

Depression: An Extreme Case of “Yes, But”

by David Shackleton

I have never been clinically depressed. I have never seriously contemplated suicide. I haven't known the depths of despair or loss of life energy that some people must cope with. But from my experience of less intense forms of depression, I have crafted a model of how this condition arises and can be worked with that may be of use to others.

I make no claim to originality for this model. Although I put it together myself, it seems so simple and intuitive that I feel sure others must have proposed this idea before.

Let's begin with an illustrative story. This issue of *Everyman* is a full month late. It's late because I have almost no enthusiasm left for producing the magazine. My enthusiasm has dried up because I no longer believe in the vision that sustained me for many years. I used to have a net energy for producing *Everyman*, based on a strong “yes” energy that was about moving towards my vision offering a service that I believed was useful, compared to a smaller “but” or “no” energy that was about the work involved, the loss of opportunity to do other things with my time, etc. The “yes” was way bigger than the “but” in my psyche, and so I had a lot of net energy for the work. Now, however, the “yes” energy has diminished with my loss of belief in my vision for the work, and is barely bigger than the “but” energy, so that there is little net energy left over. This, I suggest, is the essence of depression. I am depressed about *Everyman* in its present form, to the point where I can barely make myself work on it. I am very glad that this is the last issue.

I think that this “yes/but” dynamic determines how we show up in virtually everything in our lives, from our work to our relationships. A common example: “Yes, I want to be in relationship with you - but I'm afraid of being hurt,” Someone with that energy combination shows up tentatively, cautiously, with less enthusiasm - and that changes everything. They attract someone who is similarly cautious and tentative (someone full of enthusiasm would be too scary), and together the two begin the familiar dance of codependence, founded on the yes /no pattern of “How can I get what I need without risking what I fear?”

This yes/but pattern sometimes grows into a depression that can dominate our lives. A marriage that began in the yes energy of excitement becomes constricting or stagnates, and the no energy rises to balance the yes. A career that was challenging and meaningful becomes a dreary, repetitive chore. A dream that we would be ‘successful’ or happy by our forties turns into a midlife crisis or the ashes of failure or despair. The negative energy of no comes to balance the positive yes energy, and with our energies opposing each other, with no net life energy left over for our use, we experience what we call depression.

If this model is correct, if it is the *balance* between yes and no energies in us that causes our depression, then it suggests ways to work with this condition. The key is to upset the balance.

This means either growing or diminishing the energy on either side. My own strategy in the recent years of my depression around the men's movement and the lack of success of *Everyman* was to grow the yes energy by finding a new inspiration - the refocusing that I am now pursuing toward gender workshops and working with men *and w omen*. An alternative would have been to grow the no energy, for instance by increasing the work involved in producing the magazine to the point where I was unwilling to do it any more, and would have chosen to shut it down.

Depression is, more than anything else, a message from our psyches that something has gotten old and tired, something needs to change. As we grow ourselves up in our psyches, as we let go of our shame and our fears, as we get to know ourselves and trust our own judgement, we show up with more "yes" and a lot less "but" energy for the projects and relationships in our lives.

For example, I wrote in "the Challenge of Real equality" in *Everyman* #67 that I had been seeking a female cofacilitator to do gender workshops with, and that no one I had approached had been willing to work with me. Then Maria Loza Koxahn of Calgary, AB got in touch with me. We exchanged a few emails, and then she wrote,

"Okay, so here it is: I want to do gender workshops with you. Workshops because I've imagined doing that for a long time, I have something to say and I now have the confidence and the ability to mesmerize a crowd. Gender because I'm fascinated by it, I have some knowledge and understanding about it and I'm hungry to have people get along with each other. And with you because you're passionate about it, because you have the knowledge and the experience and the leadership (in the past I would have been the 'leader'/the masculine energy with the partners and I don't want to do that. I want to essentially embody the feminine energy - although, is it okay if I swear in front of the audience?) Because you have always been supportive of me, because you're intelligent and I admire your ability to communicate with me, because you're not afraid of me and you have the ability and desire to challenge me (grow me up) because I believe that you'll stick around to help me pick up my pieces when you challenge me with something that decimates me, because we're not partners and because I'm not attracted to you (cuz that could get really messy emotionally for me). Because I trust you ... But anyway, I'm making this 'commitment' to you. I want to do gender workshops and I'm prepared (YIKES) to go through this process of discovery with you."

Do you get a feel for Mariah's energy here? It's all out there, all yes, all "I want this." There's no hesitation, no codependent "only if it's what you want too" energy, no protecting herself, her clarity about what she wants and her belief in her own readiness and competence shine through her words.

It takes a lot of personal growth work for people to get themselves to the place where they show up this fully. As long as we are carrying significant shame or fear around, we will necessarily show up with mixed yes/no energy. Shame causes us to doubt ourselves or to hide the strength of our desire, out of a worry that it might be inappropriate or stupid. Fear causes us to protect ourselves from rejection or betrayal, so that we cautiously compromise our request and our depth of commitment.

If we want to grow ourselves up quickly, the answer is courage. Feel the fear and do it anyway. Accept that we might be rejected, we might be betrayed, we might look stupid, and that that might hurt a lot. And then take the risk, do it anyway. Playing it safe is itself a kind of depression, a way of trying to have our cake and eat it too. A way of balancing opposing energies that steals from us the joy of living and loving fully.

Mariah came to the Everyman Gathering in May of this year, and we arranged to spend the Monday after the conference planning the workshops that we wanted to do together, But I awoke that morning with a new idea, with a clear intuition, I told her, “I don’t want to plan workshop content today. I believe that to do this work, we ourselves need to be in the kind of conscious, emotionally intimate, gender-balanced relationship that our workshops will point towards, so I want to spend the day getting to know you well.” She agreed, so we shared our life stories, and ended by sharing our intentions towards each other for our work together.

In that final exchange, as Mariah spoke her intentions for working with me, I felt that I saw into her soul, and what I saw was yes, a total absence of ‘no’ energy. And I realized that I felt the same way towards this work. That night I told my wife Christine, “I think that my relationship with Mariah will be a second primary relationship in my life.” I explained that I felt called to build an emotionally intimate working relationship with Mariah in order to work from and model gender balance and equality in our workshops. Christine understood, and said that she trusted me to honour appropriate boundaries, to keep our own relationship safe and sacred. Christine also shows up fully in her willingness to trust and support my work.

This is radical - and this, as I see it, is what it means to show up in strength, to live fully, It means discovering our right path and following it one hundred percent, without reservation. It doesn’t matter whether others understand, whether what you do brings up their fears. What matters is living true to your own life, your own vision, showing up with a full yes to life and to your courage to live it as truly and honestly as you can. And so I am finding in the months since the Gathering that I have lots of energy for working with Mariah towards gender workshops, towards a refocused magazine, and almost no energy to put out this last issue of *Everyman*. The contrast couldn’t be greater. My depression around *Everyman* sits alongside my excitement and enthusiasm for joint male /female gender work. I am so pleased that my new direction showed up in my life in a way and at a time that allows an easy and natural transition from one to the other.

A final word about depression. For those times when the depression seems overwhelming and inscrutable, when it dominates the forms and structure of our lives, I counsel patience. The psyche is a dynamic system: things change. What starts out inscrutable and mysterious often becomes more tractable with time and careful attention. Have faith that the underlying goal of the psyche is your health, and that depression is simply a waystation on the way to deeper living. The various authors in this issue have offered differing perspectives on depression, but the common theme has been that it is a call to go deeper, to understand oneself better, to move to a more fulfilling life. A faith that this is true, that all will work out well in the end, is sometimes the best that we can manage - and it is enough. Despair, the loss of hope that leads to suicide, is a failure of faith in the process of life. Depression is not the end: it is often just the seemingly

endless pregnancy of our new life.

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