

## On Conquering Depression

Depression.

This is a word that we hear far too often these days. The rich and famous get depressed. The poor feel depressed. Students suffer from depression. The world's leaders look depressed.

I suppose it's the times we live in: the fast, unrelenting pace of life; the striving for fame, money, power; the ever increasing dependence on technology; the ascendancy of hate over love in a world of conflicting civilizations and ideologies.

Because people confuse age with wisdom I am sometimes asked if there are ways of combating stress and depression. I am not really the right person to hand out advice, as my period of depression coincide either with a raging toothache or a bank balance that has fallen below sea level; conditions that apply to most of us from time to time.

But I have been making a short list of people who are immune to deep depression, or approx to be so, and heading the list are the Bird-watchers. I am always impressed by the enthusiasm of these good folk who spend their leisure hours tramping about in the woods or on the hillside or in open country, binoculars in hand, bursting with excitement every time they spot a tree-pipit or a red-bottomed bulbul or a rufous-bellied babbles . I have got the nomenclature wrong, of course, but I am sure my bird-watching friends won't mind, as they are the most tolerant of people. If you want to do away with your depression, go and join the bird-watching fraternity. There is nothing like a Spotted Forktail hopping from boulder to boulder, or a kingfisher swooping down upon a startled young trout, to raise the spirits of the most sensitive of the souls.

Or you could try bee-keeping. I know an old lady who was never depressed, she was too busy tending to her bees and making sure their hives were in good order. The first time I visited her I was stung by one of her bees, but she told me bee-venom was good for the adrenalin or something like that. Oddly enough, she never got stung. Presumably she had all the adrenalin she needed. You could give it a try.

\*\*\*

And then there are my friends, the carpenters. A contented lot, from the look of them-- busy making cabinets, cupboards, desks, bookshelves, dining tables, doors and windows, floorboards, rafters, easy chairs, uneasy chairs—like that old rocking-chair in my verandah which creaks every night whenever its ghostly occupant, the Late Rani of Lal Tibba, chooses to spend a night in it, rocking herself to sleep while keeping me awake into the early hours.

I have great respect for carpenters, the way they concentrate on their tasks—sawings away, hammering at every little nail, even imaginary ones. I have a young carpenter who just loves to bang away with the hammer, especially when he sees a look of pain cross my face as I try hard to finish this article.

Here they are, three of them, trying to make sure a new window-frame fits in my window. This is their third or fourth visit, and the frame refuse to fit. An icy wind finds its way through a stubborn little aperture and then makes its way up my pyjamas. They'll fix it tomorrow, they say, and off they go with an advance for nuts and bolts, a happy and contented lot, leaving me just a little depressed.

But I miss the old carpenter who used to have his shop a little way down the road from here. He specialized in making coffins. If anyone on the hillside passed away, he would have a sturdy little coffin (made to size) ready in no time at all. And he always had one or two to spare, if you weren't too fishy about measurements.

A merry soul was our coffin maker. I never saw him looking depressed –except, perhaps, in his later years, when the number of souls departing the hillside decreased dramatically, leading in the demand for his handiwork.

So forget about being a coffin maker. People are living longer these days.

\*\*\*

You could try singing.

If I'm down in the dump, I sing my blues away. If I'm in a romantic trough I'll sing Pucuii or Verdi or some great operatic area, and never mind the neighbours. If I'm broke I'll sing "Pennies from Heaven"—and hope they'll shower upon me. If the weather is depressing I'll sing "Till the Clouds Go By" and hope the depression in the Bay of Bengal has gone by. If I have a headache I'll sing Johny Walker's rendering of "Tel-Malish" from Pyaasa, and give everyone else a headache.

The only trouble is, my singing depresses other people. Friends don't allow me to sing in their company or in their homes. Pictures fall off walls or the rice gets burnt. I burst into song in Victor Banerjee's antique Morris Minor, and the door fell off. It was a battered old car anyway, but he sent me a bill for the new door. Needless to say I haven't paid it.

This business of preventing me from singing goes back to my school days when our choir mistress, Mrs. Whitmarsh-Knight, put me in the school choir but forbade me from singing. She said I looked cute in a cassock and surplice, and that I could open my mouth along with the others but that I must never, never allow any sound to issue forth. So there I was opening and closing my mouth like a goldfish, a silent singer in the midst of a gathering of crackling hens

I got my revenge one day, letting out a bellow in the middle of Mrs. Whitmarsh-Knight's favourite carol. I was removed from the choir, but she went into depression and took to playing the organ late into the night.

And so over the years, I've learnt to sing on my own, when there is no one around to pass out or take offence. I close my bedroom door, open my window, and give free rein to my vocal chords away with depression. Occasionally a car grinds to a halt or veers off the road. A

conclave of crows might decide to move elsewhere, Stray dogs will depart, tails between their legs. A wedding band will fall silent.

But I am not to be deterred. No one can prevent me from singing from my second-floor window. Even the langoors watch in awe as I burst into sing, belting out an old Nelson Eddy favourite:

“When you are down and out,  
Lift up your head and shout--  
It's going to be a great day!”

Ruskin Bond  
Iconic Writer

