

to wear it. I had allowed the doctor's diagnosis of suffering severe clinical depression, to turn into an excuse to be sad, a mask to hide behind, and worst of all, a tool to create dramas in my life.

I held onto that diagnosis so tight, it stripped me of the ability to get well. Realising that there was a doorway out of my hell was the first big step in my recovery. Once I knew that I could overcome the depression, my journey began. I started experimenting with different natural remedies, using myself as a guinea pig. Some were more successful than others.

A diet of good food and rest became a priority, and exercise, a necessity. Many people fail to recognise that exercise can be used like a drug. When we get active for an extended period of time, feel-good endorphins are released into the body. This lifts our mood and helps us think more clearly, while distracting us from the stresses of our everyday life.

After learning that dietary changes bring about changes in our brain structure, chemistry, and physiology, thus leading to changes in behaviour, I began using food as my medicine. Rice, greens, oily fish and bananas, given their serotonin-boosting qualities, soon became prominent ingredients in my everyday meals. Even snacking on walnuts would lift the brain fog of an afternoon.

Unfortunately, chocolate had to be taken off the menu during my recovery, as I soon learnt that indulging in this sweet treat would leave me feeling emotional and fragile once the initial buzz wore off. I learnt to become a mood-food detective and identify which foods would puncture my mental state.

As I started researching the affects of food on a person's mood, I discovered sugar, caffeine and alcohol were the three big brain drainers. Caffeine increases anxiety by over stimulating the nervous system, sugar causes roller-coaster mood swings of rapid highs followed by intense lows, while alcohol is a depressant that does nothing more than mask the pain, while impairing proper serotonin uptake.

But treating the mind and the body were only two thirds of the equation. Nurturing the soul was the

last component I was missing to ensure a full recovery. If the soul is ignored or malnourished, the psyche, and ultimately the body, suffers.

So I got in touch with my inner child and started to laugh more, watching comedies and attending regular laughter yoga classes. Laughter is a powerful antidote for depression. When we laugh, especially when we really let ourselves go, our endocrine system releases endorphins and encephalins, reducing feelings of stress, and leaving behind a sense of euphoria.

Laughter wasn't my only source of fun. I pursued my passions, getting back behind my drumkit after a small hiatus, going out dancing and taking the odd hip hop class. I even did a floristry course, which gave me yet another creative outlet while at the same time relaxing me. I began to nurture myself, indulging in baths with soft music and scented candles and the occasional massage.

As my moods lightened I started to really take responsibility for my happiness. I stopped blaming others for my current situation and realised that everyone has emotional scars; it's how you chose to deal with those hurts that determines whether they affect your overall wellbeing.

My self-esteem began to repair and as my confidence grew I started stepping out of my comfort zone. I was no longer socially awkward and could hold conversations with complete strangers. My relationships with my parents and friends strengthened as I learnt that I could rely on those around me.

The problem with depression is that it can stop you from connecting with the outside world. Depressed people often suffer an exaggerated sense of isolation. We need, just as we need air, food and water, to be a part of the woven pattern of human life.

Having a strong support network helps in many ways. Hanging out with happy people gives you 'time-out' from your depression. Friends can be shoulders to cry on, there to hold your hand as you step out of your comfort zone, and an extra pair of eyes to observe any changes in behaviour should you relapse.

Depression soon became nothing more than a shuffling in the wings. By this point, even when the dark shadows tapped me on the shoulder, I no longer fell to their mercy. I had successfully rewired my brain, so that I would seek out the opportunity in every situation rather than the pitfalls.

Just as the dark cloud was lifting, I suffered a major health scare, which landed me in hospital needing surgery. At the same time, my partner of almost five years left me. But despite these misfortunes, this time I stayed afloat. The self-development work I had done had given me extensive coping skills and prepared me well for life's obstacles. I was able to quickly recover from both the physical and emotional wounds.

Almost four years on, I have not suffered a single relapse and live a happy and fulfilling life, constantly achieving new goals, while having fun along the way. I bought my own apartment, took in the sights of Europe and the United States, began following my passions of freelance writing and became a qualified Life Coach so I could use my experience and insights on depression to help others. I even met an amazing man to share my life with.

I realise now that depression is not a random chemical event, but an emotional logic. It shows up when one is being harmful to themselves and not listening to their heart and soul. As awful as it is, depression is a 'gift' – an early warning signal you ignore at your own peril. **em**

Since publishing *The Upside of Down* **Tamra Mercieca** has become an advocate for Lifeline.

The Upside of Down is available in all major bookstores across Australia and New Zealand, all VitaminMe stores and online at www.theupsideofdown.com.au and www.empoweronline.com.au