



Nina Brown

A good friend, who suffers from both a deteriorating back and depression, once told me that her physical pain was nothing compared to her emotional pain. Having escaped the pain of depression, possibly due to my good fortune, the side effects derived from some of the anti-Parkinson medications or my dogged determination to only look at the glass as half full, I could only sympathize with her...until recently. Having spent a few days in the depths of despair, it's not someplace I ever wish to revisit.

The progression of my Parkinson's disease seemed to be rapidly rolling downhill. Usually, I am able to perform the "normal activities of daily living" 6-8 hours out of the day. I suddenly found myself able to walk or function only few hours out of the day and, then, with only a great deal of effort. Although I hadn't previously experienced much tremor, I found myself unable to hold a paper. I was unable to dress myself, nor did I even *want* to get dressed. I was so weak that I didn't want to get out of bed. When I pushed myself to attend our adorable four year old granddaughter's dance recital, I found I couldn't control the tears that were running down my face. I could see that my family was concerned, but there was nothing anyone could do to stop my eyes from "leaking."

Today, having returned to my more "normal" state, I now question whether this bout of depression could have resulted from getting off of some of my medications too quickly. In my desire to try anything to make the days easier, I had agreed to be in a clinical trial that required discontinuing the dopamine agonist I had been taking for years.

Then, because I began seeing some side effects from another drug I had taken for many years to help with dyskinesia (involuntary movements) I decided to stop taking that as well. A few days later, I checked the internet so I could tell my doctor the correct name of the side effect I was experiencing. To my dismay, I found that this was not the innocuous drug I thought it was. It should not have been stopped abruptly. Not only were there warnings that it could be fatal, but there were warnings of people committing suicide!

I'm sharing this saga with you for a number of reasons. First, I suggest that you not attempt to self-medicate. You should be aware of your body and your reactions, but no one knows the treatments and side effects as well as a movement disorder specialist; so always check with your doctor before making any changes in your medication.

Second, you should be aware that depression can be one of the first symptoms of Parkinson's disease. It has been estimated that up to 60% of people with Parkinson's suffer from depression. A study at Columbia in New York found that the annual number of new cases of depression in people with Parkinson's was 10 times that of the general population.

*Parkinson's Disease, The A to Z Guide to Symptoms and Side Effects* explains the reason. The neurotransmitters involved in movement are also related to processes in the brain that control emotions and moods. People that are depressed and people with Parkinson's have been found to have less norepinephrine and serotonin in their brains. People taking Sinemet, which replaces dopamine, may feel enthusiastic and optimistic when the levodopa is working and they are "on" and suddenly become anxious and pessimistic when the medicine doesn't work and they are "off."

Physicians have not been able to give a definitive answer to the question of whether dealing with a chronic illness or the disease process itself causes depression, yet dopamine, the missing brain chemical in PD, *does* have a direct effect on mood. This could explain why many of the characteristics of depression can also be symptoms of Parkinson's. This often makes the diagnosis difficult. You may be depressed if you feel a deep sadness, hopelessness, helplessness and blame yourself...if you are irritable and apathetic and lose interest in your family, friends and things you used to enjoy...if you experience a lack of energy, feel you're slowing down, have difficulty concentrating, have memory lapses, have either a decreased or increased appetite, sleep excessively or not at all.

If you feel these symptoms apply to you, don't suffer, **do something about it!** If you had diabetes or arthritis you wouldn't be expected to cure yourself by changing your mental outlook.

The problems and dangers associated with depression should not be underestimated, especially if the symptoms last for more than a few months. When you are depressed, physical problems are exacerbated and your immune system is impaired. Some type of treatment is needed, but it's imperative that you maintain close contact with your doctor if you take medication. Antidepressant medications and antiparkinson medications have the potential to aggravate each other.

You may also want to seek the help of a psychotherapist since everyone experiences depression in a different way and will respond to different therapies,

Dr. William T. Wallace Jr. may have aptly expressed his feelings when he wrote: *"yes, I'm depressed and you would be, too if you faced each day not having a clue as to where you can go or what you can do."* True, being diagnosed with a progressive, incurable, debilitating neurological disease does not make a person happy, but I live with that same uncertainty in my life and am rarely depressed. I've had to make accommodations over the past 17 years due to the progression of the disease but I still enjoy life.

Rather than focusing on your disability, attempt to regain an interest in the world around you. If you lack energy and motivation, set small, easy-to-achieve goals for yourself. Exercise for 15 minutes a day. Start a new project. Go to a HAPS support group meeting and meet some new people. Every time you reach a goal, congratulate yourself. Take time to feel good about what you've accomplished. Your self-esteem will grow and your activities will give you pleasure again. And, once your mood improves, your Parkinson's symptoms will also be easier to endure and manage.

Fortunately, some of you may sympathize, but never fully comprehend what it can be like living with depression because you haven't and never will have such an experience.

Some of you may have been recently diagnosed and are reading this with apprehension and dismay. Don't! You may have to live with Parkinson's, but you don't have to live with depression.

Don't give up! Don't give in! Fight back with everything you have in you! Some days may be tough, but you can be tougher!