

# the upside of down.

Wendy Champagne talks to Tamra Mercieca about how natural therapies helped her to overcome depression.

For most of us, landing a dream job would be cause for celebration, but for Tamra Mercieca it was the beginning of a period where she would attempt suicide and spiral into helplessness. However, it was also her initiation into intense personal discovery. "Looking back, depression hovered around me all through my teens," Mercieca says. "I just put it down to an inability to fit in and a perfectionist attitude." However, the negative cycles continued and the radio personality and author of *The Upside of Down: A Personal Journey and Toolkit to Overcome Depression* endured a 10-year roller-coaster ride with depression before eventually emerging to sustained wellness.

## Battling the black dog

Contrary to misconceptions, depression is not limited to vulnerable or sensitive people. It is indiscriminate in its choice of victims and it is very widespread: a recent meta-study has found that between 30 and 50 percent of all people – that's every second person you know – will at some point battle "the black dog", which is how Winston Churchill described his bouts with melancholia.

Mercieca had many typical symptoms – lethargy, being reclusive and disinclined to socialise, self-loathing, helplessness, insomnia – plus a few of her own. "During the worst times, I felt like a puppet being controlled by a monster," she says. "Depression stripped me of the ability to think or act rationally. I no longer owned my identity."

Yet even in the darkest times, life can open a window. During one suicidal bout, Mercieca met life coach Anje Camens who helped her to turn her life around. "She called it 'losing the label' – just like choosing a brand of jeans to wear, we can also choose whether we want to wear the depression label," Mercieca explains. "I chose not to wear it – and that was a huge turning point."

## An alternative view

This is where Mercieca came up against the mental health establishment, which operates only within the parameters of disease, diagnosis, and treatment. Her experience has led her to believe that it is better to work on a person's behaviours and help them get back to their core, rather than to tell them that they have a problem. She committed to becoming depression-free by making a series of holistic lifestyle changes that boosted her serotonin levels, which are often depleted in depressed people.

"Alleviating depression goes beyond helping people to not feel blue," she says. "True recovery re-energises the body, opens your eyes to self-awareness, and allows you to better understand how your mind and body work." One of her key tools was exercise. "I traded in my antidepressants for a gym membership – and then a pole!" she says. "I manage five hours of exercise a week, mainly walking, with a few dance classes."

The benefits of exercise, from aerobics to yoga, are well established.

Research from Duke University proves that exercise is a powerful antidepressant, both immediately and long term; plus, the longer the exercise program and the more sessions, the greater the decrease in depression. For Therese Bouchard, depression sufferer and author of the blog *Beyond Blue*, exercise is not an option, it's a necessity. Her "10 Good Things About Depression" echoes Mercieca's experience. She writes: "Number 8 on this list is I Don't Have a Choice About Staying in Shape. People ask me how I keep the discipline to work out five times a week. Here's the thing: I know that if I skip exercising for over three days that I

start to fantasise about death again. I don't dare touch alcohol because it's a depressive, and I have enough trouble staying out of the darkness without its help, thank you. I'm not disciplined. I'm just very delicate."

## Fighting back

Lack of sleep is a big hurdle for depressed people. Mercieca realised that she had to steer clear of shift work in her job as a news presenter on FM radio, and focus on getting rest instead. She takes B-complex and zinc supplements, and swears by acupuncture. "Whenever I feel run down, I head straight for the acupuncturist's table," she says. But her most important wellness method is making sure that she has fun: laughing, following her passions, and enjoying life. On a perfect day, she drives to the Dandenongs, has tea and scones, and writes. It's the simple pleasures she now appreciates.

"I believe that if someone wants to get well, they can," Mercieca says.

"You need to stay committed, because you will have relapses. Overcoming depression means completely rewiring your brain, and that won't happen overnight." She admits that it is sheer determination that has kept her moving towards her goal of being depression-free. "Once my mind was made up, I used that to fuel my recovery," she says.

As she was coming out of her depression, Mercieca's boyfriend left her and she suffered a major health scare. It was the perfect scenario for a relapse – but it didn't happen. "If anything, I dealt with those misfortunes better than the average person, because through my journey with depression I developed amazing coping skills," she says.

In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.

Albert Camus,  
French philosopher  
(1913-1960)



## 8 WAYS TO TACKLE DEPRESSION

Mercieca calls these 'eight Rs' her recipe for a balanced life.

**RATIONALISE** How serious is this stress anyway?

**REFRESH** How can I view it differently?

**RELAX** Take time out to recharge.

**RECREATION** Time away doing something else is nurturing.

**RESPOND** Make positive moves to deal with the problem.

**RENEW** Engage in activities that keep you growing.

**REGENERATE** Eat well and exercise.

**REALIGN** Review your mission, goals and objectives.

## THE 'COMMON COLD' OF PSYCHIATRY

Why is it that so many people who have been diagnosed with depression find themselves in a state of denial or minimisation of their condition? It's a common phenomenon, and one that can be particularly challenging for those who are struggling to understand their own mental health. In many cases, the stigma associated with mental illness can lead to a sense of shame or embarrassment, making it difficult to seek help or support. However, it's important to remember that depression is a medical condition, just like the common cold or flu, and it deserves the same level of respect and care. By acknowledging the reality of the situation and seeking professional assistance, individuals can begin to take control of their lives and work towards a brighter future.

## NEED MORE INFO?

**Beyond Blue**  
www.beyondblue.com.au  
**Therese Bouchard's blog**  
www.hellernet.com