

IT'S NOT DEPRESSION...IT'S HIBERNATION!
The Alchemy of Changing Your Mind About Yourself
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One of the worst things about being depressed is how fiercely we judge ourselves while floating about in the darkness without a tether to any recognizable reality. Depression alone is a frightening experience, but combined with self-criticism for being depressed, it is devastating. If you have ever experienced deep depression, whether for a short period of time or a longer one, you can relate to this feeling of defeat that comes as a result of criticizing yourself for being depressed. Others, frightened of what depression mirrors back to them about themselves, often tell us to "snap out of it," or "just pull yourself out of it." Their lack of understanding and compassion confirms the power of depression. Anything we avoid usually has great meaning or power.

Our criticism of being depressed is just such an avoidance. It pulls our attention away from the true purpose of why we are being held hostage in a hostile and shadowy part of ourselves. Just as nature calls many of its creatures into hibernation in the wintertime, our inner natures call us into seeing ourselves more deeply. If we are already self-aware and accepting all aspects of ourselves, then this cyclic immersion into unexplored regions of self will be an adventure - not always pleasant but certainly life-changing. But if we are caught in the habit pattern of self-loathing and criticism, we will perceive such a descent as proof of our unworthiness or frightening aspects of self.

My own personal experience of depression comes from almost fifty years of recurring and sometimes suicidal episodes. I tried many different approaches to heal the depression, including taking antidepressants and employing various holistic therapies*, but nothing worked until I was ready to change my mind about the purpose of my depression. I believed I was a victim of it until one day, during a meditation, I spontaneously found myself moving into a sphere of darkness. (This is described as an exercise you can use in item #5 below.) In that sphere, I learned I was not a victim. I learned that depression, like recurring dreams, had been trying for years to get my attention. It had valuable messages for me and I had ignored them because of fear. I feared that if I went deeper into my depressions, I'd never come back out. I feared that people would think I was crazy. I feared that I would have to change my life.

All of those fears were based in a weakened ego structure which didn't allow me to stretch my perceptions of reality. As I realized in the spontaneous meditation that I actually had more courage than I had thought, I was willing to explore what depression had been trying to tell me all along about what my real fear was: the fear of truly being myself.

The exploration within my depression helped me to discover a very strong

ego structure - and a healthy one - hiding within. It was the part of me that actually had confidence, realistic expectations about my life, and all the skills and talents I needed to make my dreams a reality. It was an entirely non-judgmental part of me. It was the part of me that could laugh at myself and had great compassion for all my mistakes and experiences of expanding toward wholeness. All of this wonderful stuff had been hiding for so long in depression! My spiritual teacher, Brugh Joy, tells us that the deeper the shyness or the lower the self-regard, the greater are our gifts. Our so-called limitations hold us in check until the right time comes for us to shine. That has certainly proved to be true in my own life and I've seen it happen many times in my students' lives. Our experiences of depression, defeat and disillusionment have been the rich compost of fulfillment. Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that the rose needs the unpleasantness of the manure in order to become itself - and in turn, it must eventually become the compost to guarantee life's balance.

I've found the spiritual organizations that promote the rejection of the "compost" are actually teaching imbalance. It is only the person who can accept life as it is in all its colors and textures who can truly be fulfilled. One of the traditions that I've found particularly powerful for the transformation of depression, self-doubt, and unrealistic expectations of how life "should" be is within the ancient mystical way of alchemy.

It is believed that alchemy began in ancient Egypt as a way of life, although most of us picture alchemists living in medieval times in Europe. The common belief about alchemists is that they turned lead into gold. This has been proven to be true by modern day alchemists who can actually create precious metals from base metals. But the process, not the product, is known to be the most important part of true alchemy. And although there were alchemists known as "puffers," who were interested only in the monetary gain of such an endeavor, other alchemists were interested in the spiritual rewards that personally experiencing such a process could produce. Through watching the stages of change that the chemical substances went through, the alchemists themselves were transformed. Modern quantum physicists have reported much the same experience as they have noted inner changes as they observed the activity of subatomic life forms. If you can imagine watching something change before your eyes as your intellect struggles to attach logical meaning to the process, you can also imagine how you might be personally affected.

When we apply this concept to the experience of depression, we can infer that by consciously watching (meaning without judgment and self-criticism) what the depression is, what it does, and how it makes us feel, we are actually opening a new door to perception, wherein we are observing a process of change of attitude. The depression is no longer our enemy, but it becomes our ally, tending our dark regions within until we are ready to accept ourselves completely. Our depression takes us into hibernation so that growth can occur. It is only our negative attitudes or lack of willingness to let go of old beliefs about our worthiness that keeps us blind to what is actually changing.

When we do a metaphysical prayer (one that does not plead for what is

desired, but rather moves us into an acceptance that what is needed is already accomplished in Divine Mind because we have identified ourselves with it), we are doing the same thing as the quantum physicists and the alchemists in aligning ourselves through high level observation of the truth of what it is that we are focusing upon.

The seven stages of the alchemical principles as applied to everyday modern living follow:

1. Get to know your ego (called "Calcination" in alchemy): Observe how it works, what it does, how it protects you or limits you, and what it says about your depression. This step develops a healthy relationship with the ego so it works for you instead of against you. The process involves a "burning to ashes" of the destructive actions of the ego that are no longer necessary. It is generally a very difficult process to experience due to its affect on the ego's defenses - they fight for existence. But the results are essential to the success of the next stages - the inner ground must be prepared by the ego's deflation before the higher levels of being may be experienced.
2. Accept your emotions ("Dissolution"): Transform your inner voice of criticism into your inner gift of discernment by lovingly embracing all your feelings, including those that accompany depression. The ability to fully accept emotions comes from a willingness to let them flow so they can be observed and fine-tuned. This involves an honest inventory of how we use or misuse our emotions. For example, do we manipulate others with our tears or anger? Do we deaden our feelings in order to appear "together?"
3. Develop your discernment ("Separation"): Decide which emotions and situations need to be mellowed, emphasized, clarified, released from the bondage of your attitude toward them, or explored more deeply. Discern whether or not you are willing to separate yourself from old patterns and cherished beliefs that limit you.
4. Develop cooperation and strength from your pairs of opposites or extremes within (masculine-feminine, right-wrong, better-worse, etc.)("Conjunction"): Find the fulcrum point of balance between them, especially in regard to emotional highs and lows. Observe wherever imbalances occur between the pairs and discern what is needed to bring balance into your life. For example, is your inner masculine drive to succeed overpowering your feminine desire for fulfilling relationship? Is your misuse of emotions undermining your Soul's wish for creative expression?
5. Be willing to face your shadow and remove your masks

("Putrefaction-Fermentation"): This is a process of becoming truly real, for while the unacceptable parts of us remain in the dark, we remain victims to our unconscious forces. The best exercise I know to do this is to imagine your depression as a transparent dark sphere of energy. See yourself sitting in a meditative posture floating slowly into the center of the sphere. The task is to sit within the energy of depression for as long as it takes to learn what it has to teach you. This is basically hibernating within the cave of depression and allowing it to awaken you at the right time. (You may need to do this several times before your ego settles down and allows you to sense the answers.)

6. Surrender to the higher power within you ("Distillation"): Clarify your essence so you know who you are and what your purpose is. (This can be facilitated by the exercise suggested in #5.)

7. Be who you are ("Coagulation"): Celebrate your undeniable interrelatedness with the Divine Mystery.

8. By changing your perceptions about your relationship with depression as well as your personal definition of it, you can change its affects upon your life. This idea is based in the simple yet powerful ages-old wisdom of embracing your enemy. Our egos battle against this because their purpose is to protect. But we do reach a level in our evolvment where we no longer need to hide, so we can open our hearts and minds to whatever life gives us because our perceptions are different. I think of Earth as "the Workshop Planet" because this is where we learn about life and all its aspects. An important part of learning to be human is having and expressing feelings. Depression may serve as an effective tool in grabbing ahold of us when we've refused to give our feeling nature the attention it deserves, and holding us in hibernation until we awaken to the fullness of our being. Life is not always joyous and filled with light. Our most profound learnings are, in most cases, based upon experiences with the unknown, dark, and rich potential of what lies deeply within us. Depression can take us there. It's up to us whether we view it as our enemy or our ally. If we accept its gift, we may experience the true joy that is composed of both the dark and the light. It is the joy that opens our hearts and makes us whole.

(*The material in this article does not in any way imply medical or psychological advice. Everyone should seek professional help if seriously depressed.)