

DEPRESSION: A Message From Self?

by Kathleen O'Keefe Kanavos

Cancer and depression go together like peanut and butter.

During my severe bouts of depression I had a choice. I could take pills to alleviate it, or I could face it and figure out what my body and psyche were telling me.

I always believed that depression was a symptom, not an illness. Alleviating the symptom would not cure the disorder. I saw my depression as something that would diminish if I faced and cured the cause.

This is easier said than done.

Looking back on those difficult times I can now answer questions I avoided such as, "Why was I depressed? How did depression serve me and what did it teach me?" Our minds are incredibly powerful and will manifest situations to serve and save us.

I came to the conclusion that depression and illness were ways of forcing me to slow down and "look within" at memories (old baggage), events (past and present cycles), people (relationships), and life styles (habits) that are not to my benefit.

Without depression, I may have continued accepting whatever I thought life was throwing at me, settling for less than I needed and/or deserved.

I learned that just because something is thrown at me doesn't mean I have to catch it, hold, and keep it, including insults or negative relationships. I can choose to duck or move out of the way. And, if I do catch it, I can choose to drop it.

Depression made me stop and reassess my life choices. I came to the conclusion that how people treat me is their Karma, how I respond to them is mine. Not all relationships or situations should be avoided or dropped.

That is when I learned my most important lesson: the quickest way to change someone's behavior is to change mine first. They must respond differently to the new behavior.

Illness and depression made me take time out for myself, taught me how to respect, honor, and put myself first, and to choose to change or walk away from bad habits, relationships and situations. I drew new boundaries with which I could live.

A friend once asked me, "How can I just quit my job or walk away from my relationship if that is what is depressing or killing me?"

I answered her question with another question. "Are you worried about letting down your job and relationship, or yourself? Will they survive tomorrow if you are not around? Will you thrive if they are gone? You cannot hold a gift if your hands are full. Put something down."

Now whenever I feel overwhelmed I take a step back and reassess my life. One of the first things I do is "check my inner baggage." I'm often surprised to find I'm bogged down with baggage that is not mine.

In the past, I took on other people's emotional baggage rather than respecting their right to carry it. Old habits are hard to break. I'm still working on them.

A caregiver by nature, I often thought if I carried someone else's troubles for them it would lighten their load. It doesn't. It just makes mine heavier. That taught me a very difficult lesson. I cannot carry other people's baggage or walk their path for them. I have to respect their life-lessons... to be learned by them... and my lesson was to respect and love them enough to let them learn those lessons, including mistakes. I will offer them my shoulder but not my back.

I learned there is a big difference between being supportive and being a mule. A supportive person lends a helping hand or a shoulder to cry on. A mule carries the weight of the world on their back while refusing to focus on their own life. This is avoidance. It only takes another challenge to be the straw that breaks their back and sends them spiraling into depression.

The mind is a beautiful thing. Experience has taught me that we manifest not only what we want but also what we need. Sometimes we need to slow down and reassess our lives. Depression served me in this capacity. I didn't enjoy it and would not choose to go through it again.

By facing depression rather than suppressing it, I learned from it, used it to change my life, and ultimately survived adversity and illness.



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To read more advice from Kathy visit her Cancer Q&A column in our Holistic Health section.