

# A Lived Experience of Depression ...

by Carmel Williams  
Guest speaker at Centre for Remote Health seminar | July 2008

*On 1 July the Centre for Remote Health hosted an evening mental health seminar on Depression with Chairperson of Beyond Blue, Jeff Kennett, the key guest speaker (see cover story for more details). Coordinator of the Alice Springs GROW program, Carmel Williams, was also approached to be a guest speaker—as someone with a lived experience of depression. It was a privilege to hear Carmel’s speech—which reflected humility, dignity, warmth and humour, and, above all, courage. Carmel’s speech is reprinted here with permission.*

Depression is almost a cliché these days: It’s getting really hard to make ends meet. A lot of us are up to our necks in debt. Kids are in childcare centres because we have lost the freedom to choose another way. Companies have little loyalty to staff. And people change jobs like their underwear, trying to keep up with the cost of living. Add to this—marriage break-ups over 40%, longer working hours, global conflict and climate change. You hardly need a reason to be depressed, and it doesn’t take an Einstein to work out that something is wrong.

It is persuasive, rational and negative thinking like this that I have used in my life to justify myself for not getting help. Yet now, I believe strongly that we change the world, one person at a time.

So what has that to do with me? I am a middle-aged single mother of two teenagers. I work fulltime and I am a published poet. I also have a lived experience of depression.

I came from a fairly typical dysfunctional family. There were elements of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. It was a large, poor and strictly Catholic family with a good few twisted notions on how faith is lived. They had very high expectations of us regarding school: I learnt my times tables courtesy of a ruler on my knuckles. By the time I hit year 12 Chemistry I didn’t need their help at all; I used a sewing needle in the palm of my hand to teach me the periodic table. I can still recite it ...

I am sure when I am old and grey and in the last stages of dementia, you’ll know it is me; I’ll be sitting in the corner reciting my tables and the elements of the periodic table.



Guest speaker, Carmel Williams, at the Centre for Remote Health seminar on 1 July, who spoke of her lived experience with depression and subsequent journey of recovery

My father died a rather agonising death at home from cancer when I was twelve. He was a large part of my world, and I loved him dearly; as you do. The fact that he often reminded me of Hannibal Lector on steroids added a certain layer of ambivalence about his death. My mother, a bright and frustrated Catholic with too many children, took on widow-hood like a penance. Yes, I became depressed; and flirted with anorexia and bulimia in attempts to manage my feelings and the awkwardness of puberty. I went to school, studied hard, kept away from boys and managed to get through year 12 and into university in the dizzy days of Gough Whitlam and everybody’s right to an education.

In my third year of a mathematical science degree I crashed. I made two attempts on my life; not so you’d notice though. I met and married and began a stream of somewhat random occupations. Somewhere in there I had two children—and a rather intense realisation that the world would be a rather crappy place for them too unless I took hold of this black cloud that seemed forever to hang over me.

I was nervous a lot of the time, quite paranoid, lonely, anti-social, overly sensitive, flat, tired, overweight and driven in all the wrong ways. Life seemed small and mean to me at the time and I was hardly scintillating company to be with.

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Carmel presenting to a receptive audience at the Centre for Remote Health seminar

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**The stigma of mental illness stopped me from getting help. Coming from a mob that liked to crucify with words, I was not about to give them a new label to add to the list of my faults.**

'Counselling' was a dirty word, an admission of weakness, so I bumbled along with my pop psychology like a Nigel-no-friends, taking on causes, volunteer work and throwing myself into various occupations like a workaholic. That didn't work either!

Then, as life does, a couple of other spanners were thrown into the works and the wheels really came off. My husband left me, my oldest sister died of breast cancer and my other sister suffered two very debilitating strokes. I had to move house, negotiate a property settlement, change jobs and cope with shared custody. Dr Phil just wasn't going to cut it this time!

I rocked up at the doctor's surgery and slumped in his chair. I couldn't even look him in the face. I was way past tears. I told him I was going to kill myself and needed to know exactly how many tablets it would take without making too much mess. The poor bugger! I think his response was something like, "Oh shit!" Thanks to Beyond Blue and some good education for GPs, he knew how to respond.

So ... What helped? Good, belligerent, persistent friends, lots and lots of counselling, taking a good hard look in a mirror, using creative skills, medication and faith—good grounded mature faith in God. These were the tools I had to get well.

Is my story unique? No way. There are people living stories that would make a horror-movie director curl up in his doona and not go out for a week. So why would I put my hand up for something like this? I guess because I can. I have the words; I have the confidence now and I know that others don't. What possible difference could it make? If one of you have stopped for a second and saw yourself in part of my story, or a loved one or a person in your workplace, and maybe one thing I said today makes you reach out and get help, then it has been worth it.

I'd like to finish with a poem—written through the eyes of someone who could finally see what a wonderful opportunity life is. It is called the 'Mulberry Tree' ...

Carmel Williams  
(Coordinator, Day to Day Living Program)

# The Mulberry Tree



by Carmel Williams

*This poem celebrates the passage from darkness to life. Depression can keep one disengaged with life—pruned back or watching from the porch. In depression one can see the beauty of the world, but cannot feel or move into the present moment. Finally we see this soul engage with life and get a taste of what joy is possible in every fully lived moment.*

I watched from the porch, pruned to carcass  
All through winter, like an empty house  
Rain brought the first awkward shoots  
Dotting the boughs with hope

I watched from the porch, cautious stubble of green  
Halo of life ... pale, tender, vulnerable  
Reaching up and up to tangle the sky  
Broad, green tongues of summer  
Inviting the birds and beasts to feast in the blue and green  
and the rush, the rush of life

I watched from my porch, tiny green berries  
hard and stiff in their coming out  
Saw the rain, sun, air and earth  
mesmerise and dance the tree into fullness  
Bigger berries, red, fat, juicy berries, hide under leaves,  
plump shadows on screens of green

I watched from my porch, red turn to scarlet  
in the oven of Alice and the turn  
of the tides of growth, spilling the royal carpet  
red beaks of birds, busy ants and pink-fingered  
children picking and climbing and brimming with red  
Boughs in the tender arch of fullness, spell out the harvest  
Limp leaves, like new mothers,  
take their rest in the sweet crimson air

At last, rain falls this day ... Grey, green and red fills the porch  
It is already late, say my feet, stained in the happy bleed to earth.

Hurry, says my skin in the cold thrill of rain. Hurry, hands,  
white from the shade. Touch the tree, cool brown flesh. Leaves,  
green, wet, in a tender courting with skin Deeper, deeper into  
the tree. Eyes everywhere. Upward geometry of brown, green  
and red, laced with threads of rain that land on my open face.  
Red, red berries - in hands, in mouth, slipping down inside, waking up  
parts that have tasted this sweet gift before. Happy child. Wet to  
skin, singing silent hymns to the sky. Brimming with mulberries.