DEPRESSION
THE WAY OUT OF YOUR PRISON
THIRD EDITION
SAMPLE CHAPTER
First published in 1983 when it won the MIND book of the year award, this best-selling book has helped thousands of people leave the prison of depression. Dorothy Rowe gives people a way of understanding their depression which matches their experience and which enables them to take charge of their life and change it. She shows that depression is not an illness or a mental disorder but a defence against pain and fear, which we can use whenever we suffer a disaster that our life is not what we thought it was.

Depression is an unwanted consequence of how we see ourselves and the world. By understanding how we have interpreted events in our life we can choose to change our interpretations and thus create for ourselves a happier, more fulfilling life.

*Depression: The way out of your prison* is for depressed people, their family and friends, and for all professionals and non-professionals who work with depressed people.
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Third Edition

Dorothy Rowe
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Depression is as old as the human race, and rare is the person who has not felt its touch. Sometimes, suddenly, without apparent reason we feel unbearably sad. The world turns grey, and we taste a bitterness in our mouth. We hear an echo of the bell that tolls our passing, and we reach out for a comforting hand, but find ourselves alone. For some of us this experience is no more than a fleeting moment, or something we can dispel with common-sense thoughts and practical actions. But for some of us this experience becomes a ghost whose unbidden presence mars every feast, or, worse, a prison whose walls, though invisible, are quite impenetrable.

Depression, in this century, [the twentieth] has been called an illness and treated with pills and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). Some people are greatly helped by this treatment. Their depression vanishes, never to return. However, for some people, pills and ECT bring only temporary relief or no change at all. For these people something more is needed, and this is not surprising, since being depressed is something more than being ill.

If we have measles or a broken leg, we may feel miserable and inconvenienced, but, unless we feel we are so ill that we might die, we do not spend our time worrying about our sins, or contemplating the futility of existence. Yet if we are depressed this is what we do. In our own way and in our own terms we think about, agonise about, the issues of life and death – which are about what purpose life has, what faith we can live by, whether our life ends in death or whether something lies beyond death, what we have done and our feelings

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of shame and guilt, fear and courage, forgiveness and revenge, anger, jealousy, hate and love. For some of us, out of this period of painful turmoil comes a measure of peace and wisdom; for others, the confusion continues.

Depression is so common in all cultures and throughout history that it seems to be more than just a painful illness. It seems to be a universal experience, a period of unhappy withdrawal, an uncomfortable hibernation where the person comes to realise that something has gone wrong with his life and that something needs to be put right. Why is it, then, that some people going through this experience do discover what it is that needs to be put right, while others go on and on in miserable confusion?

Over the past twelve years I have had long conversations with people whose depression has persisted despite all the best medical treatment. I have also had long conversations with people who have had their fair share of problems but nevertheless still cope. People who cope and people who get depressed see the issues of life and death in very different terms.

Some of the depressed people I have talked with have found their way out of their depression. Others still get depressed from time to time, but they now have some idea why this happens. Depression is a prison which we build for ourselves. Just as we build it, so we can unlock the door and let ourselves out.

Dorothy Rowe
Eagle, Lincolnshire, 1983
When in 1983 I was writing this book I never anticipated that it would still be being read a decade or more later. In that time my life changed, as did the National Health Service. The substance of the book remains as valid as ever, but there are some things which I now know are important but which were not in the first edition. Many people have told me that they have been greatly helped by this book, but depression remains as common as ever because we fail to understand ourselves. The cure for depression is not pills but wisdom.

Dorothy Rowe
London, 1995
Ideas permeate throughout society slowly. When this book was first published in 1983 an idea held by very few people was that depression could be understood and dealt with solely in terms of how we live our life. Nineteen years later it is a far from rare idea, although it still causes controversy.

Some ideas permeate society from the top down. Fashion idols such as the famous Beckhams start a fashion and others follow. Scientists invent a theory, create new jargon, and gradually the whole world starts to talk of holes in the ozone layer, global warming and greenhouse gases. Some ideas begin at the bottom and permeate up. People discover from their own personal experience that what those at the top, the ‘experts’, say is not right. When someone like me, an unknown psychologist, puts what they have discovered into an accessible book they are delighted, and they tell their friends.

It is this word-of-mouth, grassroots publicity which has ensured the longevity of this book. I have not been showered with recognition and honours by my psychologist colleagues and certainly not by psychiatrists. But what has happened, time and time again, some complete stranger has written to me or accosted me after a lecture with the words, ‘You wrote that book about me.’

When ideas develop at grassroots level they flow around and we ingest them, often without knowing that we do. We produce the idea and feel that we have invented it. When we know that we got the idea from someone else we acknowledge this at first but then we stop doing this and pass the idea off

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as our own. An idea which is central to this book, that depression can be our response to the discovery that there is a serious discrepancy between what we thought our life was and what it actually is, I got from Phillip Hodson, now Fellow of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. In the first few months of talking about this idea I used to acknowledge Phillip as its author, but, as I once told him, I stopped doing this. Phillip did not mind because, like me, he sees his ideas as children. You create them, and then you have to let them go. If they go out into the world and do good, you can feel happy, even though you cannot take the credit.

Often grassroots ideas inspire people, who otherwise would have lived quietly, to do brave things. One such person is Terry Lynch, an Irish GP. Psychiatry in Ireland is still very traditional, and this is the kind of psychiatry which Terry Lynch would have learnt in his training. As a GP he could have enjoyed a hard-working but quiet life, tending the physically ill and sending those with troubled minds to the psychiatrists, but he found that what the psychiatrists did did not accord with his experience. So he encouraged his troubled patients to talk to him, and out of these talks he wrote his book Beyond Prozac: Healing Mental Suffering without Drugs, a book which he knew would not please his psychiatrist colleagues. In this he said,

I now believe that depression is not a ‘psychiatric illness’. Depression is a coping mechanism, a withdrawal within oneself when reaching out to others has become too painful, too risky. Depression is an unhappy place to be, but for the person who suffers with it, depression is the lesser of two evils. . . .

Doctors believe that depression serves no purpose. We have had ‘Fight Depression’ and ‘Defeat Depression’ campaigns, as if depression were an enemy to be exterminated. These campaigns have received great publicity. But they have made little impression, either on depression or on the suicide rate. I believe that even the most severe depressions make sense, and are
understandable in the context of the life that person has lived and experienced.¹

In his book Terry Lynch told the story of Jean whom psychiatrists had diagnosed as having a severe anxiety disorder. They had spent no time listening to her and trying to understand her story. Terry Lynch wrote,

Had they focussed on the real issue – her total lack of inner safety and security – they might have got somewhere. Jean’s anxiety was not her problem – quite the opposite: it was her protector. Feeling constantly unsafe and under threat, her anxiety protected Jean from taking risks which would have left her open to further hurt. Even simple things like going for a walk had become very threatening to her. While becoming a recluse was painful to her, it was less painful than taking any risks.²

That depression and anxiety, and other mental disorders, are defences, not illness, is an idea that is spreading gradually.³ Different people in different places can come to the same conclusions. While Terry Lynch was dealing with the pregnancies and births in his practice, Paula Nicolson at Sheffield University was researching the problem of postnatal depression and writing an excellent book for mothers and fathers, essential reading for any family where postnatal depression is, or could be, an issue.⁴ They both came to the same conclusion. Terry Lynch wrote,

What women with post-natal depression need is social, emotional and psychological support. Post-natal depression is not a ‘mental illness’. It is an understandable human response to one of the most challenging human experiences of all – becoming a mother. Why do we need psychiatric reasons when there is a perfectly adequate human explanation?⁵

The Welsh poet Gwyneth Lewis told me that she had not read any of my work until after she had gone through a long depression, emerged from it, and then written what is undoubtedly the best book I have ever read about one per-
son’s experience of depression. It is *Sunbathing in the Rain: A Cheerful Book about Depression*. Gwyneth wrote,

> We are all the artists of our own lives. We shape them, as best we can, using our experience and intuition as guides. But we’re also natural liars and we get things wrong. It’s so easy for the internal commentary that forms how we live to become a forgery. Approached in a certain way, depression is a lie detector of last resort. By knocking you out for a while, it allows you to ditch the out-of-date ideas by which you’ve been living and to grasp a more accurate description of the terrain. It doesn’t have to come to this, of course, and most people are able to discern their own truths perfectly well without needing to be pushed by an illness. But my imagination is strong and it takes some people longer than others to sort out pleasing fancies from delusions.

If you can cope with the internal nuclear winter of depression and come through it without committing suicide – the disease’s most serious side effect – then, in my experience, depression can be a great friend. It says the way you’ve been living is unbearable, it’s not for you. And it teaches you slowly how to live in a way that suits you infinitely better. If you don’t listen, of course, it comes back and knocks you out even harder the next time, until you get the point.

Over twenty years I’ve discovered that my depression isn’t a random chemical event but has an emotional logic which makes it a very accurate guide for me. It kicks in when I’m not listening to what I really know, when I’m being wilful and harming myself. Much as I hate going through it, I’ve learned that depression is an important gift, an early warning system I ignore at my peril.6

When you become depressed you have a choice. You can choose to make your depression a lifelong prison from which you get rare glimpses of sunlight, or you can make it a tough school which teaches you wisdom. If you choose the tough school you will find this book to be a useful textbook.

Dorothy Rowe
London, July 2002
What is the difference between being depressed and being unhappy? There is a difference, and when you have experienced both you know what this difference is.

When you are unhappy, even if you have suffered the most grievous blow, you are able to seek comfort and let that comfort come through to you to ease the pain. You can seek out and obtain another’s sympathy and loving concern; you can be kind and comfort yourself. But in depression neither the sympathy and concern of others nor the gentle love of oneself is available. Other people may be there, offering all the love, sympathy and concern any person could want, but none of this compassion can pierce the wall that separates you from them, while inside the wall you not only refuse yourself the smallest ease and comfort but you also punish yourself by words and deeds. Depression is a prison where you are both the suffering prisoner and the cruel jailer.

It is this peculiar isolation which distinguishes depression from common unhappiness. It is not simply loneliness, although in the prison of depression you are pitifully alone. It is an isolation which changes even your perception of your environment. Intellectually you know that you are sharing a space with other people, that you are talking to them and they are hearing you. But their words come to you as if across a bottomless chasm, and even though you can reach out and touch another person, or that person touches you, nothing is transmitted to you in that touch. No human contact crosses the barrier. Even objects around you seem further away, although you know it is not so, and while you
are aware that the sun is shining and the birds are singing, you know, even more poignantly, that the colour has drained from the sky and the birds are silent.

How can you describe this experience and convey its meaning, to someone else? Saying that you are depressed, or really down, or fed-up, can mean to another person no more than the Monday morning blues, or something you could snap out of if you really tried. But you know that it is not a passing mood or something that will vanish if you try to ‘pull yourself together’. The turmoil of your feelings is so great that it is impossible to know where to begin to describe them. So it is better to remain silent.

Yet there is a way of conveying what you are experiencing. If you were an artist or a film-maker, you would be able to create an image which would convey at least something of what you are experiencing. It is for this reason that I always ask my depressed clients, usually at our first meeting, this question. *If you could paint a picture of what you are feeling, what sort of picture would you paint?*

Some people answer immediately and describe their image, often in a complex way. Some people are rather shy to answer and fumble for words, sketching their image in very simple terms. But no matter whom I ask, it seems that a person’s image of being depressed will be one of the following kinds.

First, there are the images of the person alone in a fog. The fog may be grey, or black, or a tangle of violent colours. The fog may be swirling round the person or still and thick like cotton wool. The person may be trying to find his way out of it, or he may be frozen in fright and hopelessness.

Next, there are the images of empty landscapes, waterless deserts or frozen wastes, or images of boundless oceans. The person sees himself trudging alone towards an empty horizon or caught in a violent storm, or sitting helplessly immobile on a burning rock or a melting ice floe.

Then, there are the images of the person, alone in a space, wrapped tightly in something or pressed down by some heavy weight. The wrapping may be a shroud, or a thick black cloth, or some encasing garment. The weight may be a crushingly heavy box, or a stone lodged over one’s heart, or a
bird like a heavy black owl which perches on one’s shoulders. Andrew Solomon saw his depression as a heavy vine that wraps itself around an oak tree and sucks out its life, ‘a sucking thing that wrapped itself around me, ugly and more alive than I.’

The most elaborate images are those where the person finds himself trapped. He may be travelling along an endless black tunnel, or clinging to the sides of a bottomless pit, or grovelling in the crater of a burnt-out volcano, or locked in a cold dungeon, or sealed in a metal sphere or a black balloon. Cages come in many shapes and forms. A person may see himself alone in a diving bell deep in the waters of the cold North Sea, or abandoned high on a Ferris wheel in an empty fairground, or crouched in a small cage which is suspended by a fraying rope over a bottomless abyss.

All the images are terrible. Some contain a modicum of hope. Perhaps you could find your way through a swirling grey fog, or lift a weight from your shoulders. Help might come from outside – a friendly Eskimo might chance along or someone arrive with the key of the Ferris wheel. Perhaps you could gain the strength to help yourself – to clamber out of the pit or unwrap the heavy cloth. But, however the image is expressed, all the images have one thing in common. You are enduring a terrible isolation.

You are alone in a prison.