

Preamble

Esther

Over the past eight years, I have fought depression three times. Luckily, I am now fully recovered.¹ My illness might appear to have been triggered by my divorce, but its roots can be traced much further back to my childhood and to the personality I was born with. I've always been introverted, keeping my feelings to myself instead of sharing them with friends and family. Several years ago, my marriage started to fall apart. Our personalities were so different, and I was incapable of communicating my feelings to Man Ching, so in the end we separated. Even then, I didn't tell my friends and family. Perhaps I was too ashamed to admit that my marriage had failed.

I was on anti-depressants throughout this time, but they didn't make things better. I still felt like I was trapped in the depths of a dark valley, with no hope of ever getting out. Every day seemed infinitely long. My body weighed about a thousand tons. I felt like a walking corpse.

In the year 1992, during the worst of my depression I tried to kill myself four times. It's a miracle that I survived. Since then, I

¹ In 2008 Esther published a detailed account of her struggles with depression, including her four suicide attempts. It was entitled *Depression is Just Like This*. It became an instant best seller and went through several printings. See the appendix for a full list of Esther's books.

have vowed to fight depression with all my strength. I have tried all kinds of treatments and cures in the hopes of escaping this mental prison that I built for myself. It has been a long and arduous struggle. The only thing that got me through was sheer will power and my determination to get better. Man Ching's support was also vital at the time. Looking back on those years now, I can only sigh at the ordeal I went through.

After recovering from my illness, I thought to myself, I wonder how many people there are in this world struggling with depression right now. Many of them are too afraid to talk about it openly, and this can lead to delays in seeking professional help and can result in prolonged suffering. There are indeed some effective treatments. I have made a list of them based on my own experience of the battle with depression. I shall be very pleased if this can be of some help to one or two readers.

People with depression usually suffer simultaneously from poor physical health and from insomnia. They find it hard to concentrate and to be at peace with themselves. They are anxious and indecisive all the time. Some have eating disorders, which can lead to fluctuations in weight and related problems such as diarrhoea and constipation. They also commonly suffer from heart palpitations. In more extreme cases, they go through severe mood swings and struggle to relate at all with the people around them. Some even withdraw from life altogether.

What causes all these different symptoms? Doctors believe that they are caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, which can be treated by anti-depressants that increase certain chemicals like serotonin. Based on my own experience, medication on its

own can only solve half the problem. The other half requires other forms of treatment. The most effective of all is also the simplest and hardest: learning to love oneself. People with depression usually don't love themselves. Once they learn to love themselves and are resolved to get better, they are already half way to recovery. Here is a list of some of the things that I did to help overcome my own depression:

- ❶ Jogging (30 minutes a day). Depressed people tend to be psychologically vulnerable and very tense. This often leads to insomnia. Jogging can help relax the nerves and improve the body's metabolism.
- ❷ Meditation. Breathe deeply and slowly from the abdomen, using the muscles of the diaphragm. Controlled breathing can help restore a sense of balance and calm and reduce the stream of extraneous thoughts that may come crowding into the mind.
- ❸ Vitamin supplements. People with depression are prone to eating disorders, so it is doubly important for them to have the proper nutrition the body needs.
- ❹ Staying socially active. Social withdrawal is one of the many symptoms of depression. It is therefore vital to make an effort to participate in social activities and maintain social interactions.
- ❺ Talking to a friend. A good friend can give you the courage and support you need. It is even more beneficial to talk to friends who are by nature optimistic. Their optimistic outlook can help counter your own negative thoughts.

20 October 2000

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Leo

Esther wrote the above ‘manifesto’ at my urging. After our marriage in the autumn of the year 2000, we decided to delve more deeply into our respective pasts so as to understand each other better. That was what prompted us to organise our letters and diary entries into this little book that you are reading. I’ve always believed that it’s only by understanding the past, no matter how painful it may be, that one can build a better future.

I’d heard Esther talk about her depression many times. But apart from feeling sorry for her, I never made much of an effort to learn about depression itself. I naively attributed her illness to her unhappy past. We were happy now, I thought to myself, so how could she ever be depressed again? This was why, when she suddenly relapsed into depression six months into our marriage, I was completely overwhelmed. I didn’t know what to do except call the doctor for help and set about reading as much as I could on the subject. Deep down I knew this must be something decreed by fate. No marriage is ever perfect. This was going to be a challenge for us and the process was inevitably going to be a difficult one. This was also why I persuaded Esther to write down her thoughts and feelings, even from the darkest moments of her depression, relating everything exactly as it was. She persevered with this. Sometimes her handwriting was little more than a scrawl, and sometimes her sentences lacked polish. In order to preserve her

experience truthfully, I've arranged her jottings without making any changes other than the deletion of certain repetitive phrases and sentences.

Thinking back now, the lingering anxiety is still there. But I intend to continue confronting it. I can never consign it to oblivion. I still believe that words of reflection *can* help to resolve the invisible wounds of the soul. With the encouragement of our dear friends Pai Hsien-yung and Wang Der-wei,² Esther also steeled herself to write down her experiences of attempting to commit suicide. These are included as a postscript.

Depression is a condition whose causes continue to baffle the medical profession, even though the number of sufferers worldwide is ever on the increase. Most people, especially in the Chinese-speaking world, have insufficient understanding of it. They may even try to conceal it like some guilty secret, something to be ashamed of. But the more they conceal it, the more harm it may cause to the sufferer and to their family and friends. In America, nowadays doctors recommend the forming of support groups for depressives, to promote the exchange of helpful information and to provide mutual aid. It is hard to say if this would ever work in the Chinese world.

² David Der-wei Wang, born 1954, is the Edward C. Henderson Professor of Chinese Literature at Harvard University. He has written extensively on modern and contemporary Chinese literature, comparative literary theory, and Chinese intellectuals and artists in the 20th century.

Esther and I resolved to share the story of our travails, with the aim of drawing the attention of concerned readers to this problem and perhaps diminishing to some extent future misunderstandings and negligence with regard to this illness. I can speak as the partner of a sufferer. Psychological and emotional support is of incalculable importance. In other words, medication is not a sufficient cure *in itself*. It must be supplemented with other forms of therapy, both physical and psychological. But Western types of therapy are not necessarily going to be effective with Asians. The concerned care of family members and friends, and the consolation of religion, seem perhaps to be more appropriate. This at least has been my personal experience.

Here are nine of the classic symptoms of the onset of depression. If any four or five of these are observed simultaneously, and indeed if the ninth symptom is present on its own, one should immediately seek medical assistance.

- ① A despondent mood.
- ② A lack of interest or pleasure in any form of activity.
- ③ A sudden and noticeable change in appetite or body weight.
- ④ Insomnia, or drowsiness on waking, persisting over several nights.
- ⑤ Sluggishness of movement, or excessive irritability.
- ⑥ Severe exhaustion, listlessness.
- ⑦ A lack of self-esteem and self-confidence, excessive feelings of self-blame and guilt.

- ⑧ Inability to concentrate, unfocussed thoughts in general, indecision.
- ⑨ Recurring ideas of death or suicide.

Any cure for depression is bound to be of long duration. In the lightest cases, it may last a month; in more severe cases a year and a half. In some acute cases, or where a suicidal tendency is present, hospitalisation may be necessary. With this illness there is a high rate of recurrence. Medication should be continued well after recovery, perhaps at a reduced dosage, and should be accompanied by a healthy physical and psychological regime. Esther has listed five possible components of such a regime. Unfortunately, with her recent bout of depression, six months after recovery she prematurely stopped taking her medication, and a year and a half later suffered a relapse.

These are just my own 'provisional' jottings. I could never begin to chronicle in full our emotional travails during the course of this illness. Reading her entries now from a few months ago, I feel the total powerlessness of words to provide a truthful account of the reality. The pain we lived through, which lies behind the words, will remain forever engraved in our minds. It can never be forgotten. We neither of us ever imagined that this little book, which was conceived originally as an account of our happiness together, of our 'wedded bliss', would lead to such a sombre last 'movement'. We live in hopes that this 'adagio' will gradually return to the more lively 'allegretto' of our happier times.

Journal of Depression

Esther: Boston, 8 March 2001

I was in a rush to leave the house this morning, when mum called. She told me she'd received the doctor's report. They've found cancer in her spine and she needs to start chemotherapy straightaway. I was quite shocked to hear this but tried not to let it show. Lately we've been worried about my stepfather's health. He has a weak heart and the doctor has told him that he may only have a few years to live. So now he wants to retire. We all think he is making the right decision and that he should go ahead and enjoy his retirement. But now, suddenly mum has fallen ill again.

I remember the winter of 1991, when she was diagnosed with early stage breast cancer and underwent surgery. She's a strong woman and recovered quickly. My stepfather, who was doing business in Indonesia, came back and looked after her for a while. Then he left again. I had just separated from Man Ching and was in a pretty desperate state myself. I hadn't yet told my parents about the failure of my marriage, as I was trying to deal with my pain alone with the help of therapy and medication. I was too caught up in my own emotional turmoil to register my mother's physical suffering. She never complained to me when I went to visit her. Instead, she could see that I looked unhappy, and always ended up consoling me.

Now, ten years later, her cancer has come back, just as my life is moving into a brighter future. I married Leo last year, and am

no longer depressed. We are very happy together. I can more easily empathise now with mum's illness and her pain. I feel sorry for her, and regret not having taken better care of her in the past. I also feel powerless in the face of illness and death. Luckily, Leo was next to me when I heard the news. He said to me, 'We are so blessed to be living such a happy and perfect life together. Perhaps it's time to repay some of our debts. Don't worry, I'll always be here for you. We'll get through this together.' I'm still worried about my mum, but his words have helped to lift a weight from my heavy heart. My mother is a brave woman, and I feel that although she may suffer physical pain, she will get through this. She has unusually prominent ears, which is traditionally considered by Chinese people to be a sign of good fortune. Heaven must surely be on her side. I went and bought a plant this afternoon from the local flower shop. I'm going to look after it with great care, just as I want to look after my mother. Mum will recover, just as my plant too will grow to be healthy and strong.

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Esther: 15 March

I've been suffering from sleepless nights because of the return of mum's cancer. As a result, I was feeling really tired the other morning. I even missed out on Leo's lecture in the afternoon. I had a rest in his office instead. But no matter how hard I tried, I still couldn't fall asleep and started feeling very anxious—I remembered how my

depression had always started after a few sleepless nights. We'd made plans to travel to Berlin and the Netherlands on the 22nd. If this carries on, I thought to myself, I'll be too worn out to go. The more I thought about it, the more anxious I became. I waited until Leo finished teaching and asked him to call his GP for some sleeping pills. That night I managed to sleep soundly.

The next morning, Leo took me out for lunch to my favourite Japanese restaurant. After lunch I went to get a haircut and at three o'clock I went to see a psychologist to discuss my recent changes in mood. She didn't think that I was relapsing into depression. She attributed my low spirits to my mother's illness and my ongoing menopause. When I got home, I felt fine at first. But later that evening, all sorts of feelings of worry, anxiety, and uncertainty began to resurface, and I ended up feeling wretched. After dinner, Leo and I sat on the sofa and talked through our feelings. We both ended upset and in floods of tears.

We were weeping for different reasons. Leo was afraid that after my depression I might leave him, that I wouldn't need him any more. I was distraught because I was terrified at the thought of having to go through all the pain of depression yet again. During my previous bouts of depression I'd been on my own, I'd had no responsibilities. But now things were different, now I had Leo, he was part of my life. Previously I could go for days without eating and drinking, without talking and laughing. Even if I were to die, it would just be me. But now? Now it was different. We'd been together for more than a year, we were so happy. We used to joke and laugh every day. Life was so much fun. Leo kept

repeating his fake-Cantonese expression 'kei-ho' a dozen times a day to show how happy he was in our life together. How would my depression affect him? Would I ever be able to make myself laugh again? If I stopped being happy, could *he* be happy? Ever since we've been married, my greatest source of pride has been that I can give him a happy family life. But now my depression could put an end to that. That was what concerned me the most, the fear that I might no longer be able to give him happiness. At the same time I was also very concerned about my physical health. I'd always been rather a hypochondriac. Every time I felt sick, I'd start thinking that I might be coming down with some serious and undiagnosed disease. I would become quite obsessed by the thought. I already had two health check-ups booked for the coming month of April. The first one was connected with my application for a green card, the second one was my normal annual check-up. Now that I was going through menopause, I needed to have extra tests and check-ups before I could start taking any medication. All of this was adding to my concerns. I felt terrified. Supposing I were to be both seriously ill *and also* severely depressed? What a nightmare that would be for us both! What if I died prematurely? What would happen then to my poor Leo, who needed me to look after him?

Then he started weeping too. My heart broke when I saw his tears. He also was emotionally vulnerable. 'I waited 60 years to be with you,' he pleaded, 'to find happiness! Please don't ever leave me!' I could never bear to leave him! But I'd married him to bring him joy and happiness, not to become a burden. I was at my wits'

end! I didn't know what to do! Thoughts like these were keeping me awake at night. He tried to distract me by telling me stories, by talking to me and comforting me so I could fall asleep. Poor Leo, I hated keeping him awake in the middle of the night. I tried my best not to disturb him.



Esther: 20 March

Spring seems to have arrived in Boston. It's a warm sunny day. But I'm miserable. This morning, I got up and stumbled around feeling half-awake, half-asleep, with a terrible aching pain in my head. It was as if the demon of Anxiety and of all bad thoughts was there lurking in a corner of my brain, lying in wait to attack me. I could feel the old pain coming back once again. 'A curse on you, demon of Depression!' I cried silently to myself. 'Get away from me!'



Esther: 21 March

A letter to my husband

This morning I didn't want to get out of bed and go out with you. I know that's a common sign of depression. The minute I open my eyes, I'm terrified at the thought of having to face the world.