

FOREWORD

We all have a tendency to like what is familiar and avoid the unknown. While this may have evolutionary advantages, it also results in discomfort around things that cannot be seen, yet still exist. This may be why depression, or major depressive disorder, is so misunderstood. We cannot see the multitude of changes in brain structure and function that occur with each depressive episode, so there is a proclivity to minimize the significance of this disorder.

In *Breaking Free of Depression's Grip*, Bruce Ross has courageously portrayed his lifelong battle with depression and gives a voice to the 5% of the global adult population who are currently affected by this disease. In my practice, patients have often described their experience with depression as being trapped inside their own body, as if there is a window to the outside world where the beauty of life can be seen, but it is out of reach. Bruce captures this experience of monochromatic life as he sits through Bill Clinton's speaking engagement and Jay Leno's comedy routine, appreciating the importance of these events with absolutely no emotional connection.

Major depressive disorder is diagnosed based on a personal account of persisting and disabling symptoms: most importantly sadness and inability to experience pleasure in life, as well as hopelessness, sleeplessness, sheer exhaustion, and suicidal thoughts. A limitation of this and other diagnoses involving mental disorders is that it does not take into account the biological aspect of depression, including genetics and brain networks or psychosocial adversities. With the advent of more refined technologies, new research demonstrates altered patterns of emotional neurocircuitry, chemical transmitters, or even the size and

activity of specific brain areas are associated with depression. These disturbances are responsible for the complex disorder that is depression.

Treatments for depression affect neural networks to varying degrees, and for some these treatments are sufficient to “reset” the brain’s function, while for others, like Bruce, they are not. These individuals with “treatment resistant depression,” also referred to as “difficult to treat depression,” face a particularly difficult battle. Bruce epitomizes this struggle faced by many people as they navigate their way through what often feels like a disconnected and impersonal healthcare system, “Like a tennis ball I was served back to Dr. C’s court.”

He displays enormous tenacity as he moves from one disappointing treatment to another, hoping each would be the key out of the body he finds himself locked in. He finds his way to the National Institute for Mental Health in the US, tries electroconvulsive therapy (shock treatment), and multiple cocktails of antidepressant medications with no more than temporary relief. Family values and tremendous resilience kept Bruce fighting for his health, researching his next steps.

This brought him to investigate his options with an experimental surgery, Deep Brain Stimulation, involving the implantation of electrodes to a specific brain area that are connected to a pacemaker in the chest. Professor Helen Mayberg’s seminal work showing changes in the subcallosal cingulate in response to sadness was the driving force of the exploration of Deep Brain Stimulation to this brain region for treatment-resistant depression and researchers are in the process of evaluating its efficacy in clinical trials.

It is a privilege for me to introduce *Breaking Free of Depression's Grip: A Powerful Success Story* by Bruce Ross as he recounts his journey before, during, and now more than a decade after his neurosurgical implant to excite brain neurocircuits that are thought to be responsible for constellations of symptoms that define Major Depressive Disorder in its most “difficult to treat” form. This book will serve as an inspiration to those

Foreword

still living in darkness, and as an education to others, and their families who are searching for a greater understanding of this severely disabling disorder.

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