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May 26, 2011

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The Miracle You Can Have Every Day, Part 3: Exercise, Depression, and the Brain

by [L.L. Barkat](#)



A tiny white feather floated down from the pine, and the thought crossed my mind, "There are angels in these little woods."

I was outside because I'd committed to a year of daily outdoor solitude. I was outside crying, again. When had it started? This constant sadness that followed me wherever I went? One minute I'd be doing dishes, the next minute I'd be carried away by tears. One morning I'd start out laughing at something my daughters said, but by

afternoon I'd be fantasizing about quietly ending my existence. Sometimes it went the other way and I would get really angry. End my life? You must be kidding. I'd hang on forever, even if I felt like I'd been hung. *Damn the world.*

Was I depressed, or just in a long-term funk?

Answering such a question is one of the challenges in pinpointing and treating **clinical depression**. Some of us are simply melancholic personalities, exhibiting what [Dr. John Ratey](#) calls a *shadow syndrome of depression*. Some of us will get suicidal, but others can't even make the simplest decision and lapse into isolation and helplessness. Some will get angry about everything and shout and threaten. Depression has many faces.

The bottom line? We may not want to wait around to find out whether we're officially depressed, or figure out every last symptom. **There's too much at stake**, whether it is physical existence or emotional well-being. If you experience the first signs of depression like sadness or sleep disturbance, Dr. Ratey advises, "Get moving immediately. And do not stop."

Exercise treats depressive symptoms at multiple levels and can work even faster than antidepressants, which sometimes take up to three weeks to begin working. Exercise is also more effective than antidepressants in the long-term, and does not offer difficult side effects like a potential decrease in sexual interest and function, potential nausea or vomiting, and potential **exacerbation of suicidal thoughts**.

How does exercise achieve these miracles? It works from both the "top down" and the "bottom up," affecting thoughts and self concept by boosting critical neurotransmitters in the pre-frontal cortex, while simultaneously affecting energy, passion, interest, and motivation in the brain stem. Unlike antidepressants, which selectively affect neurotransmitters, exercise adjusts the entire brain chemistry in an elegant manner.

The trick, in many cases, is to get the depressed person moving. It could first take a solid dose of talk therapy and a jumpstart of antidepressants to motivate a person to start literally running from his depression.

Regardless, it's notable, observes Ratey, that exercise is the first-line treatment for depression in Britain. (Yes, Brad, maybe there is **more to the brilliance than just talk**. :) Maybe, like the British, we need to reconsider where we turn first for our miracle.

When I think back on my year of sadness, I wonder if its consequent **foray into running** began with the

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Miracle Worker. After all, I knew nothing of the deep benefits of exercise for potentially reversing depression. I just know that one day I finally forgot to cry.

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Image by [Laura Boggess](#). Used with permission. Information about depression and exercise is from [John Ratey's book Spark](#). Post by [L.L. Barkat](#), author of [God in the Yard: Spiritual Practice for the Rest of Us](#).

Book Title	Author	Format	Price
Users Guide to the ...	John Ratey	Paperback	\$2.00
7 Tools to Beat Add...	Stanton Peele	Paperback	\$10.19
Brain Rules: 12 Pri...	John Medina	Hardcover	\$18.06
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DAILY REFLECTION FROM LAITY LODGE

Unity in Christ: A Look Ahead

by [Mark D. Roberts](#)

I have spent the last three reflections focusing on the "mystery" of God's will, his plan "to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (1:10). Before I move on in Ephesians, I... [Read More +](#)

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Marilyn Yocum

1 year ago

Ah, a photo from the lock keeper's house! Love it!

Taking nothing away from the very real help people have gotten from meds and counseling, a big YES to the potential benefits of MOVEMENT as front-line help, along with regularity in sleep schedule (neither too much not too little) and a simple, regular diet. These three comprise the 'low hanging fruit.' Easiest to reach and it'll give a good start to filling the bushel basket of what might need to be picked.

hide 4 replies

reply



Ilbarkat

1 year ago

So glad you added the note about sleep and diet. Yes! I noticed that Ratey, like my one of my psychologist friends, also suggests Essential Fatty Acid supplements.

Body and soul, so inextricably linked.

hide 3 replies

reply



Marilyn Yocum

1 year ago

I go for REAL simple. Eat an apple. Have a grilled cheese sandwich. Call it a meal. (But this is more about my inability to swallow a pill than a stand against supplements.) :-)

hide 2 replies

reply



Ilbarkat

1 year ago

Another excellent point :) Do you have any favorite "real" essential-fatty-acid foods to recommend?

hide 1 reply

reply



Marilyn Yocum

1 year ago

Gogging it brings up lists of food choices that will increase amounts of the various essential fatty acids, including fish, nuts and even preferable cooking oils.

reply



Ann Kroeker

1 year ago

Wish I could get a couple of people in my life to read this and heed its advice. One in particular is too set in his ways. What might life be like for him (and everybody whose life he makes miserable) if he would get up and move?

hide 7 replies

reply



Ilbarkat

1 year ago

It would be interesting to unpack that idea of "too set in his ways."

I'm sorry for the pain surrounding that situation.

hide 6 replies

reply



Ann Kroeker

1 year ago

83 years old, he sits and watches Fox News most of the day. All the years I remember he has lived a pretty sedentary life, lumbering slowly, almost limping, when walking. No interest in exercise. No interest in healthy eating. Though, listening to all that news, he'll often catch a health report and then warn others—even criticize them (from his chair in front of the television) for not eating right or exercising.

hide 5 replies

reply



Ilbarkat

1 year ago

Frustrating.

(Is this where the saying "light a fire" under somebody came from? Maybe necessity was the mother of invention? :)

reply



Sheila Seiler Lagrand

1 year ago

Ann--

How on earth do you know my (wait--must be discreet), um...this person you describe here?

Seriously, if you find a way to light that fire, please report back.

hide 1 reply

reply



Ann Kroeker

1 year ago

:)

reply



susandimickele

1 year ago

Keep praying for him. I have watched several like him take unexpected steps, even late in life.

The hardest issues for me is how do you convince him he can change? How do we help those around us take the first step?

hide 1 reply

reply



Ann Kroeker

1 year ago

I really appreciate your note, Susan. I do pray...will continue to. Testimonies such as yours give me a glimmer of hope.

reply



Christine A. Scheller

1 year ago

L.L., I so appreciate that you shared your own struggle with depression and suicidal thoughts, because the more we de-stigmatize these common experiences, the more likely all of us will be to get the support we need to overcome, or at least manage, these challenges.

Blessings to you.~

hide 7 replies

reply



Ilbarkat

1 year ago

Interesting. It sounds so stark to hear it put that way. At the time, it felt like fantasies and nothing I'd ever act on. But I think there's a spiral that we can enter, where we might eventually be drawn to act.

I remember at the time remembering my own mom and how she'd once struggled with such thoughts but decided she needed to live for her girls. Somewhere in the back of my head that wouldn't go away, and I clung to it. But who knows... if the sorrows had gone on longer, unchecked.

hide 6 replies

reply



Ilbarkat

1 year ago

In fact, I should add this: Ratey cites research that shows that the longer depression lasts, the more serious the need for reversal. Because parts of the brain actually continue to shrivel and die and shrink, and need to be revived and reborn in order to alter mindset.

hide 1 reply

reply



Christine A. Scheller

1 year ago

This is a good point L.L. The longer depression goes untreated, the more dangerous it becomes.

reply



Christine A. Scheller

1 year ago

You've hit on why there is so much shame and stigma. If people whose suicidal fantasies lead to action are different from us, we can feel safe and superior, but if we and our thoughts are similar, it's a little bit scarier.

hide 3 replies

reply



Ilbarkat

1 year ago

Yes. :) I'm guessing that people who take action often had a long road leading up to that decision, and that they aren't different from others (unless there is some kind of genetic force at work). As my daughter said recently when we lost a friend to suicide, "Nobody just wakes up and decides, 'I think I'll end my life today.' There must be a process."

To me, one of the most distressing players in that process is what you've shared elsewhere, about how a high percentage (is it as high as 50%?) of students become depressive upon going to college. Scary.

hide 2 replies

reply



Christine A. Scheller

1 year ago

Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among college students so mental health should be a real concern for parents as their children head to college. Also, alcohol is involved in, I believe, more than 50 percent of suicides, including my son's. However, there is some research that points to impulsivity rather than process in some suicides.

I recently reported on a lecture by a neuro-psychologist that is relevant to age related impulsivity as well. I'll quote that article here:

"Although teenagers sound like adults because language is fully developed by age 10-14, their brains are not fully developed until they are in their early 20s, Lindgren said. And whether teenagers spend their time on Facebook or learning

to play the cello, or whether they nurture positive or negative thoughts and emotions, 'the behavioral patterns that get ingrained stay ingrained,' she said.

'The things that we choose to get good at or that we choose to do a lot ... are the connections that are going to get really strengthened in our brains,' said Lindgren.

Behaviors and consequences are linked through our emotional systems, she said, and teenagers process their emotions through the amygdala, which is responsible for gut reactions and knee jerk responses while adults process theirs in the frontal lobe, which directs, controls, and organizes behavior, said Lindgren.

Additionally, there is a surge of the neurotransmitter dopamine and a decrease in serotonin in the teen brain. Dopamine is a pleasure neurotransmitter and serotonin regulates behavior. Add to this combination the fact that hormones 'flip the switch' on the amygdala in adolescence and the potential for risky behavior peaks."

She offered some good suggestions for dealing with these challenges, if you're interested:

<http://lacey.patch.com/article...>

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