
To : Seafarers Our Ref : Mentoring Letter 18 – Depression, the Black Dog
From : Marine Mentor Date : 4 June 2020

Dear colleagues,

In Mentoring Letter 8, I discussed the barriers to mentoring. I mentioned that there were language, culture, power differential barriers, emotional and situational barriers, as well as failures of leadership and/or management. Whatever the barriers are, they need to be dismantled if a more positive and productive shipboard culture is to be achieved.

I accept that some barriers are easier to break down than others, which is why I have brought up negativity and depression at this time, now that we've learnt other skills. These two of course fall into the category of emotional barriers, which are often the most difficult to confront, especially if our EQ is not what it should be. Hopefully, by the time we're done, you'll be able to recognise these and other barriers and to find creative ways to treat them for what they are, and best of all, to tear them down.

The very mention of the word depression stirs up more emotion. Sadly, there was a social stigma attached to it for many years, which prevented many of the older generation in particular to understand that it is only an illness which can be treated. My Father for example, was brought up in a children's home, where emotions were suppressed. He started work at 14, and was a teenager during WWII. This was a time when emotions had to be kept bottled up, and the only emotion which seemed ok to show others, was anger – this was a "manly" thing to do. Other than that, emotions were little understood, and left to women. (Who coincidentally thrived to the extent that they understand these far more than men do, which only causes more trouble in our lives!) This is also the backdrop against which many viewed depression – as a mental disease, a weakness. Of course, my Dad was a human being, and experienced emotions, but just didn't know what to do with them. As a result, he suffered severe depression in his later years after having lost his wife (my mother) at a young age, and having to bring up a large family, alone. However, years later, when I appealed to his doctor friend to treat his depression, he replied that Dad was a proud man, and that he "could not do that to him." What nonsense, and a disservice that was. It didn't help my father's suffering, in fact it grew worse with time, having been left untreated. He died of old age three years ago, in relative misery.

What IS depression? First of all, it is NOT a weakness, nor is it a mental disease. It is NOT bipolar disorder, it's a mood disorder. Wikipedia describes it as "... a state of low mood and aversion to activity. It can affect a person's thoughts, behavior, motivation, feelings, and sense of well-being. It may feature sadness, difficulty in thinking and concentration and a significant increase or decrease in appetite and time spent sleeping. People experiencing depression may have feelings of dejection, hopelessness and, sometimes, suicidal thoughts. It can either be short term or long term. The core symptom of depression is said to be anhedonia, which refers to loss of interest or a loss of feeling of pleasure in certain activities that usually bring joy to people. Depressed mood is a symptom of some mood disorders such as major depressive disorder or dysthymia; it is a normal temporary reaction to life events, such as the loss of a loved one; and it is also a symptom of some physical diseases and a side effect of some drugs and medical treatments. After that, is there anyone reading this who has not ever experienced some of this? Of course not, we all do, to various degree and extent depending on the various causal factors mentioned.

Here is what a medical website (medicalnewstoday) says: *Depression is a mood disorder that involves a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest. It is different from the mood fluctuations that people regularly experience as a part of life. Major life events, such as bereavement or the loss of a job, can lead to depression. However, doctors only consider feelings of grief to be part of depression if they persist. Depression is an ongoing problem, not a passing one. It consists of episodes during which the symptoms last for at least 2 weeks. Depression can last for several weeks, months, or years.*

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Depression can be in your genes, it could be because you are experiencing relationship issues . There could be social factors, it could be psychological, or it could be the result of stress. It could also be physical – an imbalance of serotonin. There are many causes, and all of these are what we all experience at one time or another.

How do we recognise depression? Well, for me, I have known that “Black Dog” for long enough to know when he’s snapping at my heels; I feel irritable, moody, or even short-tempered, I have less interest in things I normally enjoy, I don’t sleep very well, or I struggle to get out of bed, I feel drained of energy, I’m constantly tired, I lack confidence, I withdraw and stop socialising, and yes, I suffered “burn-out” many years ago, and did harbour thoughts of self-harm, as ridiculous as it sounds. You may also suddenly find people avoiding you. That’s reason enough for a re-think! I was fortunate, I went to speak to someone I trusted, and found the support that I needed at that time. Although I am still wary of depression, I know enough about it to manage it rather than allow it to manage me. I respect it, and know that if I don’t deal with it, it will deal with me. I’ve “been around the block” enough to know that it’s temporary, and that I am stronger than a mood, and I have dealt with it very successfully for many years. I do not allow it to affect me in any way. In fact, I welcome it as a reminder that I’m human, and that I need to care for myself, and for others. NOTE: THIS IS NOT A COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF SYMPTOMS. This is only a hint that If you are not feeling your normal self, you MAY BE SUFFERING FROM DEPRESSION. There are also other symptoms, so see a doctor!

I have shared this with you because I know that depression is 3x more likely to affect seafarers, than those ashore. A high percentage of you reading this, has either experienced, or will experience depression. Some may not be as fortunate as I was, so here are some ways of dealing with it in yourself:

1. Diet – what you put in, is what you take out. Watch your nutrition. Increase your intake of fruit, vegetable, fish and olive oil.
2. That exercise bike is there for exercise, so use it. If it’s broken, fix it, or ask the Master to buy a new one.
3. Vitamins - get some sun, and take Vitamin B especially. Omega 3 and Omega 6 are very helpful.
4. I swear by chamomile tea! I was introduced to its’ benefits some years ago when I spent a few months in Ecuador.
5. Go see a doctor. He will conduct a proper diagnosis, and perhaps prescribe the meds you need to get through the episode.

What do you do if you believe that a shipmate is suffering from depression? What you certainly never do, is tell them to “snap out of it,” or to “grow up.” “Tough love” only shows your own ignorance, aggravates the situation, and weakens the relationship. Do not tell them that “everyone goes through difficult times, or to look on the bright side. Do not encourage him to drink more – excessive alcohol is unhelpful and can make it worse. What you can do is to find the right moment when it’s just the two of you, then ask him (or her) how they are feeling? By that, I don’t mean what they’re thinking! Ask most women what is meant by that, and they’ll say stuff like “happy,” “sad,” “annoyed,” “frustrated,” etc etc. Empathise with them, and allow them to talk. Tell them that you’ve noticed something different, how long have they been feeling like this, or how can I best support you? Be there for them, and do NOT judge, criticise, or try to solve their problems or offer comparisons. Best of all, encourage them to seek help. You cannot fix this for them, they are perfectly capable of doing that themselves with just a little support, encouragement, and very importantly, medical assistance. Above all, be patient, and remember that they need someone they can trust.

I hope that by reading this to the end, and by discussing it, you will assist me in de-stigmatising this common medical issue, and in so doing, encourage more to seek proper assistance. Depression is only life-threatening when it is left untreated. At best, it can be career-threatening or even create a wall between us and a Mentor, or prevent us from mentoring or socialising with others. Aboard a ship, we all know how harmful social barriers can be. Effectively managed, it is just another thing we certainly can live with, in the same way as we do many others. Nobody is perfect! We’re human, after all...

Kind regards,

Mike Melby

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