



carol@carolrossandassociates.com | www.carolrossandassociates.com | 303.666.0580

The Deep Dive

I was a stranger to deep depression. The kind that goes on for days that then turns into weeks. Until last year. Brought on by a number of personal and business problems, I knew something was wrong when I wanted to bake cookies instead of work on marketing strategy. Doing anything with my hands was better than doing something with my brain. My brain had decided to go into cold storage. Frozen, like a block of ice, in a sad emotional state. The usual “uppers” weren’t even remotely appealing. My brother asked me if I wanted to go skiing. Too much energy. Running? Please....Dance class? The last thing a funk wants is a happy mate.

No, hiking was more my style—one foot in front of another. Alone, with a single path to concentrate on. Plodding along. And space to breathe. Not that I felt any better afterwards. But at least I could breathe again. I kept saying to myself, “Go back to nature. Your body knows the way home.” At least it knew the way back to the car in parking lot.

Well, eventually even bad things come to an end. As the depression was lifting, I started noting what I was learning from this new experience. So here goes, from the eyes of a novice:

- Being with what is. No cheering up, please. I’d rather know that my feelings are true and that I’m strong enough to outlast them than to put a nice band-aid of smiles that reveals a bad cut later on. I noticed the different responses from people in my life. My husband took a cautious approach, never knowing what mood I would be in but always asking the question, “Can I do anything for you?” Mentors resonated with the familiar ground they had already traveled and gave me roadside tips to make the journey more meaningful. Family, friends, and colleagues gave me sympathy, understanding, and love.
- Realizing the depth of our resources. Depression is like the dirt that tests out the power of a good vacuum cleaner. I never realized the extent of love and support around me, until I needed it. And so with each truth-telling around the question, “How are you?” it became more apparent how many people in my life were willing to lend a bit more suction to the vacuum cleaner. Until finally, the dirt disappeared.
- The gift of slowing down. My depression became a forced rest— so that my heart could catch up with my mind, so that epiphanies could happen, and so that I could eventually become in sync with life again. Journaling became an outlet for those deep thoughts to emerge from the fog of my brain. I stopped being cerebral and instead let my heart become the guide for life. Plenty of time soon turned to plenty of space to settle into a different pace of life. I baked a new type of cookie each day. I spent hours on the phone with my business partner, who was also in a funk, exploring emotion and callings and the unspoken. This was work that could only have been done with the languidness that comes with depression.
- Tree shaking. Sometimes it takes a bit of tree shaking to get the fruit to drop. Near the end of my depression, my husband and I had one of those conversations that started out innocently and progressed to flammable and incendiary in a matter of seconds. It was the kind of scene that makes for good network TV. My husband pointed out ways I was behaving that I attribute to the Petty Tyrant. That’s the part of me that tries to control the rest of the family when I feel I can’t control anything else in the world. Usually my kids feel the brunt of the Petty Tyrant.

Lately, my husband had been bearing the burden of Petty Tyrant meets Emotional Waterfall. I realized that I had become a BOB or Big Ol' Brat. No sooner did I admit this to my husband, than the Universe decided to really put my BOBness into larger perspective. The doorbell rang and it was the father of my son's friend, picking up his son from that afternoon's play date. I asked about his wife, who was recently diagnosed with a serious disease—the kind that attracts institutes and centers in the medical community and regular fundraising campaigns. "It's been a hard week. We were at the grocery store and she had trouble seeing what was on the shelves." I could see the weariness in his face and sense the fear that his wife was experiencing. With those words, the fruit of my family and good health dropped to the ground to become visible.

Even in depression, synchronicity found me. One day, I was in my office, after a rough morning. I had just come from a long walk in the snow, feeling the weight of sadness with each step. And now, I had returned, ready for a long nap, the only thing I really had energy for. The phone rang and I looked at the display. No one I knew. Let it ring, my mind told me. But for some reason, I picked up the phone. It was a woman who had gotten my name from someone who said they knew me, but whose name sounded only vaguely familiar. In other words, I had no idea who the person on the other end of the phone was. She had gone to my website and liked it and wanted to know more about my work. Did I have time to talk?

By this time, I was coping with my depression by letting it be whatever it wanted to be, even if I sounded like a listless amoeba on the phone. And so we talked, and I recounted my journey over the years from the engineering world to following my bliss full-time, working with the human side of organizations and coaching individuals. What a blessing to have someone ask you who you are and how you got there, when you thought you had lost the way. All I needed was a bit of jogging of the memory for directions. It made me realize that my state of being was temporary.

And finally, I knew that I was coming out of the depression when I re-discovered humor in everyday life.

- There was the toddler in a cart in the grocery store parking lot. Her hair was in a pony tail, sticking straight up. I immediately imagined her as a Dr. Seuss version of a hood ornament for the grocery cart.
- I read a newspaper article about a man who had gone to meet friends on the roof of a chic nightclub, only to discover too late that the shimmering green disco floor was really a swimming pool. I couldn't stop laughing when I read that he walked onto water and went straight down, with absolutely no flailing of arms for balance.
- My husband took our vacuum cleaner for a six-month checkup and I wondered whether shots would be involved.

Yes, life became funny again. Too funny for me not to notice.

My mother says that the true test of a person is how they respond when they are down and out. She says it's easy to be successful. The hard part is when the world isn't going your way.

My depression taught me about myself in a way that wasn't possible when things were going well. I am more able to slow down and smell the roses. To be in my pajamas until mid-afternoon, playing board games with my sons and doing nothing else but be curious and enjoy the ride. I know now what it means to be in the flow, because I've experienced the deadening of creativity. I am more grateful for the richness in my life—seeing humor around every corner, tasting the sweetness of family, and feeling the support of friends. I once read that our lives can be retold as myths, to give meaning to all of it, not just the good parts. If so, let depression be part of the hero's journey.

Copyright © 2006 by Carol Ross and Associates, LLC. , www.carolrossandassociates.com. Contact carol@carolrossandassociates.com for reprint permission. If you enjoyed this article, visit Carol's blog, www.blog.carolrossandassociates.com, and podcasts, www.liveactioncoaching.com, www.leadingwithaholeneuromind.com, and www.consciousliving-leaving.com. Carol is an executive coach, organization development consultant, and writer with over 20 years experience in the telecommunications and energy industries. Carol specializes in helping clients get unstuck and into the flow of great work. She works her magic by bringing the power of the creative, intuitive right brain into a left-brained world. While her

degrees in engineering from Northwestern University have served her well, it's been her life and work experiences that have moved her to do her best work. She is certified by The Coaches Training Institute and credentialed by the International Coach Federation.