

Anxiety, Depression, Grief & Other Challenges

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The dark night of the soul is only one aspect of the spiritual journey, and there are many others that are much more pleasant. - Christina & Stan Grof

This doorway addresses the complex puzzle of anxiety, depression, grief and other psychological and psychiatric challenges with great respect. No easy answers here--only the promise that profoundly effective ways exist for reducing the suffering caused by severe anxiety, depression, grief and other psychological concerns. The path from severe anxiety or depression is best traveled with acceptance, compassion, knowledge, and understanding. One must often reach out beyond themselves to acquire these ingredients, calling upon doctors, therapists, facilitating healers, and most importantly an inner intelligence that comes through our spiritual core. Many of us must first find this inner invisible teacher and make room for it to inform us. This website exists to support this process. Whatever happens to us is happening for a reason. Whether we like it or not (and who likes these things?) our present experience is an important part of our evolutionary path. We can hate what's happening to us, and yet we can simultaneously find a special "knowing" within, one that guides us to what we need in order to complete our transformation and rebirth.

In our experience, all of these serious emotional issues signal a death to a part of our ego structure--an invisible programming shaped in earlier years that wants to hold onto our old ways of perceiving ourselves and our world--that are no longer needed. Hence, the concept of rebirth. If we navigate these choppy waters with good guidance and gain access to inner wisdom, the storm will subside and we will find a new sense of self with more resilience and clarity.

Beyond a "Dark Night of the Soul"

My first bout with crippling clinical depression was in 1984. It came after two years of cancer treatment that had almost killed me. Although my cancer seemed to be in remission, I now had to face the world again and rebuild a life. It was impossible. All I could do was sit or lay, crying or twisting in a horrific unexplainable anxiety. It never stopped. I couldn't sleep. I wanted to die rather than continue to feel this way. I thought my horrific experience with chemotherapy was "as bad as it gets," but the depression was far worse. The expression "dark night of the soul" seemed like a Pollyanna-like understatement at the time.

This debilitation lasted almost a year during which time I had to be rushed to the hospital as a psychiatric emergency because I was afraid I would throw myself out the window. The attending psychiatrist knocked me out with Thorazine for two days and gave my system a rest. It helped for a short time. Being a person in addiction recovery, I refused to get involved with anti-depression medications fearing they would taint my sobriety. I burned out two therapists in the process! The looks of pity and helplessness in their eyes only made me feel worse!

My sponsor in 12-step recovery asked me if I would speak to a woman he knew who had struggled with similar depression in recovery. I said yes. When she called, I realized I knew and admired this woman. She radiated a spiritual strength and calm. She told me of her own depression, which years earlier had made her a prisoner of her bedroom. She explained how she

found relief from the symptoms with a medication prescribed by her psychiatrist. She comforted me and reassured me that the medication was not contradictory to my recovery. I believed her and asked for her doctor's name.

Within several days after starting the medication, I began to feel better. My sense of interest returned. For the first time in over a year, I could see a light at the end of the tunnel. I was able to do things again. I could hardly believe how dramatically different--and better--I felt. Within several months, I was taking the courses I needed to complete my counseling certification. I've had a few bouts of serious depression since that time. One was set off by the loss of my life-partner Gil in 1988. Bereavement of someone that close, even when fully processed, includes anxiety and depression. Depression visited me again, differently though, after my heart attack and by-pass surgery. In my subsequent bouts I was much more able to facilitate my process and get help faster.

Blessing or Curse?

To be sure, psychotropic medications can be a blessing or a curse. They are a blessing when they alleviate intolerable feelings. They are a curse if they make you feel worse, or if they make you feel just good enough to avoid the emotional and spiritual emergence that wants to happen in you. The latter will eventually backfire. If this sounds like what is happening to you, you should seriously consider looking at alternative meds, doctors or approaches. For more on psychotropic medications see Doug Goldschmidt's article linked off this page.

A New Integration

Depression, anxiety and other psychiatric challenges always have precursors, or are at least related to underlying factors beyond the threshold of our awareness. In my case, when the strain of dealing with the cancer eventually overwhelmed my emotional defenses, I was flooded with agitating dark feelings I wanted to run from. Throughout this period I was always strangely and intuitively aware that these horrible feelings were not new, and I felt defeated that they finally caught me. These were feelings of intense hurt, despair, anger, grief and frustration that needed attention for a fuller recovery to take place. In complex and mysterious ways, I feel my cancer was at least in part due to these feelings suppressed in my being, as was the depression and anxiety. My cancer, depression and anxiety informed me in ways that lead to a new integration of myself. I became stronger, wiser, and clearer regarding who I was and wanted to be.

Transformation

While medication may be a god-send for those dealing with crippling severe symptoms, for those who feel able, the most profound and poignant healing transformation can unfold through authentic process healing techniques and communities. Similar to addiction, most emotional challenges are a vivid signal that repressed traumatic energies, feelings, and conflicts from our histories are ready to be heard and transformed. As we better understand this process, our reliance on medication will lessen. Even a systemic biological depression can often be worked through with appropriate compassion and support in a safe setting.

I pray that our society will become enlightened enough to nourish and be supportive of individuals who need special attention as they work through their spiritual emergence. We will need to eventually create affordable, non-clinical, residential settings where suffering individuals

can be supported in safety. They could take the time to learn how to be informed by the felt senses of their own bodies for their healing. The body knows and it never lies. The central nervous system will unravel toward wholeness under favorable conditions. If our culture understood and supported the sensitive nature of complete recovery or the “whole person recovery process,” we would not need to resort to medication nearly as often.

Support, Nurturing and Healing

There are times when I can see difficult times coming for my clients, and I encourage them to get away from the everyday challenges and heal in a safe, nurturing place. Often they cannot take time from work or they cannot afford to go away. Even if they could, our culture lacks appropriate, low cost, supportive, rest and renewal environments that facilitate such healing. We need them desperately. Psychiatric facilities are not the answer — they are merely the last resort.

Spiritual Emergencies

I have come to share the views of transpersonal psychologist Christina and Stanislav Grof, M.D. In their book, *The Stormy Search For The Self*, they suggest that:

For some individuals. . . the transformational journey of spiritual development becomes a “spiritual emergency,” a crisis in which the changes are so rapid and the inner states so demanding that, temporarily, these people may find it difficult to operate fully in everyday reality. In our time, these individuals are rarely treated as if they are on the edge of inner growth.

‘In a supportive environment, with proper understanding, these difficult states of mind can be extremely beneficial, often leading to physical and emotional healing, profound insights, creative activity, and permanent personality changes for the better. When we coined the term “spiritual emergency,” we sought to emphasize both the danger and opportunity inherent in such states. The phrase is, of course, a play on words, referring both to the crisis, or “emergency,” that can accompany transformation, and to the idea of “emergence,” suggesting the tremendous opportunity such experiences may offer for personal growth personal growth and the development of new levels of awareness.

There is great wisdom, understanding and compassion in these words. Until we can provide temporary, safe community environments for healing, we are severely limited. We need creative solutions. Some are presently available, but only for those who can afford them. If our government really wants to put money in a faith-based initiative, creating safe and effective places and strategies for citizens in spiritual emergency, could be an interesting and timely place to start. People who would go to these havens, and those who would minister to them, share a faith and intention that healing will occur. During these times of economic constraint and limited health-care resources, it is almost impossible to provide such environments at the levels required. The best we can do is provide as safe, structured and nurturing environments as possible and use our more refined knowledge of energy psychology techniques and (as needed) contemporary medications to provide symptom management as we coach ourselves and others through this emergence of spirit.

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