

I've seen a few tweets recently that effectively say that you can't understand what it is like to be depressed or suffer from mental illness unless you have been there. I think that is probably true, but it doesn't mean that we can't or shouldn't try to understand each other.

When my children were born I was desperate to know what it felt like to give birth. This probably confirms that I am very strange, but anyone who knows me knows that anyway. However, while I knew that I would never give birth I was desperate to try and understand what my then wife was going through, how much it hurt, what it felt like and so on. I don't think that I ever got anywhere close to understanding, but it didn't stop me wanting to know.

So for anyone who would like to try and understand a little of what it feels like to be depressed, anxious and autistic (and I know they are very different things, but that is my personal cocktail and I have given up trying to attribute different feelings to different conditions!) I am going to try and explain what it feels like to me. The obvious disclaimer being, of course, that I can only talk about me and others will doubtless have a very different experience and perception.

One the key things for me is the sheer unpredictability of my moods and outlook. Many people, I imagine, can tell in advance vaguely when they will be feeling happy or upset, or at least what will trigger those feelings. That is not the case for me. I can wake up one morning feeling like it is literally the end of the world for no reason that I can determine whatsoever. I mutter to myself that I have had enough, what is the point and sometimes worse.

If there was an obvious cause I could try and deal with it. I am much more into actions than navel gazing. So if I had received some bad news about a friend or relative I would expect to be upset for a while and I could try and help or at least know that these feelings would pass or fade with time (if not completely disappear, I am not making light of grief here in any way). If nothing else I would have a focus for my upset and sadness. But depression is not like that. I can sit down and work out that I have nothing significant to be upset about and many wonderful things to be thankful for and to look forward to. And yet I am still thoroughly miserable, sometimes to the point of just wanting to shut down.

Equally frustrating is the randomness of coming out of these lows. With the best will in the world I have not and never will be the life and soul of the party. I am generally quite morose even on a good day. But I do come out of my really dark periods and I can no more explain why or how than I can explain why they start. Things like spending time in peace with my amazing wife help a lot with getting me through bad times, but there is nothing in particular I can point to that lifts me out other than time, and a different amount of time on each occasion.

It's like running a hard race which is getting more and more exhausting. You want to give up but that is not an option, and you have no idea whether the finishing line is round the next corner or a hundred miles away. And when you get to the finishing line, there will be another race starting fairly soon, but again you don't know when.

Which brings me to another big issue for me - the exhaustion. To keep going with a mental illness, to lead anything approaching a normal life (whatever that is), takes a huge effort. Effort, including mental effort, takes energy and when you use a lot of energy you get very tired. When you then struggle to sleep properly because of anxiety or strange dreams, you wake up exhausted every morning.

I have tried to stop saying that I am tired when people ask how I am - it was even boring me - but that is how I feel nearly all the time, completely exhausted. It then becomes a circular problem

because a tired mind is even better at imagining terrible things that seem almost certain to happen in the near future.

Another aspect that I really struggle with is fighting the urge to be self-destructive when I am going through a tough time. Not so much in terms of self-harm or worse in a physical sense, though I have thought about both in the past and have certainly done things like grind my teeth and scratch until I bleed, but for me these days it is in terms of behaviours which will have consequences.

The urge to tell people what I really think of them or to say deliberately provocative things can become almost overwhelming. I certainly find it almost impossible at times to pretend to be super interested and enthusiastic in yet another pointless meeting! But inside there is this little bit of me telling myself to get it together because when my boss pulls me aside in a few days time to discuss what I have said I will be terrified and wish I hadn't done it. But at the time there is a much stronger feeling that I really don't care and that these foolish people need to hear it how it really is.

In the past the same way of thinking has led me deep into debt because I wanted to fix the problem that was in my face and didn't care about the consequences for the future. Avoiding self-destruction is another huge internal battle that I fight several times a week. Taking a long or even medium term view when I am depressed is almost impossible.

Then there is the inescapable link with my physical health. I do not have major physical health problems, but a bout of flu or a heavy cold will make my depression and anxiety much worse, and when my depression gets bad my body wants to shut down along with my mind. Walking a flat path feels like climbing Everest. I feel cold and just want to run away to my bed.

For me, too, I am inclined to cover up my depression with humour, often gallows humour. I totally get how so many comedians have struggled with depression, like Tony Hancock and Paul Merton. Rather, I think they probably used humour as a response to their mental health and found they were very good at it. I know that I can be funny. People like attending talks and presentations I give at work, in part at least because I make them amusing. And I totally get how hard it can be to understand how someone cracking jokes can be crying inside. But many of us really are - the tears of a clown and all that. It's just a mask, a coping mechanism, a way of giving voice to our inner thoughts in a more socially acceptable way.

Where I work when someone is going to the shop they ask if anyone wants anything. I will regularly reply by requesting arsenic or strychnine, for example. Everybody laughs and of course it is a joke, but it is a joke that reflects a genuine feeling even though I have no intention of actually harming myself.

I really wish mental illness was as simple as manning up or just snapping out of it. I am glad that so many now realise that it isn't, it is a war that we fight every minute of every day. And that I suppose is the biggest feeling of all. It is a constant fight against yourself, to accept parts of you that you don't like, to accept that there are things in your head that you cannot control no matter how hard you try, to try and see the truth through the illusions your own head spins for you. You can never relax, never let your guard down, because the enemy could jump back in at any time.

So just like a physical fight you need to get numbers on your side by having friends and family to help you, medical help where you can get it, and by reaching out to fellow sufferers to share strategies and war stories.

I've really just scratched the surface here and I'll try again another day, but I hope that this might help someone understand just a little bit more. Thanks for reading.