

Open Letter to a friend
Who is experiencing
Sadness and depression

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The Guest House

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

RUMI

Dear Friend,

Like you, I have experienced sadness and depression many times in my life. In recent years I have looked for ways to work with depression, both for myself and for others. During this time I have noticed several things I think may be useful in dealing with depression and possibly transforming it into a more peaceful and even joyful state.

Below I have listed 17 suggestions for easing the suffering we sometimes feel. May you find something here to ease your pain.

1. Give

One of the most powerful actions you can take to end depression is to do something useful for others. Because this action focuses attention on other people, it contains the possibility of taking you beyond your small self and your feelings of sadness.

It may be helpful to remember these lines:

*“Give.
Flow outward then.
Amaze yourself in service.
Discover what the Gods have always known.
For what is there to gather or to get?
In giving is the magic,
the delight.”*

2. Forgive

Holding anger fuels depression. See if there is someone in your life you need to forgive. Don't condone their wrong actions, but forgive them as human beings, if you are ready. The poet tells us that:

*“If we could know the secret history of our enemy
we would find there sorrow and pain enough
to disarm our hostility many times over”*

Forgiveness is a powerful ally in helping us return to peace.

3. Give thanks

Gratitude is so important to the way we feel that the Japanese have developed a psychotherapy based just on gratitude. It is called Naikan, and it helps us develop a profound sense of gratitude for blessings bestowed on us by others, blessings that were always there but went unnoticed.

The Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh suggests a meditation based on gratitude and awareness. It is called “the young child meditation,” and it focuses on gratitude in the moment:

*Breathing in, I am aware of my own young child,
alive and well, in my arms.
Breathing out, I am so happy*

(In the above meditation, substitute wife, husband, friend, mother, father, or others for “young child” as appropriate).

4. Remember a foundation of morality

It appears to be a law of the universe that we feel better when we treat our brothers and sisters better. So, remember the Golden Rule:

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Also the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson:

Each man takes care that his neighbor shall not cheat him. But a day comes when he begins to care that he does not cheat his neighbor. Then all goes well - he has changed his market-cart into a chariot of the sun.

5. Have perspective

In our world, we experience ups and downs. That's the way it works. The truth seems to be if you feel bad now, you will feel good later on. The correlate, of course, is that if you feel good now, you will feel bad later on. But we have all had "peak experiences" where we sensed and felt the goodness, love, and ultimate light of the universe. Just remembering these experiences can sometimes lift the heavy and oppressive burden of sorrow from us.

It's our small self that suffers in depression, not our large Self with a capital S. Our small self is not a bad thing. We need it to remember to pay the bills and pick up the cleaning. It helps us in many ways. But one thing about it is that it is subject to sadness and depression. Our large Self on the other hand is beyond depression. It recognizes our ultimate oneness with with all that is and allows us experience ease and joy.

6. Honor the physical body

The physical and the emotional are interconnected. You need ample nutritious food and plenty of exercise to help you feel your best emotionally. You can make it a pleasure by seeing to it that the food, exercise, and recreation are the ones you love the most.

7. Meditate

Be aware of your breathing. If possible, allow yourself to become calm. Your meditation may take you beyond your small self to that place of love that is beyond your pain.

Stephen Levine, who writes about meditation, tells about a way of relaxing the muscles and tissue of the abdomen in a way which can bring ease and calm. He says,

There is a technique that is ideal for working with fear and letting go of holding. It is soft-belly meditation, an "opening practice" . . .
. . . soft belly is a trigger for our letting go. Softening melts the armoring over the heart, experienced as hardness in the belly. Each time we remember to be present, to be mindful, we soften into the moment. Softening becomes a call to the heart that it's safe to be alive in the body once again. Soft belly brings an end to our fear.

On the next two pages is the soft belly meditation from his book *Embracing the Beloved*:

Soft belly Meditation

Stephen and Ondrea Levine

Find a comfortable place to sit and settle in there. And bring your attention into this body in which you sit. Feel this body. Let awareness come to the level of sensation in the body. Feel the breath breathing itself in the body. Sensations of body breathing. And gradually focus awareness in the abdomen. Sensations of the breath. Feel the breath breathing itself in the belly.

Sensations of breath coming and going. Each inhalation the belly fills. Each exhalation the belly empties. The belly rising and falling with each breath. Sensation arising with each breath. And begin to soften the belly. Softening the belly to receive the sensations of the breath. Softening to receive life in the belly. Breath. Sensation in the belly. Received in a new softness. Softening. Softening the hardness, the holding in the belly that resists the breath, that resists sensation, that resists life. Softening that hardness.

Sensation floating in mercy and awareness. Softening. Let the breath breathe itself in the softness. Letting go of the resistance, of the fear, of the holding of hard belly. Letting go of the grief and distrust. Meeting them with mercy. With loving kindness in soft belly. Letting go. Letting go of the hardness, breathing it out. Letting in the mercy, the patience, the kindness, with each inhalation. Soft belly. Merciful belly. Have mercy on you. Softening to the pain. Softening the holding. Breathing it out. Breathing in mercy. Breathing in healing. In soft belly. In merciful belly. Softening. Letting go of years of posturing and hiding. So much holding in the belly. So much fear. So much grief. Softening.

Levels and levels of letting go. Levels and levels of softening. Levels and levels of letting go. Levels and levels of healing. Softening the muscles. Softening the flesh. Softening the holding that resists, that limits life so. The armoring of the heart is discovered in the hardness of the belly. Meet this pain with mercy, not fear. Meet this grief in softness. In loving kindness.

In soft belly, we have room for it all. Room to be born at last. Room to heal, to be. Room even to die in soft belly. All the fear, all the anger, all the distrust held so long in the belly. Have mercy on you. Let it go. Let it just be. Gently, in the softness. Met by mercy and awareness moment to moment. Breath to breath. Softening. Softening. . . Even a single thought can tighten the belly, can reestablish separation and fear. Let thoughts come. Let thoughts go in soft belly. Expectation, doubt, confusion, harden the belly. Soften.

Thoughts arise uninvited. Let them float like bubbles in the vast spaciousness of soft belly. Moment to moment letting go. Moment to moment being in soft belly. In merciful belly. Softening. Making room for the heart. For mercy and compassion in the body, in the mind-for soft belly.

Nothing to hold to. Just the vast spaciousness. Just the mercy. Just the letting go of soft belly. In soft belly we have room for our pain and room for our healing. Soften. Letting go of the holding, of the mercilessness. Letting the universe be our body. Vast spaciousness of soft belly. There's room for it all. There's room for it all. Let it all float in soft belly. Breathing in the mercy. Breathing out the holding. Levels and levels of being in soft belly.

Even if some hardness is discovered in the midst of this softness, no resistance. No hardening to the hardness. Soften. Rest in being. Let the hardness float in the softness. Nothing to change, no urgency in soft belly. Just trusting the process. Just being. Let the sound of these words pass right through you. No holding anywhere. Even to understanding. No grasping at more. No tightening. Just a gentle letting go of the pain moment to moment. Letting it float in soft belly. Letting the spaciousness of being receive it all in mercy. In loving kindness. Let the sound of these words pass right through you. Let all that arises pass through the spaciousness of soft belly, touched by mercy and awareness. Floating in the spaciousness of being.

And gently let your eyes open. Let them open now. And as your eyes open, notice at what point the belly tightens once again. Even trying to understand can tighten the belly. Being anything but our own great nature tightens us, removes us from the joy of our essential nature. Fills us with mind and confusion tightening the body. Limiting the senses. Soften with the eyes wide open to the world. Notice at what point that someoneness reasserts itself and you feel a need to protect.

Send mercy. Send a blessing to that someoneness so in pain. Soften to it. Let it float in who you really are. Softening to the pain we all share. And the legacy of healing exposed in this deep softness.

8. Have a purpose or ultimate concern and take a stand

Lynn Twist, founding executive of the Hunger Project, has written:

When you take a stand, it shapes who you are. it sets your priorities. It wakes you up in the morning, and it dresses you. It puts you to bed at night. There's deep spirituality in that way of being.

And Sharon Salzberg, in *Faith*, says:

Our ultimate concern is the touchstone we turn to over and over again, the thread that we reach for to convey a sense of meaning in our lives. It is the glue that connects the disparate pieces, the frame that gives shape to the picture of our experiences. We turn to our ultimate concern when we are afraid, or bewildered, or when we don't quite know who we are anymore. We turn urgently toward our ultimate concern to give us context when we are shaken by loss or the threat of loss; we turn there quietly when something we wanted disappoints us or begins to fade away.

Here are some examples of ultimate concerns that others have embraced:

Justice
Compassion
Freedom
Beauty
Creativity
Injecting more love into the world
Designing objects to enhance people's well-being
Seeking medicines to relieve suffering
Helping people design better communities
Helping children grow into loving, fully functioning adults

9. Reach out

Our wounding, our pain, had its beginning in a relationship. It can respond in a positive way to a healing relationship. So seek out a friend, a therapist, a pastor, or someone else for talking, listening, and relating.

10. Read books that promote healing

Here are a few suggestions:

Faith by Sharon Salzberg

Constructive Living by David Reynolds

Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer by Brother David Steindl-Rast

A Path With Heart by Jack Kornfield

Insight Meditation by Joseph Goldstein

The Miracle of Mindfulness by Thich Nhat Hanh

11. Have meaningful work (right livelihood)

For each of us there is work that is appropriate at any given time. If we are pursuing that appropriate work, it will lead in the direction of our happiness. If we are not, it will be likely to cause us pain. Take some time to discern your own proper path. Then follow that path.

12. Dance/make music/create

Music, dance, and art can make their own energy. Sometimes we can let their healing power ease our pain.

13. Remember the words of “Desiderata”

See next page:

Desiderata

Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story. Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are vexatious to the spirit. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.

Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time. Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals; and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should

Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you may conceive him to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul. With all its shame, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be careful. Strive to be happy.

14. Look at your wonderful spouse, child, or friend, or a picture of them if they are not present.

There is someone in your life, past or present, who brings a smile to your face when you think of them. You can experience a wave of love just by looking at them or by bringing their image into your mind. Try this, and let the experience lift your spirits.

15. Get on with it. Do what needs to be done

We usually know what needs to be done. Here are some possibilities:

- Make something
- Read something
- Read to a child
- Learn something
- Exercise
- Clean your house, car, or office
- Shine your shoes
- Do these things for someone else
- Play

David Reynolds tells us, in *Constructive Living* that:

. . . the fully functioning human being isn't someone who is utterly free of pain and happy all the time. Not at all. The mature human being goes about doing what needs to be done regardless of whether that person feels great or terrible. Knowing that you are that kind of person with that kind of self-control brings all the satisfaction and confidence you will ever need. Even on the days when the satisfaction and confidence are not there, you can get the job done anyway.

16. Watch carefully.

Another possibility is not to transform the feeling at all, but just to carefully feel the feeling. This is a world of great beauty and delight and there are times we need to be moved by these joyful feelings, but it is also a world of tragedy and heartbreak and sometimes feeling sadness is the only authentic response. We can remember the words of Pir Vilayat Khan,

*Overcome any bitterness that may have come
because you were not up to the magnitude of suffering
that was entrusted to you.
Like the mother of the world
who carries the pain of the world in her heart,
each one of us is part of her heart,
and therefore endowed with a certain measure of cosmic pain.
You are sharing in the totality of that pain.
You are called upon to meet it in joy instead of self-pity.*

So just feel what you feel and watch carefully to see what happens with the pain. We cannot make an end-run around our pain. The way to healing is through our feelings, not around them.

Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that we become one with the feeling. He suggests we greet our sadness, “Hello depression. How are you today?” He then suggests that we calm the feeling. He tells us to “hold your depression like a loving mother holds her crying baby.” Then he suggests that we let it go, that we release the feeling. Finally he counsels us to look deeply, seeking the cause of the pain. By looking, he says, we may see what will help us begin to transform the feeling, what we need to do or not do.

17. And remember . . .

. . . that many people, including me, and perhaps some celestial beings, love you and want you to be happy. Remember to love yourself.

Wishing you blessings,

Jim

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