

SNG-depression-9-12-or whenever

Why do we so rarely talk about this?

By Jim Nowlan

My friend Beth Smith asked me to write about this. Beth is community health educator for the Henry-Stark County Health Department. She has personal family experience with what I discuss.

I feel a bit self-conscious, but here goes.

I have recently begun traveling to Chicago by Amtrak Monday to Friday, where I go to Rush Medical Center for what will be 30 daily treatments for depression.

The transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) treatments are considered by many psychiatrists a “last resort” therapy for patients who have not responded to medications, talk therapy and other approaches to ameliorating chronic low mood.

[The relatively new therapy is FDA-approved and covered by my insurance. I think of the treatment as electro-convulsive shock therapy-lite. In that old treatment, strong electric shocks were administered to the brain to cause a seizure(s) in a patient.]

I sit in a chair like that in a dentist’s office, lean back a little and a figure-eight covered coil about the diameter of a baseball is placed against the upper left side of my skull.

The coil zaps me with four electromagnetic pulses per second for 10 seconds, followed by a 20-second breather, then more pulsing, and so on, for 40 minutes.

It’s as if Woody the Woodpecker is perched on my head, drilling my skull rat-a-tat-tat, though nothing physical touches my cranium.

[It hurt the first day, though with each subsequent session this first week, Woody and I become a bit more comfortable with one another.]

I am sure not looking for sympathy. Many people have much worse physical and mental ailments than I do.

On the train the other day, for example, I sat next to a school teacher on his way to stay with his 36-year-old son, who is cooped up in a hospital waiting, for weeks, months, for a heart to replace his failing ticker.

Yet I must be feeling pretty miserable to go to this effort.

“But how can you be depressed, Jim?” people ask. “You are often smiling and upbeat.”

Yet people who suffer depression often wear “masks” to hide their inner feelings.

And we depressives are, fortunately, sometimes distracted from our generally blue moods. When I am playing tennis, for example, I am in another world, completely into my game, which is maybe surprising as I have such a pitiful backhand.

Over the years, I have tried medications (more than a dozen, sometimes in “cocktails”), talk therapy, meditation (which I do daily), and walking. My daily walks of an hour or more are the most help, other than tennis.

I have tried licensed clinical social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, witch doctors (well, I would if I thought they would help).

Nothing much has relieved my low mood, where the world is generally a bleak, very dark place, the outlook hopeless, and I a despicable failure.

People with depression are in good company.

The late well-known psychiatrist Karl Menninger said the ratio of mental illness to population is one-to-one. That is, everyone in his lifetime suffers at some point from mental distress, just as we all suffer at one time from the flu.

Abraham Lincoln is well-known for his lifetime of what he called “the melancholies.”

[I think Lincoln’s distress may have been triggered by the unexpected loss of Ann Rutledge, his young love at New Salem, who was taken in a summer miasma, which may have been cholera.

[Of course, Lincoln was also plagued by a difficult marriage with Mary Todd and, more devastating, the loss in childhood of three of their four sons.]

Enough rambling.

Beth Smith wanted me to write about this simply because so few of us do open up to our friends about mental distress, which could be a lifesaver.

It’s ironic that we do talk, sometimes almost endlessly, about our physical ailments, but not about our mental discomfort, which is so common.

Ten percent of us suffer some sort of mental anguish in any given year, women about twice as often as men.

On the other hand, men commit seven out of ten of all suicides, 43,000 a year, about 50 percent more deaths than from automobile accidents. (By the way, I have never been suicidal, fortunately.)

And yet mental illness is treatable in nearly all cases. Most persons respond to medications or counseling, or from a combination of approaches.

Beth Smith knows of all the above first-hand. Several short years ago her husband, a successful lawyer, unexpectedly committed suicide. He left Beth and their young twin daughters, now in college, in the deepest anguish, forced to pick up the pieces and face the future alone.

If Beth's husband had been willing to confide in loved ones that he was suffering, help might well have been found.

So if you have been feeling blue for an extended period, let somebody know. And if you observe a friend or loved one who has been, say, unusually quiet for a period of time, ask how he or she is doing, and if you might help somehow. You could save a life.

There, I said my piece. And it wasn't so hard.

Now back to my treatments. I am hoping they might also somehow help my tennis game.