

## **Depressiveness**

Depression is such a hard thing to define and detect – particularly for the person experiencing it. It is often difficult to detect because it can morph into so many forms as to be almost invisible to the person suffering from and to those close to him/her. We hear a lot about the obvious forms of depression which include symptoms like fatigue, sadness, lack of concentration, loss of interest in things, early waking, etc. In this kind of depression the person looks depressed to outsiders, and feels depressed within themselves.

However, there are other serious forms of major life dissatisfaction which, at their root, are a form of depressiveness, but at their branch appear as something different such as stress, anxiety, workaholism, 'parentaholism' (to coin a word), over-responsibility, obsessiveness about others, impulsivity, etc. The person who experiences these things does not necessarily feel depressed because their energy feels elevated with stress, worry, obsessiveness, and activity.

Steve was one such person I met recently. Steve was a married 42 year-old civil servant working at a large office in Cork. He was a lovely character - decent, caring, responsible, and intelligent. When I asked him was he depressed he said “No, I am just under a lot of pressure. I am fine really; I just have so much going on.” Because Steve was active in trying to cope with things he rarely moped around or acted depressed. He went on to describe the litany of family, work, and life pressures he was experiencing. Clearly, he was someone under a lot of stress.

However, I was less interested in the pressures he was under and more concerned with what he felt and thought about himself. In the face of the intense verbiage about all the things he had to deal I asked a simple question: “Tell me, are you happy Steve?”

He paused for a moment and said, “No, but...” and went on to describe the stress she was feeling again but I interrupted him and asked an equally simple question: “When was the last time you felt happy and content with your life? When was the last time you felt a real sense of happiness, contentment, or simple joy in your life?” He stopped again and looked up into the corner of my office as if trying to scan through his memories like files. His gaze switched and he then began to look down at the floor (usually a sign that one is accessing something emotional) and he remained silent. “I don’t know” he whispered. I waited in the silence that followed, and prompted him again with “What comes to mind Steve? When was the last time?” He lifted his head. I urged him again, seeing that he now remembered.

The urgency had gone from him and he teared up slightly as he said, “It was when I was 22 and I was heading off to Germany with a bunch of friends and we were leaning over the sides of the ferry singing Irish ballads as the ship left the harbour. That was a great year”, he said. He was taken aback that his first memory of being happy was 20 years ago.

After some discussion of this he revealed that he has been searching for this experience for the past 20 years but that no matter what he tried to do, he could not recreate it. It emerged that Steve has been trying so hard to responsibly take care of the people and obligations that form his life with a child-like magical expectation that all he has to do

is tidy away all of these things and then he will be happy again. But it never happened. For every problem he solved and took care of another emerged just as quickly. His life, over the last ten years had been a life of problem-solving, ferrying problems to and fro, carrying people here and there, climbing up and down through his life like a house servant trying to tidy a house that gets messed up faster than it can be cleaned. This was his life.

Trying to gain control of a force over which he had none. Steve had become the worker ant, becoming increasingly numb and dead to himself. He was going through the motions of sorting the everyday problems that came at him on the treadmill that was his life.

“This is not how your life is supposed to be” I emphasised. “Life is not supposed to be like this and the only way you can change this is to let go of control.”

The compulsive reflex to be in control and to manage everything gradually quenches the sparks of life that ignite the quiet flames of simple joy. To let go of control is to confront the two lies that trigger much depression: The lie that “because I am not good enough I have to work hard to prove myself”. And the lie that “if life and people are left to their own devices, things might fall apart without me”.

These are the lies that breed compulsive over-responsibility and the need to prove oneself – whether it is as a worker, mother, father, or child. Depressiveness, that is that vague unhappiness that surrounds a person like a fog, can come as much from over-responsibility and control as much as from giving up.

Let go some control. You don't have to prove yourself to anyone.