



Coping with Depression

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Commentary

This film looks at what can happen when people are overwhelmed by such profound feelings of fear and sadness that they can't carry on with their everyday lives. Three people who have braved the potential stigma of being open about their crises and their use of mental health services give a glimpse into the journey it's taken them on.

Trisha Goddard

I became extremely sleep deprived. I was working stupid numbers of hours a week. There was no way I could get off the treadmill whatsoever. I worked harder and harder. I did more and more hours. In the television channel's eyes, I would have been absolutely brilliant, but I was absolutely empty inside.

Jim Brown

I would get an awful churning in my stomach; it would go over and over. And get clammy, sort of sweaty palms and all the classic kind of anxiety symptoms really. And ... to a greater or lesser extent that's stayed with me

Stephen Fry

There comes a time when the blank, the blankness of future is so extreme, it is such a black wall of nothingness, not even of bad things, it's not like there's a cave full of monsters that you are afraid of entering, the future. It's just nothingness. The néant as the French would say. Le vide, the void, the emptiness and it is ... just horrible.

Commentary

While the feelings of fear and sadness are generally normal and appropriate responses to life events, they can become so dominant and difficult to handle that people seek professional help for them. These difficulties are often classed under 'anxiety' or 'depression' if they are diagnosed.

Trisha Goddard

Looking back, I probably experienced my first episode of depression as a teenager, although in those days, in the '70s, early '70s, it wasn't recognised.

Commentary

Trisha Goddard is best known in Britain for her successful show in which she encouraged other people to explore their problems. But she herself suffered a breakdown when she was presenting a TV programme and running her own production company in Australia.

Trisha Goddard

People see depression as sort of one, one thing, of feeling sad and that's the end of it, but there are lots of different types of depressions. I was actually very hyper, ... and at 14, I remember I felt very much out of control and my way of trying to get control was to stop eating. umm I used to live on a swig of sherry and a biscuit a day before I went to school. It was kind of punishment as well, but I had some control over that. I started touching things, like taps. My number was 4. I became very obsessive. I had a lot of rituals that I had to go through. An in those days no one had heard of anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or anything like that. But I know, I know from reading my diaries that I was quite clearly depressed.

Commentary

Jim Brown is an engineer and father. He's also the author of a book about his long struggle with extreme anxiety.

Jim Brown

Well, I think the business with anxiety has been with me probably for all of my life, and I think it does relate to, um, my relationship to authority really. Particularly, you know at that time the main authority figure, of course, was my father. The anxiety was about satisfying other people's requirements above your own and if this continues for long enough it means that you don't really pursue your own interests and satisfy your own needs and wishes and I think the depression comes about as a result of that.

Commentary

The actor, writer and presenter Stephen Fry can also see the beginnings of his bipolar disorder in his teenage years.

Stephen Fry

It came as quite a shock to me to realise that the feelings of suicidal thoughts that I had were actually rare and that these were not the norm. Many other feelings I had were perfectly normal. But the feeling of wishing my own life would end and trying to do something about it, which I did, from I guess 17, 18, a few times, that I discovered was not usual. And I suppose that is as good a time to date it from than any other.

Trisha Goddard

I used to think all of that behaviour was normal. You can normalise it in your own mind. And dealing with depression, as it were, just became part of who I was, until I had a breakdown in 1994. And that's when I had to go into a psychiatric hospital for five weeks and in order to come out I had to engage with a psychiatrist twice a week and that's when it was given a name: 'depression'.

Jim Brown

The first time it became a real problem was when I was 28 and I had a really bad depressive episode. I was anxious in my job and I found that I started to worry about being anxious and worried about being worried. And I got into this cycle. So in terms of looking after myself, cooking food and getting regular sleep, all of that just went out the window. And ultimately, of course, I needed to be hospitalised.

Commentary

In the late 1990s, Stephen Fry was appearing in a West End play when he went into a terrible depression. One night he sat in his car in the garage on the verge of suicide. In despair and confusion he left instead on a ferry for France.

Stephen Fry

I saw these rows of, you know, newspaper headlines and 'Fears for Fry' type thing and I stared at it in complete disbelief. I mean, I was absolutely staggered. I can't believe how people worry so much.

Commentary

After realising he'd inadvertently prompted an international search for his whereabouts, he returned to London and admitted himself to hospital. He was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Stephen Fry

It's horrible to contemplate a futureless future, if that isn't too impossible. And so you just want to step out of it. To step out of the whole race, the whole business. The monstrosity of being alive overwhelms you.

Trisha Goddard

In the past when I'd gone through periods of being down, I would sleep a lot. Even if I couldn't sleep at night, my mind was racing at night, I could catch up that sleep in the day. With my breakdown, the difference was I had a new baby, I was running a television company and fronting a television show and I had no sleep. I was sleep-deprived with the new baby. 3 a.m., my thoughts would what I'd call 'skid' – go over and over worrying and panicking, my marriage had broken up. I'd just discovered my then husband's infidelity and it was, 'How am I gonna cope, what am I gonna do? Have I got to do the show?' Literally another voice in my

head would be saying, 'Shut up, shut up, shut up, you need to sleep'. So there was a lot of head-talk going on. From the outside, people wouldn't have seen that. I was chatty. I was up. I was too up. A few people actually sort of said 'What's going on with you?' and I was highly defensive. I did not believe, if you'd have told me then that I had depression, I'd not have believed it and I think that's an issue that people need to remember. There are different types of depression.

Jim Brown

I went into the hospital as, as a voluntary, voluntary patient, into the psychiatric ward. And at the time, because I'd lost so much sleep I suppose, I didn't really know what was happening to me and I spent probably, well what was definitely the worst night of my life on a mattress. I was given some kind of medication to, to sort of promote some kind of sleep and rest, which I resisted, and I had a terrible night. But over the course of the next few days the medication definitely helped me get back into a sort of a semblance of a normal daily routine. And by the end of the week I felt, I felt fit enough to leave, although I was still, still by no means fully fit.

Trisha Goddard

I just thought if I take a lot of pills, and drink, then at least I'll get a good night's sleep. It wasn't rational thinking and then once I realised what I'd done, I rang somebody to look after the children, but I did it in a very calm voice. She happened to be a very good friend of mine who was a psychologist and a doctor. She worked it out, put everything into chain. I was taken into hospital and eventually I was admitted for five weeks. And I sat on the end of the bed ... when I came round I was very angry that someone had woken me up [laughs], and sat on the edge of the bed not moving, not speaking, because I thought if I was perfectly still, it would make my problems and the world would go away and people would leave me alone.

Commentary

In 2006 Stephen Fry was filming a documentary about his mental health struggles when he fell into a bleak depression.

Excerpt from Stephen Fry programme, Manic Depressive.

Stephen Fry (voiceover)

For the last few days I'd been feeling increasingly depressed.

Stephen Fry (to camera)

Very sort of black stage at the moment and er ... would love to be somewhere else other than here, frankly. I'm fully aware I'm a very awful person to be with. I find it difficult to meet people's eyes. I find it very difficult to connect to people, I find it very um. I just want to be alone, frankly. I'm just praying that it will pass, basically, because it's fucking irritating and I hate myself for it. I mean I've never thought that I hear voices but I do, I do, I do um I do have a voice telling my I'm a complete **** [beeped] all the time in my head.

Stephen Fry (voiceover)

Usually when I feel like this I hide away. I can't this time. For me that numbing kind of depression comes three to four times a year and lasts a week to ten days. I spend the time in the house staring at the ceiling.

Commentary

Severe mood swings are still a central feature of Stephen Fry's life.

Stephen Fry

Mood to me is like weather. If it's raining, it's no good saying it isn't raining: it is real, you know. That water is actually falling from the sky. It can take you by surprise, 'cause it can happen in a sort of crossover, a transitional phase of moods, when you're actually quite up and you don't, you can't really make sense of it 'cause it's as if the clouds are coming in but you feel good. So, you think, 'This is really weird, what's that about?' and then, and then, you know, and it might be two days later that it's got heavier and heavier.

Trisha Goddard

I got to the point where I just had to shut up all the voices in my head which led to an overdose. Now people have said, 'Oh, you attempted suicide'. Again, in my head, I don't term that suicide and when I talk to people who are suicidal I never ask that question. I ask them, 'Do you want it to stop?' There is a difference. It's a subtle one, but it's a difference. A lot of people say they're not suicidal, but they want the noise in their heads to stop, or the flatness to stop, and you get to a situation where you will do anything to make it stop.

Commentary

For Trisha, part of recovering was doing the small, everyday things to take care of herself and her family again. But she needed help to do this.

Trisha Goddard

I had a nanny at the time, thank heavens, who became almost my nanny and she used to say, 'I've bathed the children, there's some bathwater there, jump in' and would knock on the door after a certain amount of time to say, 'Do you want to help me do the children's food?', so she wasn't leaving me alone for too long in the bath, but it was, they worked it out that I had to be doing-orientated and that got me through.

Commentary

Jim Brown's recovery began through reading.

Jim Brown

I started to read, and I read lots of self-help books and some are not very good, but one or two stand out. There was one by a GP called Dr Brian Roet, um where he talked about the things people do to try to solve their problems but actually just make the problem worse and sustain it. And I started to read more widely um, and I read lots, lots of books by well-respected people who know, who've experienced depression themselves and have, and have found a way forward. And I took ownership of it, really, as being something of real value.

Commentary

Through his reading, Jim Brown began exploring counselling and psychotherapy and the many different approaches to it. Stephen Fry went to a therapist after being told he had bipolar disorder.

Stephen Fry

The best talking therapy is really listening therapy, it's not talking therapy at all. There's a room which allows you to talk to yourself and, and most of the talking is done by the, the client or patient, you know, and then just occasionally it's the usual thing of, of, you know, you sort of saying 'I know I shouldn't' and they say 'Why do you say shouldn't?' and you say 'No, you're right, oh yes', you know, and it's ... there are bits of that.

Trisha Goddard

Cognitive behavioural therapy is another approach to counselling. It is often used to tackle problematic thoughts, ideas and behaviour patterns and develop new coping strategies.

Jim Brown

Yeah, the CBT exercises are really good, because it ... they force you to think about how you think, um and assumptions you make. Im Just trying to think of an example um – 'catastrophising' is a good one. I mean a lot of us have this tendency to start with a premise which says, 'Well, I don't feel very good today', and then we extend it by saying something like, 'Well, I never feel good, I always feel terrible', which of course is not the case.

Trisha Goddard

I needed cognitive behavioural therapy just to get me through the what, you know, panic attacks and things like that and because I'm very 'take me to the next step, how do I manage it', so that helped me, cognitive behavioural therapy and also, psychotherapy – going back into why all this had happened and what patterns I continually repeated and that's started to give me a sense of control. I could control the day-to-day panic, and moods and self-talk and I had a reason why. It wasn't just because I was weak or stupid or what have you. I had a

reason why I kept getting into certain situations, certain relationships. I could start spotting trouble from afar rather than walking slap bang into it.

And exercise, I can't tell you how much walking saved my life. I can categorically say that. I'd exercised in the past, but I had no money or anything like that, so I used to go power-walking, very fast walking, with one baby – because I had a seven-month-old baby – baby would be in the back pack, older – four-year-old – would be in the big stroller and I'd put windmills – you know the children's windmills – on the pushchair and we would walk as fast as we could and we'd sing. The girls still remember it, 'We are the Goddard girls'. I felt absolutely empty inside but I'd sing as loud, walk as fast as I could, and we'd do that every morning. I didn't realise it at the time, but what that did was socialise me at a stage where I wanted to run away from the world, so people would see me every day, and say 'Hello' or 'Hi' and gradually I'd learned to meet their eyes rather than look at the ground. Um if I didn't turn up at a certain time I could see people, 'Oh, I didn't see you this morning, we were worried' and you hear that enough times and you believe it.

Commentary

Jim Brown also found that self reflection and counselling were only part of the answer. Exercising was also key in bringing about physiological change.

Jim Brown

No matter how bad I feel ... In fact the worse I feel, the more likely I am to get out and start to run, because that definitely, definitely works. It does something to your body chemistry. It releases some chemicals that just make you feel better. And anybody, you know, anyone who can run can do that.

Commentary

Seeing feelings through another lens and attaching different meanings to them is one way to change how we relate to our interior worlds.

Jim Brown

Although I still do get anxious, I see that anxiety as a useful source of extra information now, rather than a source of pain. It's there to inform you. Um We, we can think logically about something and think 'Well, there's nothing to be frightened of in this situation', but we can still be anxious. And I suspect that that anxiety is telling us something. Having a knowledge that I am anxious, there's then a judgement to be made about whether the anxiety is telling you to withdraw for safety's sake or whether it's just a form of getting keyed up to perform better under the circumstances.

Another thing that's helped enormously really, was the concept that you don't always have to be working. I mean there's nothing, absolutely nothing wrong with doing something purely for fun. And er that's the reason I took up tennis again. I play once a week. I'm not particularly good at it, but it's something that I enjoy doing – get out in the sun, swing a racket, it's fantastic. It just makes me feel good.

Whether you go for a person-centred approach, CBT or whatever, there comes a point where you have to just, kind of, accept yourself and get on with it. And I just feel much more optimistic about things and I feel that there's a point to what I'm doing.

Stephen Fry

The thing that keeps one living is a sense of future – that there will be a tomorrow and tomorrow I've got to do this and then the day after I've got to do that. Not that any of these things have a particular logical purpose or a convincing reason to exist, but they somehow keep one going. In the words of Dorothy Parker, a great wit and writer and poet, um 'You might as well live' is her poem that she wrote.

Commentary

For many people one of the major benefits of therapy is discovering patterns in their behaviour and finding different ways to cope.

Trisha Goddard

I had to revisit my past to get where I am. If I hadn't have had those talking therapies, I would have just kept repeating those same patterns over and over and over and over and over again. Then I've seen in many people, they come to a stage where they think it's their bad luck, and when you start thinking 'All of this is my bad luck', then you become a victim and then it's, then it's worse because you have that feeling – you lose hope, I can't change anything, luck is something alien that happens to me. When you start seeing a pattern in how you cope with things or don't cope with things – I like to say 'Shit happens, it's how we deal with it that counts'. When you start looking at those patterns, when you start building up resilience, coping mechanisms, and what have you, you then have a sense of empowerment and I do believe a sense of empowerment is the best tool in learning to live with and manage anxiety, and depression, all of those things, obsessive–compulsive disorder. All of those things, so, talking therapies for me – and for most people – are essential. Which talking therapy it is? That's another argument.