



Depression and the Finance Officer

By Kent Austin

Depression is a topic we hear a lot about lately, and finance officers have a job that makes them prime candidates.

Government finance officers have jobs that are characterized by high expectations, weighty responsibility, and ongoing public scrutiny. We are called upon to be the bearers of bad news (even though it usually isn't our fault). As point persons for questions about an organization's financial condition, we are often required to explain complex or nuanced situations to less-than-patient questioners.

All these characteristics can make finance officers prime candidates for depression. It's a topic we seem to hear about more than ever, although it's impossible to tell whether that's because more people are experiencing depression or because more people are willing to talk about it. Either way, depression is a topic that finance officers should be familiar with and have some idea how to handle.

There are many nuances to depression and depressive experiences; this article uses the term to refer to a sustained feeling of low mood, often independent of direct external causes. Classic characteristics include:

- Feelings of worthlessness, self-loathing, or hypercriticism.
- Obsessive thoughts.
- Weight loss or weight gain.
- Fatigue and lack of energy.
- Loss of interest in normally enjoyable activities.
- Inability to experience pleasure.

- Disturbed sleep patterns.
- Withdrawal from or avoidance of interaction with others.

While everyone experiences some of these traits on occasion, what sets depression apart is the continuing, unrelenting presence of these conditions. The National Institute of Mental Health suggests the presence of symptoms for more than two weeks is likely evidence of depression.

A CUSTOM FIT

Acknowledging the problem early and resolving to seek a cure is important because depression is more than simply "feeling down." It is all-consuming, spreading like a stain through all elements of a person's life. Although categorized as a mental illness, depression can soon make its presence known throughout the body via symptoms including weight gain or loss, tremors, stooped posture, fatigue, and insomnia.

Your career may appear to be on a continuous upward trajectory; your marriage and family life may be untroubled; your body may be healthy; and you may have a comfortable home in a good neighborhood. Perhaps you've worked your way up the ladder to become a chief finance officer or a director, supported by bosses who valued and encouraged you. You embrace the chance to gain knowledge and undertake new challenges. None of this makes you immune to depression.

One of the most insidious features of depression is its ability to adapt itself to each sufferer's individual situation. If weaknesses are overdone strengths, depression is the master at turning one's assets into liabilities. People who value intelligence and learning believe themselves to be uninformed and inadequate. People who enjoy socializing and interacting become withdrawn and taciturn. And people who enjoy a vigorous physical life with sports and activity desire nothing more than to curl up in a fetal position and do as little as possible.

In *Undoing Depression*,¹ Dr. Richard O'Connor writes about this desire to "stay home, watch TV, and feel sorry for ourselves. It's easier than working our way out of depression. The problem is that stagnation isn't static. Once you start rotting, you don't stop. You may be able to watch a few weeks of TV safely, but any more than that and you will be doing yourself harm. Your self-esteem, ambition, humor, and juices will dry up."

Nonetheless, the craving to withdraw from the world is a powerful force. Recognizing this tendency and acknowledging that it is a symptom of something deeper and more profound is a critical step in recovering from depression. O'Connor further notes that "our choice is to grow or die. The long-term cure for depression doesn't come from anything other than living right — being productive, generous, caring, and other-centered. Happiness is something we achieve through our own effort, not something we can buy or acquire, not something anyone else can give us. It's a byproduct of living a certain kind of life that helps us feel good about ourselves. It comes from being fully engaged in life, from paying

attention to the present moment, to the process of living."

NOT JUST A LOW MOOD

Say you're starting a new job — but instead of excitement, you feel a sinking sensation in your gut, and all you can think is that you can't do it. There's too much to learn, too much complexity, too much detail. You'll finally be exposed as overrated and underqualified.

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Another sinister quality of depression is how it convinces the sufferer that it doesn't exist: "You're not depressed — this is just the way you are." Despite the torrent of public service announcements and media attention, sufferers often delay seeking help while undergoing ceaseless internal debate about the nature of their feelings and condition. Unlike physical maladies that are readily evidenced by blood tests, thermometer readings, or lab cultures, the symptoms of depression remain invisible, hiding in the shadows or masquerading as another illness. Hopelessness soon sets in.

WHEN THE PERSONAL AFFECTS THE PROFESSIONAL

Many current articles discuss a work/life blend instead of work-life balance.

None of us leave our personal issues and thoughts completely at home when we arrive at the office each day. And the proliferation of smartphones and laptop computers, which make it so easy to work any time and anywhere, have further blurred the lines between work and home. So, it is no surprise that whatever is happening to us personally will affect our careers, as well. This is especially true when it comes to depression.

Depressed finance officers may try to shake off low feelings, but they often exhibit the following behaviors:

- Spending as much of the day as possible alone in the office.
- Having difficulty completing tasks and meeting deadlines.
- Minimizing communication with others or avoiding contact altogether.
- Failing to see the humor or humanity in everyday situations.
- Avoiding difficult interactions or confrontations with others (e.g., disciplining an employee).
- Resisting change or feeling intimidated by it.

This behavior is almost certainly a far cry from how they pictured themselves before, and it is in sharp contrast with the enthusiasm they displayed in interviewing for the job they now shrink from. If the depressed condition and attendant low performance continue long enough, bad outcomes can result for both the organization — undone projects, increased costs, lost revenue opportunities, or heightened scrutiny — and the person — poor performance reviews, demotion, or termination.

OUTTHINKING DEPRESSION

Ultimately, curing depression requires self-acceptance. Constant comparisons

to others, unrelenting self-criticism, and excessive focus on weaknesses or failings are a recipe for permanent disconsolation. A professional therapist can often help one deal with these habitual thoughts and feelings, which may seem to take on a life of their own.

Once patients understand that their perceptions and thoughts are distorted and producing negative feelings and behaviors, they can begin to counter them. Sometimes a therapist will have patients use a worksheet or log to record distorted thoughts, the better to identify them and expose them to the light of reason.

Additionally, many individuals have found success with antidepressant medication and, for more difficult cases, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). Often a combination of treatments, including therapy, is effective.

Depression is a multipronged condition and thus requires a multipart solution — but emerging from depression gives sufferers a new lease on life. Individuals often find their sense of gratitude, tolerance, and acceptance deepened, and they may even be surprised to recall just how extreme and untrue their thoughts and feelings had been.

But depression has a way of lurking in the shadows and reasserting itself after sufferers think they have it beat. Patients who regarded Prozac as a miracle drug in recovering from their first depressive episode may be distraught to find themselves overcome with self-doubt and fear six months or a year later. Medication alone is sometimes not enough to beat back the lingering fingers of depression that extend into the brain and body.

People who suffer from recurrent depressive episodes are prone to constant questioning and self-scrutiny about the situation. “What’s happening? I thought I had this beat.” The low mood descends again, and what worked so well the first time has no effect now. Where does that leave the sufferer?

Especially when starting a new job, people sometimes feel overwhelmed by how much they don’t know, fearing that others will think they don’t know what they’re doing. But there’s an important distinction between ignorance and incompetence.

VICTORY

The good news is that knowledge gained from the first episode can be deployed and translated into positive action for future instances. Acknowledge the problem. Get help. Begin treatment. Know that the condition will pass. In short, remember that it is okay not to feel okay. Above all, the sufferer must understand that recurrence does not denote weakness, failure, or defectiveness; it simply means that the fight must resume. Each episode results in learning; the sufferer’s task is to just keep going. Fortunately, treatments for depression have a very high success rate. The challenge is in determining which treatment will work and possessing the patience and courage to follow through, however long the process takes.

Just as each episode of depression can be unique, so can each recovery. People who first recovered in a blazing epiphany of rebirth instead sense a gradual, growing improvement, a lightening of the ominous weight they had been struggling under. Each day seems just a little bit better, the ground below just a little firmer.

As John Powell writes in *Fully Human, Fully Alive*, “Psychologically speaking, a joyful self-acceptance, a good self-image, and a sense of self-celebration are the bedrock beginning of the fountain that rises up into the fullness of life.”² This joyful self-acceptance is easier said than done, and it can seem infinitely out of reach to someone in the self-abusing throes of depression. Yet sufferers should know that even recurrent depression can be overcome, and that they are far from alone. Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, even Bruce Springsteen all acknowledged repeated episodes of blackness and despair. Not bad company.

LESSONS LEARNED

Those who have experienced and triumphed over depression often find they share common realizations. Finance officers who have suffered from depression shared the following lessons.

Ignorance Is Not the Same as Incompetence. Especially when starting a new job, people sometimes feel overwhelmed by how much they don’t know. They may live in fear of being described as “not knowing what they are doing.” But there’s an important distinction between ignorance and incompetence. As one finance officer summarized, “Not knowing what

you are doing does not mean you are incompetent.” No one starts a new job knowing everything. Instead, if you feel overwhelmed, remind yourself that the cure for ignorance is learning. Embrace the complexity. Immerse yourself in the challenge. Remember that even the most capable professional started out with a knowledge deficit. Soon one task or subject learned will connect to another, and another, and another. And if a given task still resists mastery after persistent study, acknowledge that most tasks can be hired out or completed with outside assistance.

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Action Cures Fear. This is a case where a bumper sticker slogan is worth remembering. Fear is often described as “paralyzing.” Depression can lead a person to withdraw from challenges and engage in self-defeating internal conversations — “I can’t do it, I’m not capable, so I won’t do anything.” Withdrawal and avoidance only compound the object of fear. Breaking down the problem into its smallest pieces can help you take action on a manageable scale. This action becomes a small victory that makes the next action easier. Success breeds success, just as failure breeds failure. Something is always better than nothing.

Know Thyself. People who experience and emerge from depression often find they have gained new insights into themselves. Looking back, they recognize what started their slide downhill, and they consider ways to manage those elements from a position of strength. They realize what is necessary to continue feeling good, and they may even find themselves more tolerant of others. Ultimately, we never really know what is happening inside another person. Giving a difficult co-worker the benefit of the doubt or an extra bit of understanding may make all the difference in a relationship, and successful relationships are essential for happy work and personal lives.

Running Can Help. Regular physical activity is a well-known element for overall well-being. Running is an excellent ingredient in the recipe for a healthy life. Whether you are a lifelong athlete or devoted couch potato, running (or some other source of regular exercise) can work for you. It is the essence of incrementalism: You literally begin from wherever you are and take one step at a time, putting one foot in front of the other. Magazines and websites are full of stories about people who thought they would hate running but instead progressed from walking to jogging to 5K races, all the way to marathons. While you may not be able to run your way out of depression, many people find that running provides physical and mental benefits that help them deal with the stresses in their life. One finance officer who has finished five marathons noted that although he had experienced multiple episodes of depression in his life, none of them occurred when he was in marathon training.

Confidence Is Everything. Finally, believing in yourself is the quintessential prerequisite for success in life. Depression robs sufferers of their confidence with false recriminations, exaggerated doubts, and unfounded self-criticisms. Yet each of us is born with a unique set of qualities, so that by definition we each bring something to our jobs that no one else can. Build on this uniqueness and be proud of it. Consider all that you have done in your life, and believe in all that is yet to come. Know that a depressive episode is just that, an episode, a brief interruption in the tremendous life you are leading. Resist the negative self-talk in your head and acknowledge your true worth — you didn’t get where you are by being an uninformed, withdrawn imposter!

CONCLUSIONS

For all its prominence in the media and popular culture, depression is a good trend to avoid. Be aware of the symptoms and know that government finance officers, despite being highly qualified professionals, are not immune to this severe but survivable condition. Help is available, and chances are you will emerge better and stronger than before. Put one foot in front of the other, literally and figuratively. You’ve got this! ■

Notes

1. Richard O’Connor, *Undoing Depression* (Little, Brown and Company, 1997).
2. John Powell, *Fully Human, Fully Alive: A New Life through a New Vision* (Thomas More Press, 1976).

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