst ever I denied the existence of the wheel, I would continue to rise and fall with it in the cycle of my depression:

“I am not responsible for my life. I am not responsible for creating the pain of depression in my life. I am caught on the wheel and I will never be able to change it.”

There was a point at which I recognized the control this destructive voice was having and I could no longer deny its existence. If I let go of self-pity in my life, where could I hide? Who could I blame for the pain I felt? No, it really was not fair, I thought there must be a “get-out clause” somewhere.

I was fearful of revealing what I believed to be the weakness of my self-pity at this point on my path, my true self, the vulnerability of being revealed without anywhere to hide.

I was stopped on my path, with nowhere to hide and a seemingly impenetrable range of mountains in front of me.

I waited cold and lonely in my self-pitying story, feeling very sorry for myself, at this nowhere spot without shelter, until I remembered what had started me on this path. I saw again the painful life I had with depression. My fear and my self-pity had been revealed, they looked small and mean now.

While ever I allowed my self-pity to dictate the way I felt, then there would never be any possibility of meaningful change taking place. Its constant weight was suffocating any chance of joy and self-expression.

I thought self-pity was my friend, it seemed so reasonable, yet its

reasonableness was what really made it so stealthy and destructive to me.

It provided me with the get-out clause in my contract with depression:

“When all else fails and you are confronted with the possibility of taking responsibility for your state of being, then choose self-pity.”

It would not let me get angry at myself for wasting my life. It was after all only being reasonable.

Being reasonable was not what I needed. Being tied to self-pity was just so much extra baggage for me to carry. What made me want to hang on to self-pity and a lack of responsibility? And what was the pay-off, to the final get-out clause?

The pay-off was my being able to escape what confronted the fragile sensitivity of my depressed emotional state. It was time to leave what self-pity had carefully constructed and learn to experience reality and emotion for myself.

Fear was trying to hold on to me, to threaten me with the pain of my unexpressed emotions;

“You don’t really want to feel emotions do you?” it whispered. “Just leave things as they are and have a nice quiet rest, I will bring you a nice cup of tea inside your comfortable cell.”

It was too late for me to find my way back to the cell now, even if I wanted to.

The path had already disappeared behind me, allowing me only one choice, to move on.

“Never allow fear to hold you back or deny what you know to be the truth.”

Denying the truth was a major force in confirming depression as my way of life. Self-pity would always support this proposition of depression as my way of living. It had been successful. I was a successfully depressed human being!

Anger and the voice of resistance could suddenly pop into my head as I became aware of my self-pity. It seemed to sit just behind the skin of the face I took out into the world.

Anger was directed at and about everything in my life. That is, everything but me. I was, after all, an ‘innocent bystander.’

In time, my anger burnt itself out. I was left feeling empty, ready to face reality. What I saw was the picture of my life and its effect on myself and others.

I was shocked at the effect self-pity had on my life.

My eyes seemed empty, like those of someone who has seen the worst of a battle.

It would have been easy to slip back into self-pity as justification for avoiding the truth but this was not an option, there was something which concentrated my attention far more. It was the opportunity of a life without self-pity and its abrogation of the responsibility for my life, to be present and accountable and fully participate in living.

Practice — Moving beyond self-pity

For this practice you need at least fifteen to twenty minutes of uninterrupted time in a quiet and comfortable place

Make yourself comfortable sitting on a chair or on cushions in front of your mirror

Check that your back and posture is supported and that your body is relaxed

When you are comfortable, concentrate on breathing slowly and deeply from your abdomen

Feel the rise and fall of your breathing by placing the palms of your hands on your abdomen

They will draw open as you breathe out and come together as you breathe in

When your breathing has become relaxed you are ready to start the practice

This practice is all about discovering that you do not need self-pity in your life

Look into your eyes and be prepared to feel love for yourself and to be prepared to accept your right to take full responsibility for your life

It is the acknowledgement of the gift that life can offer you

Embrace this gift and your right to leave self-pity and

depression behind you

If you experience strong emotions let yourself accept them as much as possible

Keep breathing slowly and rhythmically from your abdomen

The breath will help you to keep relaxed and to accept your emotions as they arise

If you are comfortable keep looking at your eyes for five to ten minutes

Maintain your breathing and allow yourself to accept what you feel

When you feel ready to stop lie down and spend a few minutes relaxing, feeling the effect of the practice before you finish

Self-acceptance

“Warts-and-all” is an old English expression. I picture an old country person, a “gaffer” seated outside a quaint village pub, a tankard of ale in front of him, sporting a large wart on his red nose.

It is not the size of the wart that defines this person but their self-acceptance. They are comfortable in their own skin, their motto might be “what you see is what you get!”

I did not accept myself “warts-and-all” and I often felt uncomfortable in my own skin, as though it was inside out. There always seemed to be something which needed changing, a magic something that when changed, would make me feel just perfect.

The reality was this magic something did not exist and could never make everything just perfect if it did. Whatever I thought it was, only left me feeling just the same and the ritual cycle of frustration would be repeated once more.

It became very clear to me that there would never be a perfect anything, if I kept following the same old cycle. It would only create more frustration and I would never be at peace with myself, if I did not learn to accept myself as I was.

Up until this point, I had been in a depressive dance with avoidance and denial. My life seemed pretty worthless to me, like the emptiness of the desert, with the contemplation of the awful clarity of my constant craving.

I resisted the temptation to avoid my contemplation and a sense of peace began growing within me. The symbolic emptiness of the desert landscape began to change, becoming dotted with the growth of green vegetation. I started to think of things which would give me real joy and to acknowledge the good I found within myself.

This was the beginning of the process of self-acceptance. I looked in my internal mirror and discovered the wart seemed to be growing smaller and I no longer wanted to get rid of it anyway. It was possible for me to actually like myself exactly as I was, to start to enjoy my life as it was, without the constant frustration, annoyance and craving.

Practice — Reflecting on acceptance of the self

Learning to accept yourself takes time and practice

In this practice be aware not to replace one negative message for another, subtler one like, "I guess I am not too bad after all, everything considered" or "if I just do blah-blah-blah then things would be be just great!"

The practice of self-reflection is not about judgement and it is not about effort

It is about being present in the moment

and

about working with and being kind to yourself at all times

My own experience of this practice is of finding a sense of humility and peace within myself

It can be practiced at home, in a park, at a beach or by a river

Anywhere that is quiet and where you feel comfortable

Allow twenty minutes for this practice when you first start

If you are going to practice the process inside find something
which you can use to focus on

It could be a single flower or a favorite photograph or picture

Make yourself comfortably seated on a chair or on cushions on
the floor

Make sure that your back is well supported and your posture is
comfortable and relaxed

Breathe slowly, deeply and rhythmically from your abdomen

Once you are breathing comfortably start to focus your gaze on
your chosen object

Reflect on accepting yourself exactly as you are without
judgement

If you find negative thoughts coming up, let them go and
continue to reflect on your own self-acceptance

Let yourself focus on your chosen object, relax and feel a sense
of peace growing inside you

Feel a sense of self-acceptance growing within yourself exactly
as you are at the moment

Take your time with this practice to enjoy this sense of self acceptance and as you go out into the world notice how it has changed for you

Addictions and negative habits

When I began planning this book the subject of addiction seemed to have little to do with depression in my life. However, the more intimate I became with the reality of my depression, the more I looked at the effect of addictions and negative habits.

What I discovered was a common thread of denial connecting my depression to my addictive habits. They were like the gods of a religion to which I must pay homage. As long as I paid homage, my gods would temporarily deaden the pain I felt.

I needed the effects of tobacco, alcohol and gambling to deaden the pain. They made life more pleasant, if only briefly, and that was all that I needed. I had become addicted to addiction. This helped me avoid doing anything honestly meaningful about the depressed state of my life.

The answer seemed simple: stop paying homage to the gods of addiction, stop worshipping their images and the problem would disappear like magic.

My addictions were like icebergs, there was far more beneath the surface than above. I had spent a lifetime learning to become addicted. A lifetime developing the search for the constant craving my addictions gave me. The promise of their effect was what I craved and denying that craving was part of the same cycle of denial and avoidance of depression.

Addiction and depression were partners; the host and its shadow. I

first had to accept the effect, which addictive craving played in maintaining depression in my life.

I felt frustration and fear as I contemplated this acceptance. The story of frustration and fear which I faced in confronting my addictive habits. The addict's universal story of the missed opportunity and power to finish their relationship with their addictions.

My addictions were the glue that helped to keep depression dominant in my life. They reinforced my lack of self-worth and power to make positive changes for my well-being.

As I came to better know my addictive self, so peace and reflection became increasingly important in the maintenance of my overall well-being and health. It was the opposite of depression and its baggage of addictions and habits. As I gained insight and clarity into the effect of depression, I found comfort and peace in reflection.

I remember thinking, "So this is what life can be really like." It was the reinforcement of the desire for a better self and a better life.

With this reflection my attachment to old habits and addictions were becoming like the ghosts of my past. They no longer gave me that fleeting taste of comfort. I was moving beyond the old craving for them. I had found something infinitely finer and infinitely kinder. Something which nurtured a better self, in a way which my old habits and addictions had never given to me.

Moving beyond craving was a conscious process of witnessing my own self-destructive impulses through my addictive habits. There was a point in this process where I started to listen to my better, or higher, self in a way that I had never experienced before.

Learning to consciously be, in a state of pure reflection helped me to move further beyond the grasp of negative habits. I was able to see their self-destructive power as I had never done before.

They had dragged me down into the pit of depression, reinforcing the negative, self-destructive thinking processes I had developed in my life. They were the ultimate self-destructive game, my old depressed self, desperate to hang on at any cost.

I did not miraculously clean up all my old habits overnight but started to slowly lose my taste for them. The internal voice of addiction was still there but it no longer had the power to control me as it had previously done. I was listening to another voice that was growing stronger all the time. This voice was very different from my old addicted voice. It did not tell me to escape but to reflect on and witness what I was really thinking and feeling at the moment.

“Pay attention” it seemed to whisper, simply “pay attention to what is happening.”

It was asking me to experience being, without my habits or addictions or depression getting in the way. Just to be and experience reality as it is.

My craving to reaffirm self-destructive habits and addictions has grown weaker but not disappeared entirely. My higher, better self is what I listen to at times of stress and upset. It is a source of joy and comfort, stills me in restless craving, brings peace when I am lost and wisdom for me to grow as a human being.

Practice — Witnessing in reflection

Do my old habits and addictions support or undermine my journey to a life without depression?

Do they give me lasting joy and peace for living my life without depression?

Are they really a part of the way I want to live in the future?

These questions were formed out of my experience of the practice of witnessing in reflection, assisting in moving me beyond my addictive habits

This practice is about remaining present in witnessing your thoughts, feelings and emotions

For this practice you require at least thirty to forty minutes of uninterrupted time in a quiet place

If you are lucky enough to be able to practice in a natural setting, especially by water, then do so

You can sit or lie down for this practice in a position of your choice

It is important that you make your posture as comfortable as possible

Once you are comfortable close your eyes and start to become aware of the breath

Place your hands over your abdomen, allowing your breathing to gradually become deep, slow and rhythmical

When you are breathing comfortably, follow the breaths
inhalations and exhalations

Begin to witness your feelings, thoughts and emotions with a
quiet reflection

Do not judge or try to hold onto them

Imagine you are like a passenger travelling in a car in the
country watching the scenery pass by

Reflect on the scenery of your feelings, thoughts and emotions
without the need to escape

You may find there are feelings, thoughts or emotions that
arise, which will disturb you

Try to let them just become part of the passing scenery you are
passing through

When you are ready to finish the practice open your eyes

Give yourself plenty of time to reflect on the practice before you
carry on with your day

Relationships and intimacy

Diary

“Trust and relationships, in particular in my relationships with women. It has been an issue in my life, with much upset, judgement and confusion as a result.”

Relationships were not something which I wanted to think about. They were a constant source of frustration for me. They threatened my depressive existence by beckoning me to step out into the world and be part of it, my relationships were defined by a current of ambivalence. Ambivalence built of my desire and anxiety to be confined, to hide behind the walls of depression, to control my time, my environment and not venture beyond its walls.

The frustration, of needing, and not needing and of then denying that need. I was selfish in measuring out the amount of energy I could put into my relationships. Giving what little I felt I had to give, of the energy I needed to cope with my life. The energy, which depression gnawed away from me like a hungry rat. If I did not let myself be open to people, to fall in love, then I could not be hurt.

I denied my need for relationships and intimacy, avoiding them unless I felt that there were ready avenues of escape available to me. I was preoccupied with the maintenance of depression as my way of life and I increasingly came to see my relationships as a threat to this maintenance. Inside me was a voice which cried out for the intimacy and warmth of relationship with other people. It was a voice that in the

depths of depressive breakdown said “break out, not down.” The life I wanted was that of a healthy human, without the weight of depression, to be able to share myself with others and to share their lives as well.

As a consequence of the need to escape, to deny and avoid, there were few straight lines in my life. Everything, including my relationships, was governed by a series of circuitous routes to meet my needs, desires and wants. The consequence of this being my inability to share of myself with others. I simply did not want to give of my time. My time was precious to me, which really meant that it was precious in keeping my depression alive.

“Sorry I am too busy being depressed!” I guarded my time with the jealousy of a mother hen and her brood of chicks.

There were the rituals. The weight of the daily anxieties of living. The fear of what could be revealed if I let my guard down with other human beings. The contradiction in all this was that I appeared to be quite a gregarious character in my superficial relationships with people. When these relationships threatened to become too close and too intimate, I would look for an escape route. Years of training had allowed me to become an expert in denial and avoidance. I was like a child who believes that by closing their eyes they become invisible to the bogeyman they fear.

I lived a life of coping. In my heart of hearts, I knew that I was merely coping and the internal pressure I was feeling would only continue to grow greater. And it did grow greater as I grew older. It grew as I formed closer relationships, as much as I may have tried to avoid them.

Somehow though, amongst all this, my spontaneous, gregarious and

humorously optimistic “inner child” would find a way to sabotage the maintenance of depression in my life. It would break out and embrace life when least expected. No amount of rituals, fears, anxieties, addictive habits or even self-destruction seemed to be able to contain this child. It would and did bubble up to the surface of my life with a force of energy which was in absolute opposition to my depression.

Then there was love. I could not deny this.

There was falling in love with and being fallen in love with at the same time.

I say “falling in love with” but is it not “rising up to love” or “ascending to love”?

And indeed, I did fall in love and not only did I fall in love, we also got married.

This was an outrage to my depression. “How dare you!” it screamed. “Who gave you the authority to fall in love and get married?”

I tried to ignore this voice. I avoided and denied its very existence. I looked for escape in my addictive habits. I saw coping as a way of surviving but no matter what I tried, depression was always lurking around the next corner, ready to mug me. The pressure of this was to push me further into depression and towards breakdown.

At the time it felt as though I was suffocating. I did not seem to be able to get enough oxygen into my lungs.

It was simply that I could not and did not want to cope any more. I wanted to escape, even if that escape had as its cost, life itself.

Looking back now I have the memory of my own destruction and the destruction of my life as I thought it was. In writing this now there is the emotion of lost love. There is the memory of falling in love in the depths of the worst of my depression. In imagining my own destruction and suicide I came to see it was not life itself which I wanted to end but the weight of my depression in life.

“Give it up,” I said to myself. “What is it that you are so afraid of letting go of?” Letting go was the beginning a new life. Breaking out not breaking down with depression was the question I had answered.

My relationship with my wife was falling apart. If it was not possible for me to understand what I was experiencing in my life, then it was certainly not possible for my wife to understand it. I certainly did not feel love for myself, so how could anyone else love me?

I felt in the breakdown of my marriage my whole life was falling apart. If I needed any further proof of the destructiveness of depression then I now had it. I had slowly let my marriage and family relationship fall apart through neglect. It was neglect through a lack of sharing and of love. The reality of my marriage was that my wife and I were drifting apart. She had her own life to lead, her own desires, wants, needs and dreams to pursue, as well as those of our two children. I both loved and feared the love which I felt for my wife and children and the love they felt for me.

My ability to cope with daily life, was moving beyond my control, with self-destructive thinking my life was unravelling. In the unravelling of my life I discovered the lack of trust that I had in my relationships with people and with myself.

“The truth is self-evident” and the truth of my relationships is the way my fears and anxieties in depression affected them. I was blind to their destructive control over my relationships with people and myself. It threatened to suffocate my relationships, as it threatened to suffocate almost anything in my life which held the promise of joy and well-being.

My process in learning to experience relationships is much like the process I had of letting go of the past. There was no easy, quick or superficial way of doing this. It has been a process of facing my fears and anxieties of trust, of intimacy and sharing of feelings and emotions honestly with others.

I have been humbled to discover how trivial my own life seems, when compared with seeing the beauty, courage, joy, creativity and absolute humanity of other people. I have discovered the extraordinary lives that people live. In truth, I do not believe that there is an ordinary life to be lived.

I have been emboldened and enthused to live life in a way that I would not have believed possible when I was depressed. I found that I really did just have to ‘do it.’ The more I listened to those negative and destructive inner voices, then the more chance there was that I would find an excuse to avoid being in relationship with life.

One of my first experiences of just “doing it” was enrolling in an acting course. The idea of risking facing my fear with other people attracted me and I ended up enjoying the whole course tremendously. It was a great experience because I flew in the face of my depression and the stress of my breakdown by undertaking it. It involved defying the sacred gods of depression in being vulnerable and intimate in front of other people, risking ridicule and all the other baggage of fear and

anxiety.

I gradually built on this experience by undertaking a range of activities and courses which contributed to my positive experience of being in relationship with other people. Some of my best experiences have come from twists of fate like enrolling for a philosophy course and finding that I had enrolled in a course on humour! This was a time when my inner voice was correct; the philosophy course would have been boring, while the course in humour, was fun and allowed me to laugh without any feeling of inhibition.

The process continues to this day.

"Ah, The Sad Club"

I thought the idea was simple in a "build it and they will come" sort of way; just put up some notices on community notice boards in the area where I lived for people to meet for coffee and chat who were depressed. Not so revolutionary in today's world but a big step for someone like me at the time. Someone who spent a lot of time hiding out behind the mask of "who, me depressed?" always coping, always cool, nothing to see here.

I did not set out to call it The Sad Club, that happened later when the child of someone who attended nicknamed it "Ah, The Sad Club" and the nickname stuck.

At the time I knew or felt I knew that less was better, when it came to anything being too structured about the idea. It really was just meeting up for a "coffee and a chat," in a sort of down to earth meeting people and getting to know them way. What surprised me most was people actually showed up and my idea that I was somehow different in my suffering with depression quickly changed.

I found that meeting as a small group was the key and that five people seemed like a good number. More than that and it seemed to become harder for people to share honestly and openly about what was happening in their lives.

Also, the idea that this could become too organised did not fit in with my idea of a relaxed and casual environment. I could see myself hiring space, asking for donations, providing tea, coffee and those ubiquitous

packets of mixed biscuits with cream fillings that have a corrosive effect on the inside of your mouth.

So, it was “Ah, The Sad Club,” with me arranging to meet people in such and such a café on a Saturday or Sunday and assuming that there would be enough space for us all to sit down.

We always did find enough space to sit down, even if we were packed in like sardines and in hindsight, I think that was a good thing. It is hard not to start to share something of yourself, even if it is only some of the coffee from your overfull cup or flakes from your croissant. It was just a random group of people who happened to be suffering and for an hour or two they could be with other people who were suffering some of the same things and were prepared to talk about it.

I very quickly changed my thinking about seeing it in the frame of people having “issues” and started to see that these “issues” were just like any other type of health problem: they did not respond well to being hidden. Providing a space where you could talk with other people and unlock some of the stuff you had inside yourself seemed like a healthy idea to me.

What I learnt was that I was not “special” or “different.” There were better ways to live than with depression and anxiety and being absorbed in my own suffering. Everyone had their own stories, following their own paths towards a better life without the weight of depression and the self-absorption of their suffering.

They were also dealing with the stories of their own demons of addiction, domestic abuse, obsessive behaviour, eating disorders and all the manifold, painful mental and physical manifestations of depression

and anxiety.

I got to sit with them, another sardine trying to share what I had to share, listening to what they had to say. Becoming filled with a sense of their nobility and their common courage, walking with them in their stories along their own paths.

The message seemed to be to me: Step out, face your fears and say, "no, I am not all right" and be prepared to seek help and talk to other people. When I think about The Sad Club now, I feel happy and I still meet with one of the people I met then. We have become firm friends and still meet regularly for coffee and a chat together to talk about anything and everything.

Meeting with each other through the best of times and the worst of times, sharing the view from the top of the mountain and in its shadow in the narrow valley down below.

My friend used to lament that he would never have a partner and never have children. I recently became godfather to his second child.

I feel happy when I think about that too. Taking the step to open up can make a difference.

The power of visualisation — Creating my own world

Learning to use the power of visualisation helped me to create my own inner world. A pearl from a speck of sand inside my imagination.

In the beginning the world and home I imagined was not what I wanted. The land was not a place to live in but a place to pass through, a sort of low lying, scrubby area by the sea, surrounded by hills. In many ways it was a reflection of the way I lived my life.

I moved round to the next headland and built my home on a steep hill looking out to sea, although I could not quite see it, the sea yet.

And so it went, just like one of those television programmes where people find an impossible dream and build an impossible dream home, spending more than they can afford and at the end are they any wiser as to why they did it?

The home I first built is still sitting there, like one of those follies on an English country estate. It was not the place where I could be at peace or feel comfortable but the “place” I thought it “should be,” something imposing and grand is how I might have imagined.

When I stopped trying to anxiously force “my impossible” dream and reach the finishing line it started to grow and change. From the vision of something that I thought it “should be,” to something which simply grew one piece at a time.

It allowed me to enjoy the deep sense of peace and reflection that I

found in the process of visualisation itself.

Later on, when I had let go of my dream home, I found my real dream home sitting on the hill near the beach with its comfortable veranda and weathered wooden exterior bleached by the sea and sun.

But that was later, so I stayed homeless and started to explore my world and find its paths and roads and the people who lived there.

There was the old monk who lived in a small wooden house in the forest off the unmade road that meandered up the hill. There was a herd of deer who lived amongst the trees around his house and the fawns would come to greet me when I stopped.

At the top of the hill there was a two-storey white washed stone house, where a woman lived. I do not know if she was young or old or even how she actually looked or even the sound of her voice but I do know that I was always welcome to stop and rest.

Even if she was not there, I could just sit outside, under the shade of the veranda and enjoy the stillness and peace of the place and the sense of her peaceful presence.

There was also a tall man with a beard who would appear from nowhere and we would greet each other without words and not say anything that I can remember.

There was also a whole tribe of wild hill people whom I came to know. They were nomads and sometimes I would stay with them and share their food and the warmth of their fire.

We never seemed to need a common language but still communicated

easily, without any real effort or difficulty.

There was always laughter with the tribe and they loved to dance and to play music on the instruments that they made themselves.

They loved their land and their freedom, often travelling on their ponies to gather food and hunt.

As I travelled further into the hills, I met more people, more characters with whom I shared the landscape of my new world. They each seemed to bring something with them for me, like a gift to welcome a stranger. And again, just like my friends from the hill tribe and the woman and the man, we never seemed to need a common language but still communicated easily, without any real effort or difficulty.

As I travelled, I was joined by a horse called Bruce and a dog, it had to be a Kelpie, so I will call it Ears.

I communicated with my horse and my dog just the way I communicated with the people that I had met in my new world. They knew what I needed and they guided me in silence. This was the gift which they had brought with them, silent trust in the path to follow and the place to rest.

Eventually Bruce and Ears guided me deep into the mountains, to a place where the rocky road turned sharply to the right, and at that right turning was a great monastery built into the mountainside overlooking the valley.

To me it was like the pictures of Tibetan monasteries I had seen, great mystical structures, like layered cakes hanging out into the thin mountain air, that had acquired yet more layers over the centuries.

At the massive doors of the monastery I knocked and the doors' spy window opened and then silently the right door swung back and I was inside the monastery itself.

They seemed to have been expecting me because I was shown immediately to a little monk's cell overlooking the valley.

And that is where I slept curled up against the cold on a simple cot, cocooned inside coarse blankets until I was woken at dawn.

I thought I knew what my gift would be in this vast place, although I did not see it then for the great gift it was.

The monk who had opened the door to me when I had arrived, came to fetch me and I followed him along winding corridors to the accompanying sound of chanting and the deep rumble of deep voices.

He showed me to a large room and there was the abbot and two or three monks and I was laying on a small stretcher like bed and the healing began to the sound of their rumbling chants.

Each time that the abbot gestured over my body I would imagine that another invisible layer had been rolled back and lifted from my body.

Now, when I think back, I will say that there were twelve layers but how and why I say that number I do not know.

In my state of visualisation there was just the sound of deep chanting and the feeling of the presence of the abbot standing above me.

Then the healing was finished and I felt a sense of loss that I was no longer with the abbot and the monks. I already saw myself following my guide through the corridors of the monastery to its massive entrance

doors and I was outside in the pure light of the mountains.

“That was then and this is now” and I have many times tried to go back and experience what I first experienced but it has never happened.

“That was then and this is now” is the lesson that I have learnt from my imagination’s visualisation of my healing experience in the monastery. Trying to recreate that experience is part of my longing and craving for the feeling I experienced then, what I have now is the memory of that experience.

To continue to pursue its craving would be an illusion. The same type of illusion that bound me in my depression. The same type of illusion that bound me to alcohol, to pain from my past, self-pity, self-destructive behaviour and anxiety and all the baggage I allowed to weigh me down.

I have learnt to leave the past where it should be and not to carry it with me. The past does not control the present for me but it still has a place within me.

I feel fortunate and blessed that I had my visualisation of healing in the monastery above the valley. The monastery I imagined as a “layer cake”; stratum of time layered down over centuries, like a living thing that is in a continual state of transformation.

It also helped me to learn about being fortunate, being blessed, luck and belief.

For me the good fortune and blessing came not because I was “lucky” or because I “believed” but because I allowed myself to be open to the idea of possibility. My craving to feel what I had felt again was the impossible. It tied me to the past with desire to feel what I had felt, not to

nurture what I had learnt in the present.

Over time my new world changed. I gained a new sailing boat which seemed to only find perfect sailing weather and seas which were never too rough.

I had tried giving it a name but none had stuck and the boat without a name gave me great joy. Skimming over the sea as though it was barely touching it.

People changed too. At first, they had mainly been men and then quite suddenly there were women and one became my guide.

It was not the woman who lived at the top of the hill or a woman of the hill tribe but someone quite new and different.

She started to appear on the edge of my visualisations and grew stronger until she became my guide. I searched for her name and she was variously; Magog, Moira, Meera, Mary, Maryia and then finally Myra.

Myra stayed with me as I continued journeyed along my path to a better life. Her constant presence and support a source of quiet inspiration and strength to me.

She was my “sober” guide and friend. A guide who would not support the most desperate, destructive, obsessive and self-pitying thoughts that often haunted me but helped to nurture and grow the very best in me.

My new imagined world helped me to visualise and discover and build a new world of real possibility, where I could learn to use my imagination and visualisation and not to be consumed by it.

With passing time my new world and Myra have grown less and less part of my day to day life. Writing this has allowed me to revisit it and to see how important it has been to me.

It brought a sense of possibility and a resilience and joy in living. It helped move me beyond a past controlled by fear, near panic, depression and anxiety. To laugh at myself and not see every small pothole on the path of my life as a possible threat to my life feels really good.

My new world is still there and I imagine that the house I first built is now occupied by my friends from the hill tribe.

Healing and liberation

Diary

“I was reading my diaries today. It was as though I was reading the diaries of a stranger, the story of someone who was depressed. I am not depressed and I am not a stranger to myself anymore.”

There was little that depression did not seem to have touched and then tainted in my life when I first drafted this book some sixteen years ago. A lot has happened to me in those years, as I have learnt to accept life as it is and to accept myself as I am.

I am no longer living life through a haze of depression and anxiety as I had been then. There is more space in my life now. I used to hear people talk about space, it seemed a strange idea to me, because I had no feeling of space, even if I did nod my head sagely as though I did.

I was too busy trying to maintain my life as being “alright” and myself as being “healthy.” It was not so much living a life but surviving a life, as it unraveled and I stumbled towards “the breakdown I was having when I was not having a breakdown.”

I saw this breakdown as a threat to my life. I did not know then but the breakdown was the beginning of my path towards my own healing and liberation from depression.

I learnt that there was truly nothing to fear but fear itself. It was not fear but my denial of it and of the reality of my life which kept my

depression thriving.

One of the most difficult lessons I had to learn was simply to be. It required me to be present at all times. To be simply present with nothing attached and nothing added. To experience without avoidance and denial, not to crawl away and hide.

Being at peace with myself seemed such a simple process but the more I looked at it, the less simple it seemed.

It blocked my path like a bully who demanded payment before I could pass. It was the only path, and the bully stood between me and my destination.

What was it that was stopping me confronting this bully? What was stopping me from completing my journey?

The truth was I was afraid of living without depression.

Finishing the path of my journey would mean I had no excuses and no story to tell.

I could just be.

Curiously my bully began to look increasingly like a mirror image of myself! The question was liberation and healing, or more of the same old self-destructive stuff of depression? More constant anxiety and self-doubt or a clear path ahead?

I took stock of all I had learnt through my reading, self-discovery, medication, counselling, letting go of past baggage and plain old honesty about my life and yet I was still stopped.

I realized that the knowledge could either liberate me or continue to bind me to a life of depression. Was I going to let the depression win or was I going to be liberated from it? This was my choice.

There is an image of an old and wise Chinese sage looking straight at me. He is laughing so much that he is almost falling over and he keeps waving his finger at me, almost as though he is admonishing a naughty child.

I am that naughty child. I am a child clutching his best friend. It is a teddy bear with a single eye, made from a bright blue button. I think the teddy is called Thomas. He is my anchor in what I find to be hostile world where I try to find a reason for living and the presence of love.

The child was still inside me. My depression was his depression and it had never allowed us to grow up.

It was my choice.

Reach out and push the bully aside and free the child and myself from darkness.

It was my choice.

I needed a spark to make the choice happen. A light to show me the way.

Depression is all about procrastination. Not making dynamic and illuminated choices.

I found the spark I needed but not from some blinding flash of enlightenment seated on a mountain under the full moon. No, it was a very ordinary type of spark. My sage was at work in this. He did not

want me turning it into something profound and deep. No, he was making sure that I kept to the path and did not stray from it.

I found my choice in the shower.

It was written in the instructions on a box of detergent and read: "Many problem stains can be removed by soaking promptly." I read this instruction several times as I enjoyed my shower, until it became "Many problems can be removed by acting promptly."

I had learnt that depression was not dynamic. I would lose the path and become sidetracked in a bog of procrastination.

I made a choice to reach inside myself and liberate the child from darkness.

I brought it out into the light.

Once the choice was made, I could be present with my thoughts and feelings.

I started to experience to feeling a pleasant and peaceful sense of space, a lack of anxiety in my life. I could now start to let myself simply "be" with what I was feeling.

I noticed that there were physical effects as well, minor issues, which had been part of depression. An irrational but persistent feeling that I was sick or about to get sick. I knew that I was reaching the end of my path and that healing would take place in my life now that it was being liberated from depression.

I was learning to let go of what had helped keep my depression alive but the process of healing was a different experience. I needed to trust in

myself, not only to let go of what had kept me depressed but also forgive and let the process of emotional healing take place.

It was once again a question of choice; the choice of not hanging onto my story of depression. Healing would ask me to let go of my fear and anxiety about always being in control of myself and of not being able to trust in other people.

There was much that I had to forgive and to be forgiven for in return. The anxious restlessness of my depressed life fell away so that I could be at peace with myself wherever I was. It allowed me to have more energy to live and less procrastination about the choices I made in living. I recognized what was now present in my life which had been missing before. I had started to find well-being, love, respect and peace within myself. I found that I could simply be myself without the constant craving and draining weight of depression. I had a unity of existence and shared humanity in the appreciation of the journey that all human beings take in living their lives.

Celebration of liberation

When I found that I had “finished” my journey, there was a feeling of emptiness and “so what-ness” inside me. I felt as though I had lived not one life but several lives during the course of my journey. What had started out as a desire and as a wish had become a reality. I had set out with the notion that I could possibly live my life without depression.

It has become a celebration of being at peace with myself, of being able to forgive and in return ask for forgiveness. It has been a celebration of letting go of the baggage of my past. It has been a celebration of allowing myself to be loved and of learning to give love in return.

Information and help

Increasing public awareness in mental health has led to a growth in the range of information and help that is available.

A good place to start is at your local GP. They can advise you on treatment options and what Medicare assistance you are entitled to.

Federal and State Health Department web sites are a great source of information on finding both government and non-government assistance.

I have listed some services as a starting guide for your journey to good mental health and well-being.

Australian Department of Health

Free call 1800 020 103

02 6289 1555

enquiries@health.gov.au

Health Direct 24hr Helpline

Ph 1800 022 222

Australian Capital Territory Department of Health

Ph 02 5124 9213

Mental Health Triage service

Ph 1800 629 354

New South Wales Department of Health

Ph 02 9391 9000

NSW Mental Healthline

Ph 13 77 88

Northern Territory Department of Health

Ph 08 8922 8044

NT Mental Health Line

Ph 1800 682 288

Queensland Department of Health

Ph 13 432 584

Mental Health Line

Ph 13 43 25 84

South Australian Department of Health

Ph 1300 232 272

Mental Health Assessment Crisis Information Service

Ph 13 14 65

Tasmanian Mental Health Service Helpline

Ph 1800 332 388

Public Health Hotline 1800 671 738

Victorian Department of Health

Ph 1300 650 172

Suicide Helpline

1300 651 251

West Australian Department of Health

Ph 08 9222 4222

Mental Health Help Lines

Ph 1800 672 822(PEEL)

Ph 1300 555 788(Metro)

Lifeline

Ph 13 11 14 — lifeline.org.au

Beyond Blue

Ph 1800 512 348

Black Dog Institute

02 9382 4530 — blackdog.org.au

Sane Australia Helpline

Monday to Friday 10am to 10 pm info@sane.org

1800 187 263

National Alcohol and Other Drug 24hr Helpline

Ph 1800 250 015

Suicide Call back Service

Ph 1300 659 467 — www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Respect — Sexual Assault, Domestic and Family Violence

Phone Counselling Service 1880 737 732

Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service

Ph 1800 011 046

A.A. — Alcoholics Anonymous

Ph 1300 222 22

Q Life — LGBTI+

Ph 1800 184 527 3pm to Midnight

Reach Out — Young People

Ph 1800 737 732

Kids Helpline

Ph 1800 551 800 — www.kidshelpline.com.au

Headspace for Young People

Ph 1800 650 890

Practices

Practice — Learning to let go of the constant anxiety of what is next

Practice being resilient and not being despondent

If you see Hannibal Lector looking back at you when you look in the mirror, start working on seeing yourself as you really are!

Pay attention to and learn to listen to your inner voice

That inner voice, which can carry on a conversation like two neighbours gossiping over the fence:

“He always was a naughty boy you know, stupid as well” and “oh how awful and I heard that he can’t get out of bed in the morning, just a lazy good for nothing as well”

Practice being aware of and gain insight into the negative thoughts this inner voice can feed you

Start to develop a positive vision of how you want your life to look in the future

Be prepared to take things gradually

It will take time and it will take practice and learning just like anything that is worth doing

You will find, in learning not to avoid the things you have been avoiding, that there will be pain and discomfort

But

that by avoiding something, you may miss an opportunity to learn useful lessons and develop resilience

Practice — Taking a ‘Good Look’

For this practice you will need a large mirror

The practice will take approximately 30 minutes

In this practice you will look into your eyes

Looking into your own eyes can be confronting

The first time I did this practice, I found it confronting to meet my own gaze, it took time to concentrate and simply look into my eyes in the mirror

Make sure that your practice place is comfortable and you are unlikely to be interrupted

When you first undertake this practice, 3 to 5 minutes may be long enough to look into your eyes

Getting started

Stand in front of the mirror and look into your eyes

Maintain your gaze and use your voice to say out loud "I am....." and complete the sentence with the first thing which comes into your head

Here are some examples of how this has worked for me:

"I do not like myself"

"I hide from the truth"

"I have a big head"

"I want to laugh more"

"I often avoid emotional situations"

"I love my partner"

"I feel uncomfortable with intimacy"

"I want intimacy"

"I often feel in pain"

"I am self-destructive"

"I love my children"

Be honest and spontaneous in this practice

If you find yourself censoring what you want to say, stop and start again

This practice can be quite strenuous, so please stop if you start to feel tired or exhausted

We are all individuals

We are all different

We all have our own voice

Everyone will have a different experience and a different reaction to this exercise

My own reactions were emotional and in them I discovered a great deal of underlying anger and self-loathing

The true value of this practice lies in allowing yourself to be authentic, honest and not to deny your own feelings

When you want to stop, either sit or lie down, make yourself comfortable and close your eyes

Breathe deeply from your abdomen and concentrate on your breathing being regular, rhythmical and relaxed. This will have the effect of not only relaxing you but will also help to release any feeling of heaviness you may have left over from the practice.

Feel the strong support of whatever you are resting upon. Feel that this physical support is also an emotional support for you.

Now say to yourself:

"I find assistance and support on my journey to living life without anxiety and depression"

"I acknowledge the depression and anxiety in my life and choose to let it go"

"I no longer need depression to live my life"

Remember to be gentle with yourself at all times

Take time to feel the positive, life affirming benefits of the practice

When you are ready to open your eyes go and stand in front of your mirror again and look for any changes you can see in yourself, in your whole face, in your eyes, in your body posture and reflect on how you feel about yourself now before going out

into the world

Practice — A splendid vision

I am standing in a valley of extraordinary beauty. Behind me are snow-capped mountains, which I have crossed to reach the valley.

I am not wearing any shoes and my toes are digging into the earth. I am feeling at peace with myself and with my surroundings.

Before me in the valley, a river meanders its way towards the sea. Sailing down this river is a beautiful old sailing ship, with snowy white sails. The sailing ship is carrying my dreams towards the sea and the limitless horizon.

Everywhere I look in the valley there are people at work and at rest, their faces expressing joy and absorption in whatever they are doing. I realise that the expressions I see on their faces are a mirror of my own.

I have no feeling that "I should be" doing anything else or be anywhere other than right where I am, right now.

Your splendid vision may be far less or far more fantastic than mine. It may relate to everyday life, be a simple image or an extraordinary vision. It is not important what it is, other than that it is your very own splendid vision for the future. What you do when you build your own splendid vision, is to start to change and develop the way you see yourself in a world beyond depression and beyond any fears which you hold in the present.

This is part of the gradual process which is unfolding for you. Remember to be kind to yourself and not see the process as any kind of race against time or competition. This will only reinforce any prevailing anxieties you may experience and can make you feel frustrated and angry.

However painful living a depressed life is, it is still living and your mind may resist any life affirming changes you wish to make. A case of better the devil you know.

When I made my first baby steps towards a better life for myself, I found it both difficult and frustrating. The process was often painful and it seemed like a comedy, where I was the fool saying that his brain hurt. The truth is that it really did hurt! No wonder it hurt, given the years that I had lived with depression. I was questioning the way I lived, which was both frightening and dynamic at the same time. Why would I want to try to change my life?

Practice — Being secure within yourself

Allow yourself at least thirty minutes to complete the practice

You will need a blanket and pillow and a comfortable, quiet space where you can lie down and will not be interrupted

To start, lie down and make yourself comfortable

When you are comfortable close your eyes and become aware of all your senses and any images which come into your head

Allow yourself to accept whatever your senses may give you

Do not seek to change or censor anything

Simply witness the ebb and flow of your senses

Learn to be kind to yourself, what you are doing is your own personal time

As you become attuned to your senses, start to see how your body is feeling, particularly any parts which may feel uncomfortable or where you are experiencing any resistance to relaxing

When you are feeling relaxed and comfortable place your hands on your navel

Feel the navel area growing warm

Let your breathing become slow and deep

Feel your hands moving gently as you breathe

Know that you are completely safe and that there is an unbreakable connection between you and the earth

Start to imagine that you are lying in a beautiful peaceful place

Visualize that there is a silken cord attached to your navel running into the very centre of the earth

You are able to make this cord appear or disappear at will

Relax into the feeling of being supported and connected to the earth

Let your thoughts come and go without trying to become attached to them

Use your senses to enjoy imagining the beauty of your surroundings, the sounds of nature around you

Take your time to build the environment which you want to be in as you continue the practice

When you choose to stop the practice, concentrate on your breathing and gently tune in to your immediate environment

When you are ready, open your eyes and give yourself time to feel the effect of the practice before you get up

Practice — Relaxing and releasing anxiety

This guided meditation practice was one which I developed and recorded in my diary. I have found it helpful in relaxing and releasing anxiety, as well as in learning to feel the great benefits of positive affirmation in one's daily living. This meditation can be practiced almost anywhere, at any time, and is extremely simple to practice.

I have used this practice in all sorts of places; the secluded corner of an airport waiting lounge, a parked car, a park bench and in my own home.

Effort is the opposite of what you will learn in this practice. Too much "effort" is one of the reasons we can become over-stressed, anxious, depressed and unfulfilled in their lives.

Make sure that you have at least twenty to thirty minutes to yourself, in a comfortable space which is quiet and where you are unlikely to be interrupted

Allow yourself to learn by "osmosis"; the process of gradual or unconscious assimilation of ideas and knowledge

Just trust yourself to learn and you will learn

To Begin

Make yourself comfortable, either in a seated position or lying down

If you are seated, relax your shoulders and let your chin drop slightly

Make sure that your bottom is resting against the back of your chair so that your spine is erect without any strain

If you are lying down use a small rolled up towel or pillow to support your head and neck

You may also need a blanket handy to keep yourself warm

Place your hands over your abdomen

Let yourself begin to relax and start to breathe slowly and deeply from the abdomen

Let your eyes roll back gently so that you are gazing at the central point between your eyebrows and then slowly close your eyes shut

Feel yourself become still and calm

Continue to breathe slowly and deeply without straining

This is your time, your holiday, so let go of all your thoughts and simply relax

Just be with your breathing, feeling the air around you

Feel the parts of your body which are touching the chair or where you may be lying and be absolutely comfortable

Let your breath become like a sigh, gently coming and going and let yourself be where you are right now

Imagine that you are looking at a perfect night sky of pure black velvet with twinkling stars like countless diamonds. The reason the sky is so perfect, so beautiful, is that you are resting on your own personal cloud, floating in the night sky with your body perfectly secured. Your cloud floats without any effort throughout the universe. You take in the beauty of the universe, the smell of the air, the slightest coolness as you drift and the rhythm of your own sighing breathing, slow and steady. Just float.

Simply enjoy the feeling of just floating. You are floating on your own cloud in the night sky, on and on through the universe, seeing a myriad of stars and planets pass by.

Imagine you are seeing the universe within yourself

There is absolutely nothing else but floating on your cloud. When thoughts arise just let them go and return to your floating cloud.

Be absolutely present in this place and know that you are part of the universe and the universe is part of you, you are at one with the universe and you are at peace with yourself

When you are ready to finish, open your eyes and take a series of deep breaths and stretch your whole body. You can gently massage your face if you want to.

Give yourself plenty of time to become fully aware of your environment before you move and carry on with your day

Practice — Help clean out your old, stale fears

For this practice you need twenty to thirty uninterrupted minutes in a quiet, comfortable place

This is your time, remember that you are doing this for your own well-being and health

Make yourself comfortable in either a sitting or lying position

When you are comfortable close your eyes

Place your hands over your abdomen

Start to breathe slowly, rhythmically and deeply from your abdomen

When you start to feel relaxed in your breathing, let your eyes roll upwards and close them gently

I want you to imagine that you are in an old house with many rooms

This house is gloomy but it sits next to a beautiful sunlit ocean

There is an old wharf by the house, where a sailing ship is moored with a crew who sit idly about its deck waiting for the arrival of a cargo

The cargo they are waiting for is the stale air and rubbish you will clean from the rooms of your gloomy house

Choose any room you want and open the door and enter. Go straight to the windows of the room, pull back the heavy drapes and open them as wide as they will go.

Feel the sunlight on your face as you stand at the window and feel the fresh, crisp, sea air as it fills every corner of the room

Your room may be empty or contain rubbish. Not just furniture but your stale old fears and memories of people, events and places you wish to clear out

Imagine that the sailors from the ship will be transporting the stale old rubbish of memories and fear from the rooms in your house, so that each room can be filled with light and fresh sea air

When you have finished cleaning out the first room, find another room and keep repeating the process, until you have opened every window in your house and cleaned every room you want to clean

It is a big house, so you can clean as many rooms as you wish

Stop at any time, if you start to feel that you are becoming in any way distressed or upset in this practice

When you are satisfied with cleaning your house, you can watch all the activity as the ship prepares to leave the dock

The crew are whistling, singing and laughing as they finish loading the ship

When the ship is finished loading, it starts to sail out into the bright, blue ocean under the smiling gaze of the captain

Imagine that while the ship is still close to the shore, the crew wave to you and the captain leads them in, giving you three cheers

Take some time to acknowledge and enjoy the feeling of a job well done, as you look around your house of light and feel a sense of your own well-being

Stay with the feeling well-being for as long as you need before you take three deep breaths and open your eyes

The practice has ended

Allow yourself plenty of time to reflect upon what you have learnt from the practice before you finish and carry on with your day

Practice — Discovering your hidden voice

How are you breathing right now?

Is your breath shallow, deep, strong or weak?

Do you breathe a lot through your mouth?

Do you snore at night?

We usually take breathing for granted but breathing has been studied in all its subtle complexities for thousands of years

The way you breathe affects the way you feel, your mental and physical health and of course your voice

The way you breathe changes throughout the course of your day

It can also become constricted at times

If the breath is constricted, then so will your voice and your whole attitude to life can be affected

Changing your breathing for the better can have a significant effect on your voice

Practice — Mirror breathing

A warning: if you suffer from asthma or have any other health issues which may adversely affect your breathing then please consider carefully before you start this practice

This practice involves using your voice and making noise, sometimes loud noise. You may find this process confronting, with the sounds which you may make at times and may want tell any people you live with, that this could happen.

My own experience of dealing with other people's reactions to this is to be absolutely open and honest with them

In my experience being open and honest is part of the process in uncovering one's true voice

The first part of this practice can be done when you first wake up in your bed in the morning

The second part is done standing in front of a mirror

When you first start the practice allow approximately five minutes for both parts of the practice and at least ten minutes when you finish to rest

To begin

You are lying in your bed with your eyes closed

Place your hands on your abdomen

Concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly, feeling your hands rising and falling with the rhythm of your breathing

When you are ready take a deep breath in through your nose

Hold the breath for a count of about five seconds without straining and then release it through your mouth as slowly and smoothly as possible

Repeat this breathing for about five minutes

When you have finished this first part of the practice get out of bed and stand in front of your mirror

Continue your smooth, rhythmic and gentle breathing

Relax your posture and concentrate on looking into your eyes

You may find that you do not want to meet your own gaze and want to look away

After two or three minutes, push all your breath out as fully as you can through your mouth without straining

Keep looking into your eyes in the mirror and repeat the breathing process, concentrating on taking in deep breaths in through the nostrils before releasing through the mouth

If you feel discomfort at any time stop practicing and rest

If you feel you are comfortable with the breathing then you can start to use your voice to sigh with each outbreath

As you continue the practice, using your sighing voice, you may want to make different sounds

Feel that you are free to make the sounds that you want to make

In exploring your voice, you may release tension and emotion

If you find at any time that the practice is in anyway unduly upsetting you please stop and rest

When you are ready to finish, give yourself at least ten minutes to rest and relax before you carry on with your day

Practice — Breath of light

The use of the visualization of light, as a source for healing and empowerment, to help invigorate and reenergize, is an ancient and universal one. It is an integral part of the culture of many different tribes and races, religions, faiths and health teachings.

Either sit or lie down in a quiet, comfortable place, where you will not be interrupted for at least twenty to thirty minutes

Make yourself comfortable and when you are ready, place your hands over your abdomen

Start to relax and concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly

Remind yourself that this is your time alone, a break from day-to-day cares

Once your breathing is relaxed, slowly close your eyes

Keep concentrating on breathing from your abdomen, feeling the hands rising and falling with each breath you take

Start to imagine that every breath you take is one of pure light, which fills your whole body with healing and regenerative energy

If you wish, you can imagine your breath as thousands of tiny bubbles of oxygenated energy

Imagine that as you breathe out through your nose, you release any stale energy that you have

As you continue your breathing, you can choose to repeat your own particular affirmation, prayer, mantra, verse or words of meaning for you

Or If you wish you can also use these words:

"I let the healing, regenerative and cleansing power of light into every part of my body and being, letting go anything I am carrying, which is a burden and a weight to me in my life"

Discontinue bringing in the light at any time you wish

You can simply carry on concentrating on the rhythm of your breath

When you have finished the practice take a few minutes to relax and feel the full effect of the practice

Practice — Letting go

This is a practice to release whatever you feel has been weighing you down in life

Have fun with this practice

Make it an event that you remember

Imagine this is your own awards ceremony

You can think of it as a ritual, embellish it with anything your imagination conjures up
for you

Give yourself at least 30 minutes to carry out this practice

The first step in this practice is to either sit or lie down in a comfortable place

If you do not have a comfortable place already now is your opportunity to make one

Making your own comfortable place can assist in reinforcing the positive steps you
take to improve your well-being

Lie down, close your eyes, relax and start to breathe deeply and slowly from your
abdomen

Imagine that you are planning a special event and you are making making a to do list

The event you are planning is to celebrate letting go of all those things in your life,
which you would like to let go of

There is no need to rush

Take all the time you need to complete this mental checklist

The list may include people, places, events, the actions of yourself and others,
spoken words, relationships, memories, feelings, past emotions, pictures, photos,
anything which you wish to let go of

You may find some of the things on your list are unexpected

Remember that in letting go of a particular person for instance, you are not
necessarily rejecting or dismissing that person

It is often not the person whom you are rejecting but some part of your relationship
with them

Something which may be no longer appropriate in some way or you have outgrown

Be kind to yourself and move forward with love and compassion for yourself, your friends, family and all those with whom you have share relationships with in any way

To begin

Start to visualize yourself leading a large procession towards an impressive temple or hall, which sits in a beautiful valley on the shore of an ocean, surrounded by a range of snowcapped mountain peaks

You lead the procession into the building, which is full of light and seat yourself on a throne on the stage, facing the procession, which has stopped in front of you

The procession is composed of all the people and things, which you want to let go of

Take time to look at the procession in front of you and remember the reasons why you chose what is in the procession

When you are ready, look out through the open doors of the building and you will see a sailing ship moored at the oceans shore, large enough to carry all the cargo you wish to let go of

At your command, all the cargo is loaded onto the boat

When the cargo is loaded, you take your own place on the ship, seated on your throne and the ship starts to sail smoothly into the vast ocean

You enjoy the feel of the breeze on your face, the smell of the sea and the gentle sound it makes against the sides of the ship as it sails effortlessly out into the ocean

When you are ready raise your hand for the boat to stop and anchor

As soon as the ship is at anchor the crew start loading the cargo onto giant tropical leaves which are carefully placed over the side of the boat to float on the smooth ocean's waters

You stand at the side of the boat watching as the leaves gently float off towards the horizon

Imagine that as you watch the giant leaves float away towards the horizon a weight has been lifted from your shoulders

When you are you feel ready, the boat transports you back to land in the glow of the late afternoon sun

Give yourself time when you have finished the practice to rest fully, before you carry on with your day

Practice — Finding joy

Take some time to contemplate these questions:

Where is joy present in my life?

How do I express my joy?

When you have finished your time contemplating joy, you can practice it out in the real world

Each day, be aware of the possibility to create joy, in your life

Witness and share in the joy that others feel and express

Exercise your ability to create joy out in the world and the joy you find in sharing your joy with other people

Always remember that you are at the source of your own joyfulness, just as you are at the source of your own suffering

Let your joy flow

The Warrior Practice — Designing your own Warrior

This is a practice about finding resilience and inner peace in yourself, through the process of designing your own warrior

Allow yourself at least 30 to 40 minutes to undertake this practice

It is your time to practice being kind and supportive to yourself

Lie down, make yourself comfortable and relaxed

When you are ready place your hands over your abdomen

Start to breathe slowly and deeply from your abdomen

Allow yourself to feel secure, relaxed and comfortable

When you are ready, let your eyes roll upwards and close them

Imagine that you are going to design and build your own warrior

Your warrior can become a guide with you on your journey to a life without depression if you want

Take time to think about what physical, mental and emotional characteristics would make your warrior real for you

Be thoughtful and skillful in designing and building your warrior

Take pride in what you build

When you have finished designing and building your warrior you can take some time to think about how it felt to make it

You can write, draw or record these thoughts

If you want, you can share these thoughts with someone with whom you feel comfortable and trust

Give yourself time at the end of this process and before you go out into the world.

Practice — Tending to the garden

Tending to the heart is a practice much like tending to a garden

If you do nothing, then the garden becomes overgrown until you are unable to move freely

Take the time to tend it and you will be able to gain pleasure in its beauty

There does not have to be effort in this process

Think of it as something to look forward to

Like taking a break during the ebb and flow of the day's events

Learning to love and tend to the heart is like this

If you are ignoring the heart start to engage with it

It can be an island of peace and security when the worldly winds are blowing around you

A centre for your emotions and sense of well-being

The path to my own heart was overgrown and almost lost when I started to uncover
it

I learnt to be patient and not become frustrated in uncovering it

The way that I tended to my garden would be a reflection of this patience

A reflection of nurturing for myself

An expression of the future I was creating and not the past

I was rewarded by what I uncovered

The man I was, had often wanted to push through, pull down and destroy in life

I had denied this and imagined that I was different

That I was sensitive to and aware of my own and other's feelings

Whenever I felt I was getting lost, I kept bringing myself back to the heart

There is surrender in this

I know that real men don't surrender, ever!

Well I did surrender

The heart teased me out like a sad child being asked to play

Practice — The colours of the heart

You will need at least thirty minutes or longer to undertake this practice

Make sure that your practice place is quiet, a place where you can feel secure,
relaxed and comfortable

Take up your practice position lying down

Make sure that you are not too cold or hot or uncomfortable in any way

When you are ready close your eyes and concentrate on breathing slowly and deeply

Follow the flow of your breath, gently in and out

Let your breathing take your awareness to the middle point of your chest and place your left hand over your right hand there

Focus on this point in the middle of your chest as your heart centre

Let go of any expectations you might have about this process and allow your intuitive heart do its work

Start to imagine a softly glowing light at the heart point, like the light from a candle

Imagine this light as a soft and misty pink colour

As you continue the process, you can change the colour of your light and gently start to let the colours spread out into every part of your body

As you learn to let the heart do its work, you can start to experience the beauty of the colours you create

By visualizing these colours, you can enjoy the power of the loving heart

Take your time in this practice to visualize as many colours as you wish

When you feel ready, open your eyes and give yourself time to feel the benefits of this process before you finish the practice

All I want is a room somewhere far away from the cold night air, warm face, warm hands, warm feet, oh wouldn't it be lovely.

Practice — Being at your centre

There is a 'sweet spot' which exists for me somewhere in the solar plexus behind the belly button and is connected to the sacral area in my lower back. When I am connected to this place, it is a subtle, sensitive and gentle feeling, I am at home.

If you are prepared to work on yourself consistently, the benefits will start to flow

It is important that you allow yourself plenty of time out for this practice

Find a time when you are not likely to be interrupted in any way in a quiet place, either inside or outside, where you can sit or lie down in complete comfort

When you are completely settled in your spot pay attention to the following things:

Posture — sit erect with your shoulders and neck as relaxed as possible, with your

chin slightly lowered to take any strain away from your neck

If you lie down make sure you are comfortable with a small pillow or folded towel to support your head

Hands — make sure that your hands are as relaxed and open as possible. Simply let them rest in your lap or on your thighs if you are sitting. If you are lying down have them at the sides of your body, palms up, placed slightly away from your body.

Breathing — let your breath start from your abdomen. Let it be calm and rhythmical. Remember not to effort or strain. This is not a test. It is something which you are choosing to do for yourself and your own future well-being.

Once you have relaxed in your posture and are breathing deeply and rhythmically, smile!

Enjoy how it feels to smile

Feel the muscles in your face begin to soften and relax

Jaw — let your jaw relax. The simple act of consciously relaxing the jaw can release tension and stress.

Eyes - let your eyes slowly roll up into your head. This will help you to relax fully with the process.

Close your eyes slowly and imagine that you are an explorer looking for treasure in a deep cave

This treasure spot is located in your body at the sacrum

Follow your breathing and to relax fully into this spot at the sacrum

This spot is your centre for well-being

The place where you belong, your home

Enjoy the feeling of being at peace in your centre

Continue to breathe calmly, deeply and rhythmically

Continue the practice until you are ready to finish

When you are ready open your eyes

Give yourself time to stretch and feel the benefits of the process before you get up

Statement to Self

“I will not avoid or deny any situation or person, for any reason, however uncomfortable or unpleasant I may find this to be. I will honestly acknowledge my thoughts but I will also not judge myself harshly in what I find to be the truth.”

Practice — Make a shopping list

Things can get better — make a shopping list for yourself!

A shopping list created not out of depression but from the possibilities that life can present

My depressed shopping lists had always been small and mean. I took pride in seeing how small, mean and joyless I could make them.

Now I would use the finest paper to write my shopping lists on and use every colour available to illustrate them if I wanted to

I would not have to shop at the run-down collection of shops with their nearly empty shelves where I used to shop but in the beautiful avenue of shops they have become in my imagination, selling every imaginable type of merchandise from every corner of the world

This was part of the process of my choosing to learn the possibility that life holds, a process of opening up to my self-expression and of being prepared to learn from this opening up in an honest way, to choose expansiveness in my imagination rather than to continue to reduce my life to the narrow vision of depression. Making the journey of discovery and the possibility for a better life real.

Practice — Developing self-massage and healing

Self-massage is a simple, effective way of getting in touch with the physical and mental tight spots and learning to release them

The key to this process is a willingness to be clear and honest with yourself about how you feel

Learning to massage yourself is learning to accept yourself and your body exactly as you are

The shower or luxury of a warm, fragrant bath, is a good time to work out any "knots" in your body helping to release tension and stress, relaxing the body and mind

Learn to become comfortable with the process so that you start to enjoy its full and positive effects

Practice — Morning breathing

There is no better time to practice breathing than in the morning at the start of a new day. The morning hours can also be the most difficult time to undertake practice. This is the time when the seductive sirens of the doona can call out to you: "come back to us, hide safe and warm, danger awaits you beyond our protection."

It is a seductive message to stay in the protection of the greatest sanctuary of all, the womb. But it is a depressed womb, a womb of shallow breathing. My advice is not to listen to the sirens but to choose to release yourself from their magic.

This practice is an affirmation of the life which you are creating. Remember above all to be kind to yourself.

Allow the future its opportunity, by providing a kind and compassionate environment for its growth

First thing, out of bed!

Morning Breathing Practice

Before you start consider your current state of health

If you are a smoker, use alcohol or drugs, have heart or blood pressure problems or any health issue which may compromise you, then please carefully consider whether it is safe for you to start this practice

If at any time you feel in any way nauseous, faint, dizzy, sick or experience any sharp pains stop immediately

Allow yourself at least fifteen to twenty minutes for this practice

Only practice for as long as you feel comfortable and stop practicing as soon as you feel you need to

Leave the sirens of the doona behind and get out of bed

Go and stand in front of the mirror and look into your eyes

Take a deep full breath from your abdomen and then release it

Now continue, taking slow, deep breaths maintaining the focus on your eyes in the mirror

Continue to breathe deeply and slowly with complete awareness on what is happening when you do this

Feel your abdomen expanding with each incoming breath and deflating with each outgoing breath

Keep looking into your eyes observing how you are feeling

When you have finished the practice, take time to lie down and relax

Make sure that you are warm enough

Take time to check how you are breathing and how you feel

Finally congratulate yourself for choosing to leave the protection of the doona before you start your day

Practice — Moving beyond self-pity

For this practice you need at least fifteen to twenty minutes of uninterrupted time in a quiet and comfortable place

Make yourself comfortable sitting on a chair or on cushions in front of your mirror

Check that your back and posture is supported and that your body is relaxed

When you are comfortable, concentrate on breathing slowly and deeply from your abdomen

Feel the rise and fall of your breathing by placing the palms of your hands on your abdomen

They will draw open as you breathe out and come together as you breathe in

When your breathing has become relaxed you are ready to start the practice

This practice is all about discovering that you do not need self-pity in your life
Look into your eyes and be prepared to feel love for yourself and to be prepared to
accept your right to take full responsibility for your life

It is the acknowledgement of the gift that life can offer you

Embrace this gift and your right to leave self-pity and depression behind you

If you experience strong emotions let yourself accept them as much as possible

Keep breathing slowly and rhythmically from your abdomen

The breath will help you to keep relaxed and to accept your emotions as they arise

If you are comfortable keep looking at your eyes for five to ten minutes

Maintain your breathing and allow yourself to accept what you feel

When you feel ready to stop lie down and spend a few minutes relaxing, feeling the
effect of the practice before you finish

Practice — Reflecting on acceptance of the self

Learning to accept yourself takes time and practice

In this practice be aware not to replace one negative message for another, subtler
one like, "I guess I am not too bad after all, everything considered" or "if I just do
blah-blah-blah then things would be be just great!"

The practice of self-reflection is not about judgement and it is not about effort

It is about being present in the moment

and

about working with and being kind to yourself at all times

My own experience of this practice is of finding a sense of humility and peace within
myself

It can be practiced at home, in a park, at a beach or by a river

Anywhere that is quiet and where you feel comfortable

Allow twenty minutes for this practice when you first start

If you are going to practice the process inside find something which you can use to focus on

It could be a single flower or a favorite photograph or picture

Make yourself comfortably seated on a chair or on cushions on the floor

Make sure that your back is well supported and your posture is comfortable and relaxed

Breathe slowly, deeply and rhythmically from your abdomen

Once you are breathing comfortably start to focus your gaze on your chosen object

Reflect on accepting yourself exactly as you are without judgement

If you find negative thoughts coming up, let them go and continue to reflect on your own self-acceptance

Let yourself focus on your chosen object, relax and feel a sense of peace growing inside you

Feel a sense of self-acceptance growing within yourself exactly as you are at the moment

Take your time with this practice to enjoy this sense of self acceptance and as you go out into the world notice how it has changed for you

Practice — Witnessing in reflection

Do my old habits and addictions support or undermine my journey to a life without depression?

Do they give me lasting joy and peace for living my life without depression?

Are they really a part of the way I want to live in the future?

These questions were formed out of my experience of the practice of witnessing in reflection, assisting in moving me beyond my addictive habits

This practice is about remaining present in witnessing your thoughts, feelings and emotions

For this practice you require at least thirty to forty minutes of uninterrupted time in a quiet place

If you are lucky enough to be able to practice in a natural setting, especially by water, then do so

You can sit or lie down for this practice in a position of your choice

It is important that you make your posture as comfortable as possible

Once you are comfortable close your eyes and start to become aware of the breath

Place your hands over your abdomen, allowing your breathing to gradually become deep, slow and rhythmical

When you are breathing comfortably, follow the breaths inhalations and exhalations

Begin to witness your feelings, thoughts and emotions with a quiet reflection

Do not judge or try to hold onto them

Imagine you are like a passenger travelling in a car in the country watching the scenery pass by

Reflect on the scenery of your feelings, thoughts and emotions without the need to escape

You may find there are feelings, thoughts or emotions that arise, which will disturb you

Try to let them just become part of the passing scenery you are passing through

When you are ready to finish the practice open your eyes

Give yourself plenty of time to reflect on the practice before you carry on with your day

Practice — Learning to let go of the constant anxiety of what is next

Practice being resilient and not being despondent

If you see Hannibal Lector looking back at you when you look in the mirror, start working on seeing yourself as you really are!

Pay attention to and learn to listen to your inner voice

That inner voice, which can carry on a conversation like two neighbours gossiping over the fence:

“He always was a naughty boy you know, stupid as well” and “oh how awful and I heard that he can’t get out of bed in the morning, just a lazy good for nothing as well”

Practice being aware of and gain insight into the negative thoughts this inner voice can feed you

Start to develop a positive vision of how you want your life to look in the future

Be prepared to take things gradually

It will take time and it will take practice and learning just like anything that is worth doing

You will find, in learning not to avoid the things you have been avoiding, that there will be pain and discomfort

But

that by avoiding something, you may miss an opportunity to learn useful lessons and develop resilience

Practice — Taking a ‘Good Look’

For this practice you will need a large mirror

The practice will take approximately 30 minutes

In this practice you will look into your eyes

Looking into your own eyes can be confronting

The first time I did this practice, I found it confronting to meet my own gaze, it took time to concentrate and simply look into my eyes in the mirror

Make sure that your practice place is comfortable and you are unlikely to be interrupted

When you first undertake this practice, 3 to 5 minutes may be long enough to look

into your eyes

Getting started

Stand in front of the mirror and look into your eyes

Maintain your gaze and use your voice to say out loud "I am....." and complete the sentence with the first thing which comes into your head

Here are some examples of how this has worked for me:

"I do not like myself"

"I hide from the truth"

"I have a big head"

"I want to laugh more"

"I often avoid emotional situations"

"I love my partner"

"I feel uncomfortable with intimacy"

"I want intimacy"

"I often feel in pain"

"I am self-destructive"

"I love my children"

Be honest and spontaneous in this practice

If you find yourself censoring what you want to say, stop and start again

This practice can be quite strenuous, so please stop if you start to feel tired or exhausted

We are all individuals

We are all different

We all have our own voice

Everyone will have a different experience and a different reaction to this exercise

My own reactions were emotional and in them I discovered a great deal of underlying anger and self-loathing

The true value of this practice lies in allowing yourself to be authentic, honest and not to deny your own feelings

When you want to stop, either sit or lie down, make yourself comfortable and close your eyes

Breathe deeply from your abdomen and concentrate on your breathing being regular, rhythmical and relaxed. This will have the effect of not only relaxing you but will also help to release any feeling of heaviness you may have left over from the practice. Feel the strong support of whatever you are resting upon. Feel that this physical support is also an emotional support for you.

Now say to yourself:

"I find assistance and support on my journey to living life without anxiety and depression"

"I acknowledge the depression and anxiety in my life and choose to let it go"

"I no longer need depression to live my life"

Remember to be gentle with yourself at all times

Take time to feel the positive, life affirming benefits of the practice

When you are ready to open your eyes go and stand in front of your mirror again and look for any changes you can see in yourself, in your whole face, in your eyes, in your body posture and reflect on how you feel about yourself now before going out into the world

Practice — A splendid vision

I am standing in a valley of extraordinary beauty. Behind me are snow-capped mountains, which I have crossed to reach the valley.

I am not wearing any shoes and my toes are digging into the earth. I am feeling at peace with myself and with my surroundings.

Before me in the valley, a river meanders its way towards the sea. Sailing down this river is a beautiful old sailing ship, with snowy white sails. The sailing ship is carrying

my dreams towards the sea and the limitless horizon.

Everywhere I look in the valley there are people at work and at rest, their faces expressing joy and absorption in whatever they are doing. I realise that the expressions I see on their faces are a mirror of my own.

I have no feeling that "I should be" doing anything else or be anywhere other than right where I am, right now.

Your splendid vision may be far less or far more fantastic than mine. It may relate to everyday life, be a simple image or an extraordinary vision. It is not important what it is, other than that it is your very own splendid vision for the future. What you do when you build your own splendid vision, is to start to change and develop the way you see yourself in a world beyond depression and beyond any fears which you hold in the present.

This is part of the gradual process which is unfolding for you. Remember to be kind to yourself and not see the process as any kind of race against time or competition. This will only reinforce any prevailing anxieties you may experience and can make you feel frustrated and angry.

However painful living a depressed life is, it is still living and your mind may resist any life affirming changes you wish to make. A case of better the devil you know.

When I made my first baby steps towards a better life for myself, I found it both difficult and frustrating. The process was often painful and it seemed like a comedy, where I was the fool saying that his brain hurt. The truth is that it really did hurt! No wonder it hurt, given the years that I had lived with depression. I was questioning the way I lived, which was both frightening and dynamic at the same time. Why would I want to try to change my life?

Practice — Being secure within yourself

Allow yourself at least thirty minutes to complete the practice

You will need a blanket and pillow and a comfortable, quiet space where you can lie down and will not be interrupted

To start, lie down and make yourself comfortable

When you are comfortable close your eyes and become aware of all your senses and any images which come into your head

Allow yourself to accept whatever your senses may give you

Do not seek to change or censor anything

Simply witness the ebb and flow of your senses

Learn to be kind to yourself, what you are doing is your own personal time

As you become attuned to your senses, start to see how your body is feeling, particularly any parts which may feel uncomfortable or where you are experiencing any resistance to relaxing

When you are feeling relaxed and comfortable place your hands on your navel

Feel the navel area growing warm

Let your breathing become slow and deep

Feel your hands moving gently as you breathe

Know that you are completely safe and that there is an unbreakable connection between you and the earth

Start to imagine that you are lying in a beautiful peaceful place

Visualize that there is a silken cord attached to your navel running into the very centre of the earth

You are able to make this cord appear or disappear at will

Relax into the feeling of being supported and connected to the earth

Let your thoughts come and go without trying to become attached to them

Use your senses to enjoy imagining the beauty of your surroundings, the sounds of nature around you

Take your time to build the environment which you want to be in as you continue the practice

When you choose to stop the practice, concentrate on your breathing and gently tune in to your immediate environment

When you are ready, open your eyes and give yourself time to feel the effect of the practice before you get up

Practice — Relaxing and releasing anxiety

This guided meditation practice was one which I developed and recorded in my diary. I have found it helpful in relaxing and releasing anxiety, as well as in learning to feel the great benefits of positive affirmation in one's daily living. This meditation can be practiced almost anywhere, at any time, and is extremely simple to practice.

I have used this practice in all sorts of places; the secluded corner of an airport waiting lounge, a parked car, a park bench and in my own home.

Effort is the opposite of what you will learn in this practice. Too much "effort" is one of the reasons we can become over-stressed, anxious, depressed and unfulfilled in their lives.

Make sure that you have at least twenty to thirty minutes to yourself, in a comfortable space which is quiet and where you are unlikely to be interrupted

Allow yourself to learn by "osmosis"; the process of gradual or unconscious assimilation of ideas and knowledge

Just trust yourself to learn and you will learn

To Begin

Make yourself comfortable, either in a seated position or lying down

If you are seated, relax your shoulders and let your chin drop slightly

Make sure that your bottom is resting against the back of your chair so that your spine is erect without any strain

If you are lying down use a small rolled up towel or pillow to support your head and neck

You may also need a blanket handy to keep yourself warm

Place your hands over your abdomen

Let yourself begin to relax and start to breath slowly and deeply from the abdomen

Let your eyes roll back gently so that you are gazing at the central point between your eyebrows and then slowly close your eyes shut

Feel yourself become still and calm

Continue to breathe slowly and deeply without straining

This is your time, your holiday, so let go of all your thoughts and simply relax

Just be with your breathing, feeling the air around you

Feel the parts of your body which are touching the chair or where you may be lying
and be absolutely comfortable

Let your breath become like a sigh, gently coming and going and let yourself be
where you are right now

Imagine that you are looking at a perfect night sky of pure black velvet with twinkling stars like countless diamonds. The reason the sky is so perfect, so beautiful, is that you are resting on your own personal cloud, floating in the night sky with your body perfectly secured. Your cloud floats without any effort throughout the universe. You take in the beauty of the universe, the smell of the air, the slightest coolness as you drift and the rhythm of your own sighing breathing, slow and steady. Just float. Simply enjoy the feeling of just floating. You are floating on your own cloud in the night sky, on and on through the universe, seeing a myriad of stars and planets pass by.

Imagine you are seeing the universe within yourself

There is absolutely nothing else but floating on your cloud. When thoughts arise just let them go and return to your floating cloud.

Be absolutely present in this place and know that you are part of the universe and the universe is part of you, you are at one with the universe and you are at peace
with yourself

When you are ready to finish, open your eyes and take a series of deep breaths and stretch your whole body. You can gently massage your face if you want to.

Give yourself plenty of time to become fully aware of your environment before you move and carry on with your day

Practice — Help clean out your old, stale fears

For this practice you need twenty to thirty uninterrupted minutes in a quiet, comfortable place

This is your time, remember that you are doing this for your own well-being and

health

Make yourself comfortable in either a sitting or lying position

When you are comfortable close your eyes

Place your hands over your abdomen

Start to breathe slowly, rhythmically and deeply from your abdomen

When you start to feel relaxed in your breathing, let your eyes roll upwards and close them gently

I want you to imagine that you are in an old house with many rooms

This house is gloomy but it sits next to a beautiful sunlit ocean

There is an old wharf by the house, where a sailing ship is moored with a crew who sit idly about its deck waiting for the arrival of a cargo

The cargo they are waiting for is the stale air and rubbish you will clean from the rooms of your gloomy house

Choose any room you want and open the door and enter. Go straight to the windows of the room, pull back the heavy drapes and open them as wide as they will go.

Feel the sunlight on your face as you stand at the window and feel the fresh, crisp, sea air as it fills every corner of the room

Your room may be empty or contain rubbish. Not just furniture but your stale old fears and memories of people, events and places you wish to clear out

Imagine that the sailors from the ship will be transporting the stale old rubbish of memories and fear from the rooms in your house, so that each room can be filled with light and fresh sea air

When you have finished cleaning out the first room, find another room and keep repeating the process, until you have opened every window in your house and cleaned every room you want to clean

It is a big house, so you can clean as many rooms as you wish

Stop at any time, if you start to feel that you are becoming in any way distressed or upset in this practice

When you are satisfied with cleaning your house, you can watch all the activity as the

ship prepares to leave the dock

The crew are whistling, singing and laughing as they finish loading the ship

When the ship is finished loading, it starts to sail out into the bright, blue ocean
under the smiling gaze of the captain

Imagine that while the ship is still close to the shore, the crew wave to you and the
captain leads them in, giving you three cheers

Take some time to acknowledge and enjoy the feeling of a job well done, as you look
around your house of light and feel a sense of your own well-being

Stay with the feeling well-being for as long as you need before you take three deep
breaths and open your eyes

The practice has ended

Allow yourself plenty of time to reflect upon what you have learnt from the practice
before you finish and carry on with your day

Practice — Discovering your hidden voice

How are you breathing right now?

Is your breath shallow, deep, strong or weak?

Do you breathe a lot through your mouth?

Do you snore at night?

We usually take breathing for granted but breathing has been studied in all its subtle
complexities for thousands of years

The way you breathe affects the way you feel, your mental and physical health and
of course your voice

The way you breathe changes throughout the course of your day

It can also become constricted at times

If the breath is constricted, then so will your voice and your whole attitude to life can
be affected

Changing your breathing for the better can have a significant effect on your voice

Practice — Mirror breathing

A warning: if you suffer from asthma or have any other health issues which may adversely affect your breathing then please consider carefully before you start this practice

This practice involves using your voice and making noise, sometimes loud noise. You may find this process confronting, with the sounds which you may make at times and may want tell any people you live with, that this could happen.

My own experience of dealing with other people's reactions to this is to be absolutely open and honest with them

In my experience being open and honest is part of the process in uncovering one's true voice

The first part of this practice can be done when you first wake up in your bed in the morning

The second part is done standing in front of a mirror

When you first start the practice allow approximately five minutes for both parts of the practice and at least ten minutes when you finish to rest

To begin

You are lying in your bed with your eyes closed

Place your hands on your abdomen

Concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly, feeling your hands rising and falling with the rhythm of your breathing

When you are ready take a deep breath in through your nose

Hold the breath for a count of about five seconds without straining and then release it through your mouth as slowly and smoothly as possible

Repeat this breathing for about five minutes

When you have finished this first part of the practice get out of bed and stand in front of your mirror

Continue your smooth, rhythmic and gentle breathing

Relax your posture and concentrate on looking into your eyes

You may find that you do not want to meet your own gaze and want to look away

After two or three minutes, push all your breath out as fully as you can through your mouth without straining

Keep looking into your eyes in the mirror and repeat the breathing process, concentrating on taking in deep breaths in through the nostrils before releasing through the mouth

If you feel discomfort at any time stop practicing and rest

If you feel you are comfortable with the breathing then you can start to use your voice to sigh with each outbreath

As you continue the practice, using your sighing voice, you may want to make different sounds

Feel that you are free to make the sounds that you want to make

In exploring your voice, you may release tension and emotion

If you find at any time that the practice is in anyway unduly upsetting you please stop and rest

When you are ready to finish, give yourself at least ten minutes to rest and relax before you carry on with your day

Practice — Breath of light

The use of the visualization of light, as a source for healing and empowerment, to help invigorate and reenergize, is an ancient and universal one. It is an integral part of the culture of many different tribes and races, religions, faiths and health teachings.

Either sit or lie down in a quiet, comfortable place, where you will not be interrupted for at least twenty to thirty minutes

Make yourself comfortable and when you are ready, place your hands over your abdomen

Start to relax and concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly

Remind yourself that this is your time alone, a break from day-to-day cares

Once your breathing is relaxed, slowly close your eyes

Keep concentrating on breathing from your abdomen, feeling the hands rising and falling with each breath you take

Start to imagine that every breath you take is one of pure light, which fills your whole body with healing and regenerative energy

If you wish, you can imagine your breath as thousands of tiny bubbles of oxygenated energy

Imagine that as you breathe out through your nose, you release any stale energy that you have

As you continue your breathing, you can choose to repeat your own particular affirmation, prayer, mantra, verse or words of meaning for you

Or If you wish you can also use these words:

"I let the healing, regenerative and cleansing power of light into every part of my body and being, letting go anything I am carrying, which is a burden and a weight to me in my life"

Discontinue bringing in the light at any time you wish

You can simply carry on concentrating on the rhythm of your breath

When you have finished the practice take a few minutes to relax and feel the full effect of the practice

Practice — Letting go

This is a practice to release whatever you feel has been weighing you down in life

Have fun with this practice

Make it an event that you remember

Imagine this is your own awards ceremony

You can think of it as a ritual, embellish it with anything your imagination conjures up
for you

Give yourself at least 30 minutes to carry out this practice

The first step in this practice is to either sit or lie down in a comfortable place

If you do not have a comfortable place already now is your opportunity to make one

Making your own comfortable place can assist in reinforcing the positive steps you
take to improve your well-being

Lie down, close your eyes, relax and start to breathe deeply and slowly from your
abdomen

Imagine that you are planning a special event and you are making making a to do list

The event you are planning is to celebrate letting go of all those things in your life,
which you would like to let go of

There is no need to rush

Take all the time you need to complete this mental checklist

The list may include people, places, events, the actions of yourself and others,
spoken words, relationships, memories, feelings, past emotions, pictures, photos,
anything which you wish to let go of

You may find some of the things on your list are unexpected

Remember that in letting go of a particular person for instance, you are not
necessarily rejecting or dismissing that person

It is often not the person whom you are rejecting but some part of your relationship
with them

Something which may be no longer appropriate in some way or you have outgrown

Be kind to yourself and move forward with love and compassion for yourself, your
friends, family and all those with whom you have share relationships with in any way

To begin

Start to visualize yourself leading a large procession towards an impressive temple or
hall, which sits in a beautiful valley on the shore of an ocean, surrounded by a range
of snowcapped mountain peaks

You lead the procession into the building, which is full of light and seat yourself on a throne on the stage, facing the procession, which has stopped in front of you

The procession is composed of all the people and things, which you want to let go of

Take time to look at the procession in front of you and remember the reasons why you chose what is in the procession

When you are ready, look out through the open doors of the building and you will see a sailing ship moored at the oceans shore, large enough to carry all the cargo you wish to let go of

At your command, all the cargo is loaded onto the boat

When the cargo is loaded, you take your own place on the ship, seated on your throne and the ship starts to sail smoothly into the vast ocean

You enjoy the feel of the breeze on your face, the smell of the sea and the gentle sound it makes against the sides of the ship as it sails effortlessly out into the ocean

When you are ready raise your hand for the boat to stop and anchor

As soon as the ship is at anchor the crew start loading the cargo onto giant tropical leaves which are carefully placed over the side of the boat to float on the smooth ocean's waters

You stand at the side of the boat watching as the leaves gently float off towards the horizon

Imagine that as you watch the giant leaves float away towards the horizon a weight has been lifted from your shoulders

When you are you feel ready, the boat transports you back to land in the glow of the late afternoon sun

Give yourself time when you have finished the practice to rest fully, before you carry on with your day

Practice — Finding joy

Take some time to contemplate these questions:

Where is joy present in my life?

How do I express my joy?

When you have finished your time contemplating joy, you can practice it out in the real world

Each day, be aware of the possibility to create joy, in your life

Witness and share in the joy that others feel and express

Exercise your ability to create joy out in the world and the joy you find in sharing your joy with other people

Always remember that you are at the source of your own joyfulness, just as you are at the source of your own suffering

Let your joy flow

The Warrior Practice – Designing your own Warrior

This is a practice about finding resilience and inner peace in yourself, through the process of designing your own warrior

Allow yourself at least 30 to 40 minutes to undertake this practice

It is your time to practice being kind and supportive to yourself

Lie down, make yourself comfortable and relaxed

When you are ready place your hands over your abdomen

Start to breathe slowly and deeply from your abdomen

Allow yourself to feel secure, relaxed and comfortable

When you are ready, let your eyes roll upwards and close them

Imagine that you are going to design and build your own warrior

Your warrior can become a guide with you on your journey to a life without depression if you want

Take time to think about what physical, mental and emotional characteristics would make your warrior real for you

Be thoughtful and skillful in designing and building your warrior

Take pride in what you build

When you have finished designing and building your warrior you can take some time to think about how it felt to make it

You can write, draw or record these thoughts

If you want, you can share these thoughts with someone with whom you feel comfortable and trust

Give yourself time at the end of this process and before you go out into the world.

Practice — Tending to the garden

Tending to the heart is a practice much like tending to a garden

If you do nothing, then the garden becomes overgrown until you are unable to move freely

Take the time to tend it and you will be able to gain pleasure in its beauty

There does not have to be effort in this process

Think of it as something to look forward to

Like taking a break during the ebb and flow of the day's events

Learning to love and tend to the heart is like this

If you are ignoring the heart start to engage with it

It can be an island of peace and security when the worldly winds are blowing around you

A centre for your emotions and sense of well-being

The path to my own heart was overgrown and almost lost when I started to uncover it

I learnt to be patient and not become frustrated in uncovering it

The way that I tended to my garden would be a reflection of this patience

A reflection of nurturing for myself

An expression of the future I was creating and not the past
I was rewarded by what I uncovered
The man I was, had often wanted to push through, pull down and destroy in life
I had denied this and imagined that I was different
That I was sensitive to and aware of my own and other's feelings
Whenever I felt I was getting lost, I kept bringing myself back to the heart
There is surrender in this
I know that real men don't surrender, ever!
Well I did surrender
The heart teased me out like a sad child being asked to play

Practice — The colours of the heart

You will need at least thirty minutes or longer to undertake this practice
Make sure that your practice place is quiet, a place where you can feel secure,
relaxed and comfortable
Take up your practice position lying down
Make sure that you are not too cold or hot or uncomfortable in any way
When you are ready close your eyes and concentrate on breathing slowly and deeply
Follow the flow of your breath, gently in and out
Let your breathing take your awareness to the middle point of your chest and place
your left hand over your right hand there
Focus on this point in the middle of your chest as your heart centre
Let go of any expectations you might have about this process and allow your intuitive
heart do its work
Start to imagine a softly glowing light at the heart point, like the light from a candle

Imagine this light as a soft and misty pink colour

As you continue the process, you can change the colour of your light and gently start to let the colours spread out into every part of your body

As you learn to let the heart do its work, you can start to experience the beauty of the colours you create

By visualizing these colours, you can enjoy the power of the loving heart

Take your time in this practice to visualize as many colours as you wish

When you feel ready, open your eyes and give yourself time to feel the benefits of this process before you finish the practice

All I want is a room somewhere far away from the cold night air, warm face, warm hands, warm feet, oh wouldn't it be lovely.

Practice — Being at your centre

There is a 'sweet spot' which exists for me somewhere in the solar plexus behind the belly button and is connected to the sacral area in my lower back. When I am connected to this place, it is a subtle, sensitive and gentle feeling, I am at home.

If you are prepared to work on yourself consistently, the benefits will start to flow

It is important that you allow yourself plenty of time out for this practice

Find a time when you are not likely to be interrupted in any way in a quiet place, either inside or outside, where you can sit or lie down in complete comfort

When you are completely settled in your spot pay attention to the following things:

Posture — sit erect with your shoulders and neck as relaxed as possible, with your chin slightly lowered to take any strain away from your neck

If you lie down make sure you are comfortable with a small pillow or folded towel to support your head

Hands — make sure that your hands are as relaxed and open as possible. Simply let them rest in your lap or on your thighs if you are sitting. If you are lying down have them at the sides of your body, palms up, placed slightly away from your body.

Breathing — let your breath start from your abdomen. Let it be calm and rhythmical.

Remember not to effort or strain. This is not a test. It is something which you are choosing to do for yourself and your own future well-being.

Once you have relaxed in your posture and are breathing deeply and rhythmically, smile!

Enjoy how it feels to smile

Feel the muscles in your face begin to soften and relax

Jaw — let your jaw relax. The simple act of consciously relaxing the jaw can release tension and stress.

Eyes - let your eyes slowly roll up into your head. This will help you to relax fully with the process.

Close your eyes slowly and imagine that you are an explorer looking for treasure in a deep cave

This treasure spot is located in your body at the sacrum

Follow your breathing and to relax fully into this spot at the sacrum

This spot is your centre for well-being

The place where you belong, your home

Enjoy the feeling of being at peace in your centre

Continue to breathe calmly, deeply and rhythmically

Continue the practice until you are ready to finish

When you are ready open your eyes

Give yourself time to stretch and feel the benefits of the process before you get up

Statement to Self

“I will not avoid or deny any situation or person, for any reason, however uncomfortable or unpleasant I may find this to be. I will honestly acknowledge my thoughts but I will also not judge myself harshly in what I find to be the truth.”

Practice

Things can get better — make a shopping list for yourself!

A shopping list created not out of depression but from the possibilities that life can present

My depressed shopping lists had always been small and mean. I took pride in seeing how small, mean and joyless I could make them.

Now I would use the finest paper to write my shopping lists on and use every colour available to illustrate them if I wanted to

I would not have to shop at the run-down collection of shops with their nearly empty shelves where I used to shop but in the beautiful avenue of shops they have become in my imagination, selling every imaginable type of merchandise from every corner of the world

This was part of the process of my choosing to learn the possibility that life holds, a process of opening up to my self-expression and of being prepared to learn from this opening up in an honest way, to choose expansiveness in my imagination rather than to continue to reduce my life to the narrow vision of depression. Making the journey of discovery and the possibility for a better life real.

Practice — Developing self-massage and healing

Self-massage is a simple, effective way of getting in touch with the physical and mental tight spots and learning to release them

The key to this process is a willingness to be clear and honest with yourself about how you feel

Learning to massage yourself is learning to accept yourself and your body exactly as you are

The shower or luxury of a warm, fragrant bath, is a good time to work out any “knots” in your body helping to release tension and stress, relaxing the body and mind

Learn to become comfortable with the process so that you start to enjoy its full and positive effects

Practice — Morning breathing

There is no better time to practice breathing than in the morning at the start of a new day. The morning hours can also be the most difficult time to undertake practice. This is the time when the seductive sirens of the doona can call out to you: "come back to us, hide safe and warm, danger awaits you beyond our protection."

It is a seductive message to stay in the protection of the greatest sanctuary of all, the womb. But it is a depressed womb, a womb of shallow breathing. My advice is not to listen to the sirens but to choose to release yourself from their magic.

This practice is an affirmation of the life which you are creating. Remember above all to be kind to yourself.

Allow the future its opportunity, by providing a kind and compassionate environment for its growth

First thing, out of bed!

Morning Breathing Practice

Before you start consider your current state of health

If you are a smoker, use alcohol or drugs, have heart or blood pressure problems or any health issue which may compromise you, then please carefully consider whether it is safe for you to start this practice

If at any time you feel in any way nauseous, faint, dizzy, sick or experience any sharp pains stop immediately

Allow yourself at least fifteen to twenty minutes for this practice

Only practice for as long as you feel comfortable and stop practicing as soon as you feel you need to

Leave the sirens of the doona behind and get out of bed

Go and stand in front of the mirror and look into your eyes

Take a deep full breath from your abdomen and then release it

Now continue, taking slow, deep breaths maintaining the focus on your eyes in the mirror

Continue to breathe deeply and slowly with complete awareness on what is happening when you do this

Feel your abdomen expanding with each incoming breath and deflating with each outgoing breath

Keep looking into your eyes observing how you are feeling

When you have finished the practice, take time to lie down and relax

Make sure that you are warm enough

Take time to check how you are breathing and how you feel

Finally congratulate yourself for choosing to leave the protection of the doona before you start your day

Practice — Moving beyond self-pity

For this practice you need at least fifteen to twenty minutes of uninterrupted time in a quiet and comfortable place

Make yourself comfortable sitting on a chair or on cushions in front of your mirror

Check that your back and posture is supported and that your body is relaxed

When you are comfortable, concentrate on breathing slowly and deeply from your abdomen

Feel the rise and fall of your breathing by placing the palms of your hands on your abdomen

They will draw open as you breathe out and come together as you breathe in

When your breathing has become relaxed you are ready to start the practice

This practice is all about discovering that you do not need self-pity in your life

Look into your eyes and be prepared to feel love for yourself and to be prepared to accept your right to take full responsibility for your life

It is the acknowledgement of the gift that life can offer you

Embrace this gift and your right to leave self-pity and depression behind you

If you experience strong emotions let yourself accept them as much as possible

Keep breathing slowly and rhythmically from your abdomen

The breath will help you to keep relaxed and to accept your emotions as they arise

If you are comfortable keep looking at your eyes for five to ten minutes

Maintain your breathing and allow yourself to accept what you feel

When you feel ready to stop lie down and spend a few minutes relaxing, feeling the effect of the practice before you finish

Practice — Reflecting on acceptance of the self

Learning to accept yourself takes time and practice

In this practice be aware not to replace one negative message for another, subtler one like, "I guess I am not too bad after all, everything considered" or "if I just do blah-blah-blah then things would be just great!"

The practice of self-reflection is not about judgement and it is not about effort

It is about being present in the moment

and

about working with and being kind to yourself at all times

My own experience of this practice is of finding a sense of humility and peace within myself

It can be practiced at home, in a park, at a beach or by a river

Anywhere that is quiet and where you feel comfortable

Allow twenty minutes for this practice when you first start

If you are going to practice the process inside find something which you can use to focus on

It could be a single flower or a favorite photograph or picture

Make yourself comfortably seated on a chair or on cushions on the floor

Make sure that your back is well supported and your posture is comfortable and relaxed

Breathe slowly, deeply and rhythmically from your abdomen

Once you are breathing comfortably start to focus your gaze on your chosen object

Reflect on accepting yourself exactly as you are without judgement

If you find negative thoughts coming up, let them go and continue to reflect on your own self-acceptance

Let yourself focus on your chosen object, relax and feel a sense of peace growing inside you

Feel a sense of self-acceptance growing within yourself exactly as you are at the moment

Take your time with this practice to enjoy this sense of self acceptance and as you go out into the world notice how it has changed for you

Practice — Witnessing in reflection

Do my old habits and addictions support or undermine my journey to a life without depression?

Do they give me lasting joy and peace for living my life without depression?

Are they really a part of the way I want to live in the future?

These questions were formed out of my experience of the practice of witnessing in reflection, assisting in moving me beyond my addictive habits

This practice is about remaining present in witnessing your thoughts, feelings and emotions

For this practice you require at least thirty to forty minutes of uninterrupted time in a quiet place

If you are lucky enough to be able to practice in a natural setting, especially by water, then do so

You can sit or lie down for this practice in a position of your choice

It is important that you make your posture as comfortable as possible

Once you are comfortable close your eyes and start to become aware of the breath

Place your hands over your abdomen, allowing your breathing to gradually become
deep, slow and rhythmical

When you are breathing comfortably, follow the breaths inhalations and exhalations

Begin to witness your feelings, thoughts and emotions with a quiet reflection

Do not judge or try to hold onto them

Imagine you are like a passenger travelling in a car in the country watching the
scenery pass by

Reflect on the scenery of your feelings, thoughts and emotions without the need to
escape

You may find there are feelings, thoughts or emotions that arise, which will disturb
you

Try to let them just become part of the passing scenery you are passing through

When you are ready to finish the practice open your eyes

Give yourself plenty of time to reflect on the practice before you carry on with your
day