



The seaweed wrap SOLUTION

Depression is not something that can be cured by an upbeat film and a pampering session, as **Melissa Jacob** realised.

It was 10 o'clock when my aunty called to tell me that my ill mother, who had been staying with her, was showing no signs of improvement. Although my aunty described it as depression, I was certain that, given a little more R&R, an entertaining rom-com and a few positive affirmations, Mum would be back on her feet in no time.

As a precaution, I decided to travel to my aunty's place in the Hunter Valley to cheer Mum up. If she was feeling down, what could be more uplifting than a visit from her first-born child? I could cook a nice meal and together we could spring-clean the house – and if things got really dire, being the sacrificial person that I am, I would allow her to play her Celine Dion greatest hits CD.

But when I saw Mum, she was writhing around on my aunty's floor; pale and gaunt, she bore little resemblance to the woman who had raised me. "Who is it?" Mum said, sitting bolt upright, looking past me with a vacant stare. "Have you heard about the disease? It's so small, the doctors can't even see it."

"She does have a disease – a disease of the mind," my aunty said to me later, sliding a *What Is Depression?* pamphlet across the kitchen table. Yet surely I knew about depression; I didn't need a pamphlet to explain it to me. We can all get down at times, but you pick yourself up and put a smile on your face. It's all about your mindset and harnessing the power of positive thought.

I took Mum back to her own place, and on the first day I attempted to engage her in lively conversation with funny stories and personal anecdotes. When that didn't brighten Mum up, I shared tidbits of gossip and told her

"ON MY THIRD DAY WITH MUM, SHE SPENT THE ENTIRE DAY IN BED. I HAD NO IDEA HOW TO BEGIN TO HELP HER AND NEITHER DID HER FRIENDS."

some jokes, but nothing elicited the slightest response from her. Maybe I could entice her with a home-cooked meal? Not a word. Might she partake of a hot drink? Nothing. A cold beverage, perhaps? Still nothing. When I pressed her for an answer, she simply said, "I just don't know," and started to cry. After spending the day performing my one-woman monologue, I was exhausted.

The following day's strategy was "the attitude of gratitude". She had everything to be grateful for: her house, her job, me waiting on her hand and foot! But she couldn't see any of the positives. She barely spoke and, when she did, her words were vicious and negative. I started to wonder if whatever she had been struck down with was contagious, because I was starting to feel miserable as well.

On my third day with her, she spent the entire day in bed, whimpering like an injured animal. I had no idea how to begin to help her, and neither did her friends. Many of them had called, enquiring about her well-being, and with evangelical zeal they touted the wonders of organic vegetables, sunshine, a good book. But thus far their suggestions had come to nothing. Clearly, Mum's depression was about more than just feeling a little blue.

I called my aunty and she explained the types and causes of depression, and the need for immediate medical intervention. That chat recalled various snatches of conversation I had overheard during my childhood. My seemingly happy grandfather. The cleared grassed area behind the town. A shotgun. His young bride. Ten fatherless children. The mental jigsaw puzzle was complete.

"Acute clinical depression," the psychiatrist

said, before explaining that a large cocktail of medication combined with counselling was essential to Mum's recovery.

"I should be able to do it on my own," was Mum's reply, distraught that she was unable to pull herself out of the dark and confusing place she was in.

I called my sister, who was living abroad, and attempted to explain the severity of the situation. "When I'm feeling down, listening to some nice music or playing a team sport seems to really pick me up," she said. Playing a team sport? Mum can't even decide what she wants to drink, let alone make a tactical decision when a ball is being hurtled toward her at great speed.

"Yes, well, I think we can all feel down at times," I replied. "But this is different. This is clinical depression and she needs medication."

"A positive person like Mum doesn't need to take anything," my sister insisted.

"Well, what do you suggest?" I asked haughtily. After a long pause, my sister said, "What about a manicure and a pedicure?"

"Yes, of course, why hadn't I thought of that?" I wanted to say to her.

The conversation ended on a sour note and I busied myself with the dishes. A short while later, the phone rang. It was my sister again. I hoped she had given some thought to the gravity of the situation. "I've been thinking," she said. "What she really needs is the seaweed wrap. Have you ever had one?"

"Can't say I have," I said, trying to mask my fury.

"Well, it's really amazing. They cover your body with layers and, after a few hours, you feel like a totally new person."

Was she serious? A seaweed wrap? A bloody seaweed wrap? If my sister could only see the shadow of our mother – who now had to be coaxed into showering and was unable to dress or feed herself – she could see that a seaweed wrap was akin to putting a bandaid on a shark bite. With three full days as an expert on mental illness, I found my sister's suggestions patently absurd. But then, when I really thought about it, it wasn't too far removed from my initial suggestions: R&R, spring cleaning, a romantic comedy...

No wonder Mum was having so much trouble accepting her illness, when she had to wade through the plague of popular opinion. I wonder how much more difficult it would be if we placed this kind of pressure on other illnesses? If diabetics were told to "fake it 'til you make it" as they visualised their healed pancreas producing insulin? As for cancer sufferers, they could simply cast their minds back to healthier times, spurred on by personal anecdotes from friends, who picked themselves up by wholeheartedly embracing the power of positive thinking.

And failing that, they could always book in for a seaweed wrap. ●

Lifeline: 13 11 14.