

Bill W. And Depression

by: Gary N.

There may be someone reading this page that may be somewhat new to A.A. and is feeling lousy. Or there might be someone that's been sober for some time that is feeling depressed and kicking himself down even more for not feeling better after all this sober time. If so, please keep reading, since you're by no means alone. Here is what co-founder Bill W. wrote about his own depression in 1960, 25 years after A.A. was founded.

When I was tired and couldn't concentrate, I used to fall back on an affirmation toward life that took the form of simple walking and deep breathing. I sometimes told myself that I couldn't do even this – that I was too weak. But I learned that this was the point at which I could not give in without becoming still more depressed.

So I would set myself a small stint. I would determine to walk a quarter of a mile. And I would concentrate by counting my breathing – say, six steps to each slow, inhalation and four to each exhalation. Having done the quarter-mile, I found that I could go on, maybe a half-mile more. Then another half-mile, and maybe another.

This was encouraging. The false sense of physical weakness would leave me (this feeling being so characteristic of depressions). The walking and especially the breathing were powerful affirmations toward life and living and away from failure and death. The counting represented a minimum discipline in concentration, to get some rest from the wear and tear of fear and guilt.

To a friend suffering from depression, Bill wrote in 1956: "I suppose about half the old-timers have neurotic hangovers of one sort or another. Certainly I can number myself among them."

To another friend in 1946 he wrote, "Among older A.A.'s there is a great deal of this nervous breakdown business. I certainly share your view that glandular ill health plays a heavy part in many of them. I also believe that the withdrawal of alcohol is likely to accentuate the neurosis in many of us. One neurosis may break out in very aggravated form after a few years of sobriety."

And, of course, there's the January, 1958 Grapevine article *The Next Frontier: Emotional Sobriety*, probably his most famous and quoted Grapevine article, in which he wrote: "Last autumn depression, having no really rational cause at all, almost took me to the cleaners. I began to be

scared that I was in for another long chronic spell. Considering the grief I've had with depressions, it wasn't a bright prospect."

Thus we can say with absolute certainty that Bill W. was no stranger to depression, and that he was expecting many others in A.A. to share this malady along with him.

While it would be facetious and presumptive to assert that a short article might provide a solution to such a baffling and complicated subject as depression, I believe one assertion is plausible for any depressed A.A. member reading this: "There is no shame in asking for help. The only shame is not asking for help."

Chances are that help is available from the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. Start asking people, with the assistance of your sponsor, if they have ever had serious symptoms of depression. If they respond in the affirmative, investigate whether or not any of their experiences resemble yours. What solutions did they employ? Where did they go for help? What did they do? Take what you need and leave the rest, while remembering an often quoted concept in A.A. that "We can do together what I cannot do by myself."

Please remember that whoever you ask for help, that you might just be paying him the compliment that he needed that day to avoid his own depression. By you willing to share your burdens with him, you may actually help make his own burdens lighter. For after all, as written in Bill's Story, "[W]hen all other measures failed, work with another alcoholic would save the day . . . I would be amazingly lifted up and set on my feet. It is a design for living that works in rough going."

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