



THE RISE AND RISE OF DEPRESSION IN A WINNERLOSER WORLD RICHARD HILL

Depression can develop in a number of different ways. Apart from an array of personal issues that can be very individual, the most common path is from stress and anxiety over a period of time leading to depression. It is the chronic nature of stress and anxiety that is at issue. We seem to be much better designed for acute distress. So long as the stress, anxiety or other toxic disturbance is short lived, our systems can cope quite well. Robert Sapolsky's *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* (1995), shows that it is the very short term nature of attack in the world of zebras that allows them to remain "ulcer" free.

The key is returning to a feeling of safety. Our most natural state is one of feeling safe, creative and socially engaged. It is natural and healthy to be self-motivated, curious and energetic. We seek to investigate, learn and develop our potentials (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A stressor is something that infringes on our sense of safety enough to cause changes in our biological functions in order to deal with the concern. There are three principle stressors: mortal danger—the sabre-toothed tiger jumping out from behind a rock; social rejection—being abandoned or rejected by the social group, thereby putting at risk survival securities like food, shelter and care; and chronic inflammation of the immune system—an indication of serious threat to health and wellbeing (Stroud, 2002; Chouros, 1995).

It just doesn't seem to make sense that in a world where there is more leisure, rapidly developing technology, increased wealth and a plethora of personal development books, seminars and therapies that the problem of stress, anxiety and subsequent depression is increasing. But it is. In the U.S. and many other countries of the developed world, including my own, Australia,

there is an unrelenting upward trend in the statistics. The use of antidepressants has quadrupled since 1990 and the suicide numbers continue to rise, especially in youth. Suicide is now one of the main causes of death among Australian teenagers (Mojtabai, 2007; Harrison, 2008). Despite all the developments of the modern world to alleviate and protect us from stressors, something is getting in the way and interfering with our capacity to improve our general health and wellbeing. What is going on?

I've lost count of the number of people who have come to the clinic with the frustrated chant, "This world is driving me crazy!" As a psychotherapist, the best place to start is to try and help the client make some sense of their experience. Getting things into some kind of reasonable perspective is a helpful first step toward getting them back into the feeling that they are in charge of their own lives. I began to ask the question: What has pushed them out?

Their conversations would often include statements like, *I'm not good enough; I'm a failure; I just can't win; Nothing I do is right;* and so many of the other self-deprecating statements that we hear so often. What became intriguing was when, after some good progress with therapy, some people would say, "That's all great, but how do I make it work in the real world?" Thinking about it carefully, I realized this was a very good question.

What good is it to help someone up from their loss of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995) only to send them back into an environment that knocks them down again? There is something very troublesome about a *real world* that is not being recognized



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has happened over the past couple of generations. We have created a winner/loser world. This certainly warrants more explanation, which is not possible here. Note, however, that the rapid increases in availability and access to economic, material and food resources, as well as a movement toward disengaged individualism rather than engaged autonomy, are the key elements of a deeper discussion. For now, let us focus on how it is possible for social practices to impact the mind and our biological processes.

Over time, cultural attitudes can affect the way we think, learn and behave without any conscious awareness it is happening. Aronson and Steele from Stamford University (1995) showed that African Americans were affected by social stereotypes. Several cohorts were given exactly the same test, but when it was called an IQ test, the African American group dropped by 6 points. In essence, the social stereotype that African Americans are not as intelligent that has pervaded the culture for generations was enough to trigger a different mindset that changed the way in which their brains processed information. Dan Siegel from UCLA elegantly describes the mind as a process that regulates the flow of energy and information (2006) and Ernest Rossi has shown how our state of being can determine which aspects of our memory, learning and behavior are accessible (Rossi, 1993). When we live in a competitive “winner/loser” world, we can create a “winner/loser mindset.”

The winner/loser mindset triggers the stress mechanisms of the brain and body. The fear of social acceptance or rejection becomes the driving motivation. Personal pleasure and comfort are relegated to another time and place—after the stressor is resolved. Unfortunately, the stressor is very difficult to resolve because it is embedded in the social fabric. It’s a bit like living in a huge body of water. In order to survive, you must adapt. You will learn how to tread water to stay

a float. You might learn how to swim. You might then make a successful business out of teaching others to swim. You may become very inventive and create swimsuits or even boats or submarines, but everything is in the context of water. The truth is that what is really driving you crazy is being wet. This is what has happened in a winner/loser world environment.

It was Plato who first talked about the effects of living in a shallow, externally motivated world. *The Allegory of the Cave* written in *The Republic* (1997) describes the average person as a prisoner in a cave whose head was bound so that they could only see the cave wall in front of them. On the wall was a shadow dance of life from a puppet performance being played out behind. The prisoners were oblivious to the fact that true life was behind them and that their “real world” was a shallow representation controlled by others. The Wachowski brothers brought this idea to film in *The Matrix* (1999) where the real world was actually a computer program. The new field of study developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci at the University of Rochester focuses on the issue of intrinsic versus extrinsic drive and motivation. Aptly titled *Self-Determination Theory* (2000) they provide a platform for ongoing study. The winner/loser world hypothesis takes the issue one step further and points a strong finger at some of the constructs in our society that need to be addressed.

Changing a society, however, seems to be a fairly steep demand. The good news is that a society is largely a reflection of the needs, wants and beliefs of the people within, so all we have to do is work on ourselves and those around us to make a change. Much easier. By describing the effects of the different mindsets and both appreciating and accepting the existence of the winner/loser world, it is possible to maintain a creative world mindset and the stressful affect caused by trying to win and the fear of losing principally disappear. This leaves you free

to participate in a creative and engaged experience of life that is driven by inner potential, development and growth.

By giving some kind of definition and framework of the differences between the winner/loser mindset and the creative/interactive mindset, we can disrupt the process and permit a change of direction. I chose eight differences to express my observations (Hill, 2006):

Winner/Loser	Creative/Interactive
Exclusion	Inclusion
Events	Lessons
Instruction	Information
Competition	Inspiration
Result	Outcome
Probability	Possibility
Transaction	Interaction
Arrogance	Confidence

If we take time to sit with the visceral experience of each of these ideas, the differences become fairly self-explanatory. Upon examination, these differences are strongly reflective of the difference between being in the fight/flight state and the socially engaged state. These two states are mutually exclusive, which is important because we need to have our fight/flight response in order to survive threat (Porges, 2001). The socially engaged systems are necessary for survival, too, but for social cooperation and procreation. A stressful state is not good for relationships and the winner/loser mindset is equally problematic for couples and families.

There are a number of triggers that push us back into the winner/loser mindset. I have called them *demons* because they are tricksters that many of us think are ok, but they are not. One of the biggest difficulties I find with couples and families in therapy is the *need* to be *right*. When you are right, then you are not at fault, and the person at fault is responsible and the person responsible has to make amends—pay some price. The person who is wrong is the loser. People will get completely stressed out in their efforts to avoid being the loser. The rewards go to the winner and the punishment to the loser.

Another demon is being good. Here, the higher moral ground makes you a winner. Apologizing is an admission of being wrong, and then you are the

loser—at fault—and have to pay a price. Criticism is a bit more obvious, but people often criticize thinking that they are helping, but they are also making it clear that you are not good enough and, again, a loser. Expectations that are based on external measures are impossible pressures and guilt is the game that many people play in order to try and get the winning edge.

I wish to be clear that I am not saying that winning and losing should not exist. These are natural elements of life. What I am advocating is that we need to find ways to return our priority to the effort of personally challenging endeavors, rather than be dominated by the external rewards and punishments controlled by winning and losing. The needs of society are useful and valuable as guidelines and indicators that help us in our personal endeavor of life. I believe that depression has been trying to send us a message, but that message is sorely lacking in detail. It is the same for many of our other immediate-needs messages such as *I’m hungry*; *I’m tired*; and *I’m sick*. We only become consciously aware that something needs to be done. Depression speaks volumes and we have to look everywhere we can from the expression of our genes, to the functions of our cells, to the actions of billions of neurons and to the peripheral problems we create along the way—like the winner/loser world. Might I suggest we take the “red pill” of curiosity, knowledge and the expansion of creative engagement to return to the driving seat of our lives. ■



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