

Help for Outcast Depression: Four Exercises*

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There are vast realms of consciousness still undreamed of,
vast ranges of experience, like the humming of unseen harps, we know
nothing of, within us... ("Terra Incognita," Lawrence 1932)

This note proposes that most people in modern societies particularly need two things to grow and prosper: becoming deeply familiar with their own emotions, and a secure bond with at least one other person. As it turns out, this is not an easy path to follow since it requires considerable change, even opposition to conventional routines. Three exercises are proposed that might help lift the outcast depression taken as normal in our society.

Temporary Lifting of Clinical Depression

As a visiting researcher at Schenley Mental Hospital (UK) many years ago, I observed the initial interview of 80 male patients. They were all over 60, and deeply depressed in speech and manner. However, to my surprise, I saw moments in some of the interviews that were miracles of temporary recovery.

The psychiatrists asked 41 of the patients about their activity during WWII. For almost half, as they begin to describe their experience during the war, no matter what it was, their behavior and appearance underwent a dramatic change.

Those who changed most sat up, raised their voice to a normal level instead of mumbling, held their head up and looked directly at the psychiatrist, usually for the first time in the interview. The speed of their talk picked up, often to a normal rate, and became clear and coherent, virtually free of long pauses and speech static. Their facial expressions became lively and showed more color. Each of them seemed like a different, younger, person. The self-blame that was frequent in their earlier speech disappeared.

The majority changed to a lesser extent, but in the same direction. I witnessed twenty of these awakenings, some very pronounced, however temporary. Afterwards, the psychiatrists would tell me that they had seen it many times before in response to the WWII question. How can we explain these little miracles?

It seems to me now that clinical depression involves, on the one hand, the complete repression of painful emotions, such as shame, grief, fear, and anger, and, on the other, lack of a single secure bond. The memory of the patients' earlier acceptance as valued members of a group during wartime relived the feeling of a secure bond and generated pride, counteracting the shame part of their depression.

Telling the psychiatrist about belonging to a community during WWII had been enough to temporarily remove the shame of being outcasts. Conveying to the psychiatrist that "once we were kings," had briefly generated pride, and therefore lifted their depressive mood.

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Depression/ Disconnection as Universal

Perhaps these brief recoveries are meaningful to all of us. **In modern societies, we are all outcasts, to varying degrees.** That is, because of the tempo of modern life, few of us have the time, luck and/or the ability to connect deeply with others. For this reason, more than any other, we are not in touch with most of our own feelings. Both problems occur in what might be called **the emotional/relational world**, a world more or less ignored in modern societies. If that is the case, **depression, at least to some degree, would run rampant amongst adults.** It would be so widespread that it would be accepted as normal.

Here is a personal example of both points. Many years ago at the age of 40, I chanced to make contact with some of my own buried emotions. I had a full year of intense experience of emotion, especially grief, fear, and shame. At that time the anger that had been my signature became infrequent. After that happened, I thought I knew myself more than most. And after Suzanne Retzinger became my partner, years later, I thought I also had a secure bond.

Then she and I made a trip to a conference in Atlanta in August, 2003. Since Suzanne had never been in the South, we flew there, but returning in a rental car. We stayed only two days at the conference, then drove back in six days. Until this event, we both had the conceit that we talked frequently, often at length, and on occasion, in depth. Of course, we were one or both of us often out of the house. Still we thought that at least at home, we were communicating.

In Atlanta, our communication didn't change because we were both busy with the conference. The change in routine occurred during the drive back to California, when we were together all the time, with no escape, for six days. It would have been difficult, if not impossible to do anything else, so we talked. But the turn our talk took was different than anything we had done before.

Since Suzanne is a grief counselor at the local Hospice, she talks a lot about death. So I asked her what was for me an unusual question: how would you feel if I were to die? At first she spoke about what she would do, her actions. When I repeated the question, she talked at some length about her feelings. She asked me the same question about my feelings in the case of her death. Then we chatted about asking our children a similar question. (As it turned out, the question didn't work with them). But it worked with us. We were off to the races.

That was the beginning of a six-day torrent, as if the floodgates had burst. We talked, laughed, and cried our way non-stop thru Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and southern California. We kept at it not only driving during the day, but also almost continuously during our waking hours.

After this experience, we realized that we rarely talked about anything but our immediate business. There is work outside and at home, food preparation, repairs, garden, cleaning, our children, our cats, and so on. There are also many other routines. We had the practice, for example of watching TV or DVDs together from 8pm to our usual bedtime, 10pm. This two-hour period is never devoid of talk, but only pedestrian talk. We complain about the waste of time, but often one or both of us is so tired from work that TV is all we can manage. The experience of the long drive had accidentally broken our communication routines.

Once home, we vowed never again to lapse back. We agreed that if necessary, we would just drive in circles around Santa Barbara for at least one weekend a month. Nevertheless, there were too many pulls from our old routines. Within two or three weeks, we were back in to our old shallow talk. As we had since our relationship started, we continued to work on better communicating. Progress had been made, but it always seems that more is needed. Is there any remedy? Even if one has been in paradise, it may be difficult to find the way back.

Self-concept and Community

The historian Lucy Dawidowicz (1989) reported a response to severed bonds by survivors of the Holocaust similar to those of the patients discussed above:

...the survivors liked best of all to talk about their former lives, the houses they lived in, the family businesses, their place in the community. By defining themselves in their previous existence, they were confirming their identity as individuals entitled to a place in an ordered society. They had not always been outcasts (303).

One's identity as a worthy person depends both on the level of respect one is currently commanding, and also on memories of being treated respectfully. Because Virginia Woolf's writing, even her novels, was largely based on her own memories, she devoted some attention to the role of memory in sustaining the self. This passage, by her editor, occurs in the preface of Woolf's volume of autobiographical essays:

...memory is the means by which the individual builds up patterns of personal significance to which to anchor his or her life and secure it against the "lash of random unheeding flail." (Shulkind, in Woolf, 1985, p. 21).

Woolf herself made the point forcefully: "...the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it [the present] presses so close that you can feel nothing else." (Woolf 1985, p. 98). If Woolf is right, then depression arises not only out of being an outcast, but also from not having had, or being cut off from, memories of community.

One possible source of depression therefore, is having no experience, as an adult, of being accepted by a community. Of course everyone who lives to be adult, depressed and not depressed, has had the experience as an infant of being emotionally connected to at least one caretaker, a little community of two or three. But for virtually everyone, this experience is beyond recall, and cannot serve as a source of comfort and sustenance of the self.

Many persons have had the experience of community as adults, but are cut off from it. These persons, like the old men described in the earlier study, need only be asked the right questions, and listened to respectfully. It would appear that the deficit in these cases is not in the person, but in the social environment.

The men in the earlier study lived in a milieu in which they were not likely to be asked about their experiences of any kind, much less those twenty years earlier. Even those who had social relationships on the outside would probably have found that their hearers reacted with exasperation rather than respect. Many people live their adult lives without a single confidant, and, therefore, one would expect, in a state of shame and depression. Even people who have many social relationships might often undergo rejection, real or imagined, and therefore shame.

Gender and Emotion

Boys, more than girls, learn early that vulnerable feelings (love, grief, fear and shame) are seen as signs of weakness. First at home, then at school they find that acting out anger, even if faked, is seen as strength. Expressing anger merely by verbal means, rather than storming, may be seen as weakness. For self-protection, boys begin suppressing feelings that may be interpreted as signs of weakness, and exaggerating anger.

In Western cultures most boys learn, as first option, to hide their vulnerable feelings in emotionless talk, withdrawal, or silence. These three responses may be called (Emotional) SILENCE. In situations where this option seems unavailable, one may cover vulnerable feelings behind a display of hostility. Young boys, especially, learn in their families, and later, from their peers, to suppress emotions they actually feel by acting out anger whether they feel it or not.

This pattern will be called "Silence/Violence." Vulnerable feelings are first hidden from others, and after many repetitions, even from self. In this latter stage, behavior becomes compulsive. When men face what they construe to be threatening situations, they may be compelled to SILENCE or to rage and aggression.

Even without threat, men seem to be more likely to SILENCE or violence than women. With their partners, most men are less likely to talk freely about feelings of resentment, humiliation, embarrassment, rejection, loss and anxiety, or for that matter, joy, genuine pride

and love. This may be the reason they are more likely to show anger: they seem to be backed up on a wide variety of intense feelings, but have the sense that only anger is allowed them. Numbing out fear, particularly, makes men dangerous to themselves and others. Fear is an innate signal of danger that has survival value. When we see a car heading toward us on a collision course, genetic endowment has given us an immediate, automatic fear response: WAKE UP SLEEPY-HEAD, YOUR LIFE IS IN DANGER! Much faster than thought, this reaction increases our chance of survival; repressing it is dangerous to self and others. If the sense of fear has been repressed, it is necessary to find ways of uncovering it.

In order to avoid pain inflicted by others, we learn to repress our emotions. After thousands of curtailments, repression becomes habitual and out of consciousness. But as we become more backed up with avoided emotions, we have the sense that experiencing them would be unbearably painful. In this way, avoidance leads to avoidance and finally silence in a self-perpetuating feedback loop. How can we escape this loop?

One way to start would be with a list of what I call Best Moments, as discussed below. Here are some early examples from my own list:

1936 In second grade in Kilgore, Texas. Teacher asked if anybody knew what happened in Ethiopia last week. I said it was invaded by Italy. She ask, how did you know that? I said, I read it in Time Magazine. I felt recognized by the teacher: for that moment, I was somebody rather than nobody.

1938. Play in the 3rd grade. Unexpected piano accompaniment when I was Thomas Jefferson reading the Declaration of Independence. Thrilled, ennobled, instead of my usual invisible child.

1940 Drinking alone at clear bubbling spring I found in the woods. Oneness with universe

1941 Blue water came in from ocean in Gulfport, Miss where I was enrolled in a swim camp. After a month of mud. Justice!

1943-44 Being treated with respect and decency by the scoutmaster and his wife in Leesville, Louisiana. Finding my real home in their house and in the troop, the place where I belonged.

1943 Pearl River meal of fresh fish that we Scouts caught. Independence and competence.

1943 Selling merchandise in our men's clothing store with Mom on Sunday when Dad was away fishing. Independence. Feeling competent, doing my share...

Exercises

1. Best Moments: List memories of times where there was deep contentment and/or a secure bond with at least one other person, or better yet, a sense of community with a group. Explore each memory at length, to the point that you **feel** genuine pride. Depression should lift at this time, if only temporarily. This step, when it works, provides a powerful incentive for further explorations.
2. Gratitude Letters: Write letters to those, alive or dead, who have loved and/or helped you most. This project, particularly in conjunction with Best Moments, is a powerful incentive to a good cry.

3. Try to form an empathic emotional union with at least one other person, by hook or crook, no matter the content. Some find this goal easy, but others might need coaching and practice. Get off of TOPICS, into RELATIONSHIP talk. In the initial stages, discussion of anything that is not happening in the moment is topic talk. An example of relationship talk is “I didn’t understand what you just said. Could you repeat it?” or “You seem sad,” “I am proud of you,” “You seem distracted,” and so on. Relationship talk is about what is happening in the moment, to either person, or between them. For most people, it is very difficult to stay on track, avoiding topic talk. (The psychiatrist Melvin Lansky refers to topic talk as “Mother-in-law stories.”)
4. When you feel connected to your confidante, or secure enough to do memory exercises by yourself, remember and re-experience unresolved shame and other emotion episodes to the point of ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

One way to explain the meaning of acknowledgment is that it is a verbal recognition of an emotion state that is accompanied by the actual experience of that emotion. Most of the confessions of shame in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings wouldn't qualify, since they seem to be merely verbal, without being backed by the requisite feelings.

The management of grief provides one example. The author recently heard a comment in passing that provides food for thought: a woman reported that she stays on anti-depressants because she gets “weepy” when she goes off them. There is a detailed description of a situation like hers in Iris Dement’s song, No Time to Cry (1993):

My father died a year ago today,
the rooster started crowing when they carried Dad away
There beside my mother, in the living room, I stood
with my brothers and my sisters knowing Dad was gone for good
Well, I stayed at home just long enough to lay him in the ground
and then I caught a plane to do a show up north in Detroit town
because I'm older now and I've got no time to cry
I've got no time to look back, I've got no time to see
the pieces of my heart that have been ripped away from me
and if the feeling starts to coming, I've learned to stop 'em fast
`cause I don't know, if I let them go, they might not wanna pass
And there's just so many people trying to get me on the phone
and there's bills to pay, and songs to play, and a house to make a home
I guess I'm older now and I've got no time to cry...

Conclusion: My guess is that everyone, not just Iris Dement, needs more time to cry about their losses, laugh off their embarrassment and shame, and deal with their other emotions as well. That is to say, that we all probably need emotional, as well as physical exercises to enlarge and sustain our lives. The success of these exercises depends not only on our selves, but also on being securely connected with at least one other person. The exercises outlined here have worked for me and my students for the last twenty years.

References

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