



HOW TO USE YOUR  
CREATIVE SPIRIT TO  
MANAGE DEPRESSION

*A  
Joyful  
Life*

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Cover and book design by Mark Sullivan

Author photo: Robert Preidt

ISBN 978-0-9977222-1-5

Published by KiCam Projects

[www.KiCamProjects.com](http://www.KiCamProjects.com)

Printed in the United States of America.

Printed on acid-free paper.





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.....

For Robert, who stood quietly by my side from the start and supported me through life-changing decisions. Thank you for saying the things that need saying, even when difficult for me to hear. Thank you for being my writing coach, photographer, and friendly first editor—I trust you completely. You are the best!

.....







## PREFACE

I have always been fascinated by seeing buildings imploded, especially those tall ones coming down on a busy city street like we sometimes see on the news. It's impressive. How deafening the sound must be. My imagination is captured by the wonder of the scene, by the expert engineering and intricate planning needed to accomplish such a project while ensuring that the streetscape surrounding the building remains intact as if the neighboring structures had no idea what just happened.

Forcing a skyscraper to crumble at one person's command takes months of sophisticated planning and preparation from a variety of experts, all for something that lasts only a few seconds. And knowing that no two implosions can ever be executed in exactly the same way fascinates me. There's something pure about it, to decimate a giant structure with the least amount of external disruption.

Now, imagine if your brain experienced such an implosion. Not as a result of a well-orchestrated plan but from having abdicated its responsibility for managing the chemistry in your synapses, the ones that control your thoughts and behaviors. In what might seem like a few seconds, the mind just checks out. Poof! I am outta here! It's not that your mind is otherwise





occupied by a daydream or is busy with meditation. It is simply vacant, not on call anymore. Why would your mind want to do this?

In my case, my mind checked out in an attempt at self-preservation. It no longer could cope with the demands of life and the expectations I had placed on myself. At a subconscious level, it was all too much. Rather than my brain cracking in a visible and public way, like my femur might do if subjected to severe impact, my mind chose to silently implode. It was January 21, 2002, the day my son turned eighteen. It was a day I will never forget.

I experienced what is currently called Major Depressive Disorder; it used to be called “severe” or “clinical” depression. Decades ago, they would have labeled it a “nervous breakdown.” Interestingly, I feel a stronger resonance for this later term, as it very closely describes my own experience: My mind was certainly broken, barely functioning at all. The thinking part was only a hair above a vegetative state; and my nervous system was definitely out of whack.

It took a full year of very gradual healing before I could return to work and start relearning how to complete simple office tasks—beginning with data entry, progressing to preparing standard letters where only the employee’s name and address changed, to eventually using my writing skills to edit correspondence, and finally advancing to talking to colleagues on the phone to verify information contained in the letters—this “work-hardening” took place over a period of six months.

I was to revisit the state of depression several times over nine years, although those events were never as severe as the initial







## P R E F A C E

breakdown. Its gloomy specter hanging over me was enough to move me to get the necessary treatment at even the slightest sign of mental distress. That is the real trick—learning to recognize the earliest signals of potential overload or anxiety in time to thwart its progress and prevent full-on depression.

I became my own expert at this early-detection work—at identifying my personal canary in the coalmine, so to speak. I became a person who values mental health above everything else in life. Because if I don't have a healthy mind, the world holds no interest for me.

Depression is an insidious disease, lurking in the mind in places hidden from everyone, including yourself. But it can no longer hide from me. I have mastered its detection and I am back in charge.

I have learned that so long as I give my spirit what it wants and needs, as something that is essential to my whole person, I will continue to succeed at keeping a healthy balance in my life, far away from depression.

For years I struggled with this debilitating disease, a disease that is too scary for most people to talk about. I worked very hard at getting well and staying well. And I long to contribute my experience and hands-on knowledge if it can help another broken soul put a life back together. I long for my experience to be put to a larger use and purpose.

What if I could? What if someone who is struggling right now, who is desperately trying to hang on to some sense of normality, to a reality that she used to know, were to pick up this book? What if something about the words on these pages led one person to seek treatment, or led her to a resource that





## A JOYFUL LIFE

made a difference? Wouldn't that be worth doing? Oh, yes, it certainly would.

I am committed to contributing in some small way to positive change. I enjoy serving the higher good through the joy of expanding my abilities and talents. And I trust that my truth as explained in this book will be just the right thing for someone out there. Whoever you are, bless you!





## INTRODUCTION

It was the pacing. Back and forth, back and forth in front of my desk. I had just returned from my lunch break, alone, again. Even though I'd been working there for eleven years, I didn't have workplace friends—didn't know anyone well enough to go out to lunch with, to talk to about my work frustrations, the sense that I had bitten off more than I could chew when I accepted this new role. It had been four months and I still had not gotten to the bottom of all that it entailed; I felt that I was forever catching up, that I should be working on a different burning issue, one that I wasn't even aware of yet. I was given boxes of files that were now my responsibility and I still hadn't gotten through them all. I felt as though at any moment something in that box would explode in my face.

I was beginning to understand that this was a bigger job than I expected and I couldn't see my way through it. I felt trapped, with no one to call on for help. My manager was a high-level executive with much bigger fish to fry than my feelings of incompetence. I had convinced her during the interview that I was the best person for the job, so I wasn't about to let her know that she had made a mistake in hiring me.





In my world, a professional employee can handle things; she keeps trouble out of her boss's hands by anticipating and dealing with it first. I had been super competent in my previous jobs; this was my self-image and that of my colleagues and management.

..... As I returned to my desk, I  
"Whether you believe something is possible or impossible, either way you'll be right."  
—Wayne Dyer

..... I should work on or e-mails? I couldn't make heads or tails of my desk, which was just a bunch of files and stacks of papers. My head was a blur. *Get a grip; just remember what you were doing before going for lunch*, I thought. But that was the problem. Every pile of work looked urgent. If I do this one, then I won't have time to get to that one. I felt a glassy-eyed paralysis come over me, a deer-in-the-headlights, brain-numbing sensation. I had been staring at my computer for the better part of an hour and I was no further ahead.

I couldn't sit there anymore. I had to get up and do something. I had to move. I began pacing, then hyperventilating. *Oh my, what is happening here?* I fretted. (I later learned that this was my brain engaging in the fight-or-flight response to protect me from the overwhelming stress. I was never much of a fighter, and there was no one that I could fight anyway. My mind chose to flee this untenable situation.)

*I can't stay in this office—too suffocating, no windows, muted lighting, unreal. There are people outside my office*





## INTRODUCTION

*doing work, as if everything is perfectly fine and normal! As if I'm not in a desperate panic! I must get out, go someplace else. But I need to tell someone that I'm leaving. But who? My boss was in another city. But my former manager, whom I'll call Arthur, worked just down the hall. Maybe I'll ask him for help; he'll know what to do.*

I observed myself making my way to Arthur's office—I *can't believe I am doing this, going to him in my helpless state. How unprofessional.* But his friendly face and cheerful welcome were a blessing, a balm for my panic-stricken heart. *He can take charge now instead of me. That feels better already.* I shut the door as I entered the room (code for “this is serious”). When he asked how I was doing, I told him.

With my permission, he dialed the Employee Assistance Program's crisis line and the therapist at the end of the phone proceeded to talk me down. I started feeling calmer, no longer panicked, only fearful, lost, and tired—so tired. I would be okay after a few days of rest. Arthur suggested I take some time off, a week, or even three. “I don't need weeks; just a couple days will do,” I said. I had been doing too much trying to learn my new job, including commuting two hours each way several times a week. I decided I would head home just as soon as I finished a few important letters.

Back in my office, I looked at the letters and drew a dead blank; I couldn't think how to start the letters, let alone finish them. I couldn't think at all. Instead, I deposited the letters with the secretary along with instructions and made my way home.

By the time I got to the house, twenty-five minutes away, I was utterly drained and exhausted. In the ensuing days, I tried





to rest but couldn't sleep; my brain seemed on high alert, yet I couldn't get myself out of bed in the morning. I lost my appetite, and taking a shower was beyond my ability, the worst idea in the world. I didn't know what to do or say or how to act.

Having drawn a blank while sitting at my desk moments before leaving for home, my brain had stayed in Nowhere Land while my body had found its way home. I didn't understand what was happening to me, but at least I was safe now, feeling the protection of my home. I somehow got to my doctor's office—I have no recollection of that first visit—and thus began a yearlong battle with, and healing from, a nervous breakdown.

I had become traumatized by my workplace situation and my brain protected me by blocking all feelings from coming in or going out. That's one way to cope, but it turned me into a zombie, a body going through the motions of daily living but without a spirit inside. My soul had checked out, and I wished it had taken the rest of me with it.

My first experience of depression occurred in 2002 and lasted a year—which, as I now understand, is not unusually long. But try a year of this and see if you don't agree that it is the longest year of your life. It was, in fact, the darkest and loneliest time I have ever known, and it frightened me like nothing else could.

#### HOW DID THIS HAPPEN TO ME?

I was an average woman in her mid-forties with a good, responsible job in a large government organization. I lived with my husband, Robert, and two teenaged children, Caroline and Marcel. We had left the big city to live in a beautiful old home in the rolling hills of Cavan in central Ontario. It was a dream come true for us to live in the quiet country setting, surrounded





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by nature and with little traffic. I was lucky to have the opportunity to follow my job in a corporate relocation to the small city of Peterborough.

By all accounts and appearances, I had a pretty good life. But at the risk of sounding cliché, I still felt that something was missing from my life; I did not feel fulfilled as a person and was forever searching for something more. But I made do and went through the paces, distracting myself with many hobbies and our idyllic surroundings. As it turned out, my situation was more serious than I knew.

After my breakdown, it was eleven months before I was able to successfully reenter the workplace. I say “successfully” because I experienced two failed attempts during that period. The first attempt, after about two months, made it clear that I was not ready for the workplace, when simply entering the building and touching the files on my desk caused severe anxiety. The second attempt was at the five-month mark, having requested a temporary project to gently test the waters rather than return to my previous job. I was forced to abandon that effort after a few days due to mounting anxiety caused by the realization that my cognitive abilities were quite restricted, such that I could not make sense of a straightforward task involving transcribing notes from a meeting.

This was only the beginning of the life changes that were to come for my family and me. (Depression affects the whole family, not just the person experiencing the illness.)

### FINDING MY WAY BACK

It feels good to reveal to the world that I have come through depression and generalized anxiety and that I am doing well. I will always have the illness, but I've learned what it takes to





manage it and how to lead a happy, balanced life. More than that, I have learned how to be an even better me because of the illness.

I have been to one of the darkest places of all and I know with certainty that I will do everything in my power not to return. For me, this depressive state wasn't about feeling sorry for myself or being sad; it was that my body's systems simply gave

..... up. My mind quit because it could no longer tolerate the pressure of an overwhelming, isolating, and unsatisfying job.

"We do not think ourselves into new ways of living; we live ourselves into new ways of thinking."  
—Richard Rohr

..... because that was the only way to make me stop and reexamine my life and my choices.

I've come to know deeply that our spirits need feeding, and if we continue to starve them, they will eventually rebel, and they might be stronger than our will to ignore them. At least that seems to be what happened to me.

I didn't see it coming. Literally from one day to the next, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't get up in the morning, and I didn't care to look after myself, to take a shower, or to brush my teeth. I did not feel hunger, so I forced myself to eat at regular mealtimes. In truth, I didn't feel anything. I had no interest in my hobbies, felt no enjoyment when walking in the woods, which used to be a favorite activity, and had no desire to be with people, whom I sought to avoid at all costs. I couldn't even enjoy spending time with my children, whom I saw only every other weekend.







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I experienced nothing—no joy, no laughter, no anything—only dull, flat darkness.

I was in a place that stole my identity and my personality, a place where I was nothing but an empty shell of a body going through the motions of day-to-day and minute-by-minute living. I was in a place where I believed I would remain forever stuck. I had no idea how to get out or if it was even possible to get out, and no one seemed able to help me.

I saw my family doctor at two-week intervals only to relay that there was no change in my “mood” and to learn that he also had nothing new for me. I had nothing to hang on to. “See you in two weeks” was my usual farewell, with a plastic smile on my face.

My eyes told of the vacancy inside, as if the person who had been renting space inside my body had suddenly up and left without telling the landlady. My soul was wide open, raw, naked, and completely exposed to a world that didn’t care to know about it.

I worked hard at imitating a healthy person when doing errands or buying groceries and paying at the checkout. It was excruciating.

All I wanted was to disappear from existence. I felt safe only when inside our home, where I would stare out the window at nothing but the air floating by, thinking nothing, and feeling nothing.

After ten months of living in this near-vegetative state and with no help on the horizon, I began to accept that this would be my way of life from now on. I had given up on finding any help. I thought it best to accept the inevitable. It felt easier that way. None of the drugs I had been prescribed had any positive





effect, and all had terrible side effects. I was without hope.

When I shared my thoughts with my then-twenty-one-year-old daughter, she answered, “Mom, that’s not good enough.” It’s odd how her words snapped my awareness, like a switch being turned on.

This simple statement gave me a small measure of hope that somewhere, somehow, things could one day get better for me. (People need only a bit of hope to keep going.) I knew that I could not give up the fight just yet, for my family if not for myself. Though I did not believe my own thinking, corrupted as it was by the illness, I could rely on Caroline’s sound thinking.

I decided to believe her instead of me, to trust that she spoke the truth. I hung on to her words as a beacon from the reality that I used to know. I credit my insightful daughter for having had a powerful effect on my eventually getting out of the muck.

I later learned that a medication I had been taking to prevent migraines might have triggered the depression. Four months after I stopped taking that drug, the depression began to lift.

It was an early December day while walking in the woods with Robert, as was our Sunday habit, when I first realized that I might be enjoying our outing a little bit. When getting back in the car, I thought, *Wait, I actually felt something on that walk!* This marked the start of my coming out of the depression.

It also was the beginning of a new existence of living *with* mental illness.

#### A NEW APPROACH

If I wanted a different outcome, a permanent different outcome, wouldn’t I need a different approach to my healing? Because clearly, the standard, Western approach to healing I had been





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following was not working for me. I had suffered my third depression “event” in less than eight years, and I wanted a lasting solution that really worked. That’s when I invited Divine Spirit to take the lead.

My silent request went something like this: “Heavenly Spirit, you have the power to make all things happen. Show me how to heal, show me how to get better for good. I’m so tired of repeating the same story. You must take the lead because I haven’t got a clue where to start. I will follow you. But you have to be in charge. I will follow wherever you take me.” This was my prayer.

Now, don’t get the idea that I relinquished all interest in the case—not for a minute! In fact, I was mightily committed to every little step the future held for me. And I was also committed to letting Spirit guide those steps. I relinquished control of *how* I would move forward and I put my trust in the Divine, knowing that the Holy Spirit was in a better position than I to know what I needed to get well and to stay well.

My resolve became the driving force. Growing up, I was known in my family for being a very determined girl (not to say a stubborn child!). Well, wouldn’t you know that this very trait would be key not only to helping me survive a depressed mental state but also to thriving because of it. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Let’s return to the fall of 2009 when I found myself strapped with generalized anxiety and PTSD.

My self-image was frail and my inner core felt damaged. This was the state I found myself in when looking into that hallway mirror as I handed over the reins to Spirit. My fragility was





due in great part to my years-long struggle with depression; but it was also grounded in the trials and tribulations of my life, especially starting from a difficult childhood and problem teen years.

Who among us doesn't know someone who has a difficult background and yet appears to be getting along in his or her life quite well? It can certainly happen that way. But this wasn't

..... how my story unfolded; my back-  
 "Energy cannot be created or destroyed, but energy can be transformed."  
 —Master Chunyi Lin  
 ..... ground led me to and through depression. I don't know about those other people, and I wish them well with all my heart. I only know for certain how my background shaped the person that I am today. As human beings, we

are given challenges to live through, and I know that my childhood struggles were mild in comparison to many. In the end, I am grateful for the way it all turned out.

Thanks to undergoing periods of psychotherapy over the years, I understood that my inner foundation was indeed shaky.

According to my cognitive behavior therapist, I needed to rebuild my self-esteem. But how the heck was I expected to do that? I wasn't offered an instruction book with a step-by-step program for achieving this, though I desperately wanted one.

I began to see this as a new challenge and took on the job of learning how to strengthen my self-esteem; I figured that a healthier self-image would naturally follow. It made sense that this would be a necessary starting point for my overall healing.

I had always admired my sister Anne, four years my elder, as a strong and super-confident person. She seemed sure of herself





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and single-minded when going after what she wanted in life. Nothing got in her way. Of four sisters, she is closest to me in age and we shared many interests. But compared to her, I felt there was no way I could ever be so strong, even if I knew how to go about it (which I did not!).

My therapist suggested that I start by doing the things I enjoyed most, noting how the experience felt, and in particular, noticing any mood changes after the activity. The theory was that if I enjoyed doing a certain thing, then I was probably good at it (because we seldom enjoy doing what we are not at least somewhat good at). And this could be a positive move toward elevating my self-esteem. I followed her advice. Because, truthfully, what else did I have to go on?

I focused on activities that produced something tangible, like doing a craft or a sewing project. I recorded the result, posting pictures on my private blog, which I used for journaling my progress. I recorded even the smallest of successes as I went through my day. (*Success* is used here in the broadest sense to mean any forward movement toward building a healthier picture of myself.) The more I created tangible things, the more successes I could record. And my list of “achievements” began to grow.

The reason it was important to make note of even the tiniest success is that I was actually training my brain and my subconscious to form a new image of Michèle and her value, her worthiness. I needed to feed my brain new information, using as many methods as possible, in an effort to outweigh the thick layers of old and untrue beliefs that had built up over the years. I was replacing the sludge with higher, lighter, and truer information.





Well, if that's what it took, then I would have fun with it! My blogging space became a creative place to explore. I learned how to post pictures of my creations and other upbeat images (like my daughter running carefree through a field of gorgeous charreuse-yellow canola plants with a big clear-blue sky above) and I played around with colors. Without conscious effort, I was learning something of the new blogging technology as I went along. It was pure play, but my natural curiosity in learning to use the software would prove important when I returned to work.

The next step was to enlarge the type of activities that I engaged in, which would serve to expand my repertoire of successes. Little by little, and item by item, the scope of my achievements began to emerge and multiply. Soon, I started believing that I was good not only at sewing garments and knitting projects, activities that I had been practicing for many years, but also at planning and cooking great meals, at designing and fabricating original window treatments, at overseeing renovations and decorating our new home, at selecting tasteful furniture and fixtures, and at coordinating colors. I started believing that I was good at many things.

Each day, I would record those small and not-so-small successes. Because, should I one day be inclined to revert to my old, negative thought patterns—which I fully expected to do at some point, as that was still my brain's default position—I would need proof to the contrary. My journal entries about my new reality would help me get back on track. Also, seeing these things written down not only made them more real to my brain, it also made it possible for me to believe something good about myself. Hey, wasn't it written down? Then it must be





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true, right? At least, that's how my brain would perceive it. And I wanted so much to believe.

Through art and beauty, through practicing creativity in my chosen art forms, by doing with purpose what I enjoyed, I eventually pulled myself out of a negative self-image.

Today, I enjoy a healthy self-image. While I strive for humility of spirit, I no longer downplay or degrade my abilities—not to myself nor to the world at large. The process wasn't easy and it wasn't instant, but if you've suffered with depression, you know that any relief is like a miracle.

In these pages, I'm going to share my miracle with you and hope that you can find a way to make such a miracle happen in your own life. Depression is a big obstacle, no doubt, but remember that it is just that: an obstacle. It is not you. And it is not your life.





## CHAPTER SIX | TAKING CHARGE

### DEPRESSION AS AN ILLNESS

Surprisingly, the act of accepting that I had a mental illness was a freeing experience for me. It was as if the illness now had a personality of its own. I was no longer wholly responsible for my mental state because I could share the responsibility with the illness—it had its role and I had mine. It became more of a partner for understanding its evolving nature and for keeping the symptoms in check. I was not the illness, and it was not me. I was its manager, and my job was learning how to be the kind of manager it needed. I was still in charge, but I was no longer completely consumed by it. Mind you, when it was in flare-up mode, it was certainly at the forefront of my every thought and activity but only until I succeeded in managing it down again. It was about managing a cycle of aliveness and dormancy.

The trick—when it is alive—is remembering to implement the many tools I had employed before in taming it down. There is no need to feel sorry for myself, or frustrated by my lack of interest in my life or motivation. I recognize that it is just the illness attempting to take hold of my life; somewhere inside of my brain is the knowledge for how to manage it. I just need to access my self-discipline for activating the helpful keys. It is not







a quick fix by any means. It takes patience and self-indulgence, but I trust myself to find the tried and tested path. I know I can climb out of the doldrums one clear step at a time and be fine again.

RISK TAKING

It was a few months into my recovery year when I got the idea to quit my government job. I would start a home-based sewing business in which I could spend my days handling beautiful fabrics—one of my all-time favorite things—and create custom window treatments for interior designers and private clients. That’s what I would do!

.....  
“Confidence comes not from always being right but from not fearing to be wrong.”  
—Peter McIntyre  
.....

Truth is, the responsibility of staying in my stable, unsatisfying job had been weighing on me more than I cared to admit. And for the first time, I saw that staying with that job was a choice, not a prison—golden handcuffs perhaps, but not a death sentence. I finally saw what I had been blind to: I had a choice.

This decision was the most liberating thing I had done in twenty years and it felt awesome. Mind you, it was a giant risk, because as a freelance writer, my husband had little financial security and no health benefits. Mine was the stable income in our household, providing medical and dental benefits for the family.

I flew to North Carolina for a two-week course covering the ins and outs of establishing a drapery-making business, and how to fabricate window treatments such as valances, blinds, swags, and jabots. Who knew there was a dedicated school for this?





Spending twelve solid days learning alongside a dozen talented and like-minded women was fun and inspirational. It was an intensive and exhilarating experience from which I returned with an impressive portfolio of sample mini-drapes and window shades that I had constructed. I learned how to use industrial sewing machines and an arsenal of specialized workroom tools and equipment, from thread cones and magnetized bowls for straight pins, to blackout linings and railroaded fabric. I even learned to work with staple guns powered by compressed air—wow, do they have punch!

Once home, I immediately set up my workroom in the lower level of our bungalow—not pretty but spacious enough. The biggest commitment was having a suitable worktable built in the center of the room, large enough to accommodate the lengths of fabric I would be handling on my own. My custom-built table is five feet wide by ten feet long, is covered with a padded, pinnable surface, with storage shelves underneath for bolts of fabrics and bulky supplies. I wasted no time inscribing the name of my business on the table cover: MaBelle Interior Sewing. (The name comes from my mom calling me “*Michèle, ma belle*” which in French means “my pretty” and rhymes with my name, and is also like the lyrics of the song by The Beatles.)

Although I didn’t open my business in the end, the process of considering the decision to quit my employment was important. It released my spirit from the shackles of my job (the beast responsible for causing my first breakdown and subsequent relapses!) and allowed me to explore other income possibilities. For those reasons alone, the experience was hugely beneficial.

It also taught me much about the limits and expectations I placed upon myself. My workplace caused my breakage, and it





was only natural that I feared it so. But it didn't need to continue paralyzing me.

Having a table custom built was not a waste either; it continues to see plenty of use, because fabrics and all things related remain my favorite artistic medium. From creating art quilts, “painting” portraits using a broad palette of colored threads and a sewing machine, exploring surface design on fabric, and learning to weave my own textiles, my leisure activities more than justify the financial outlay.

#### LIVING WITHOUT FEAR

I don't feel like a loner any longer. While I continue to enjoy my own company, no question there, I also enjoy the company of good friends—a lot. There was a time in my life when I honestly did not understand the desire for friends! Isn't that a bit sad? But that's where my spirit was, constrained by an underlying, unrecognized low-grade depression. Having friends pulled me out of my comfort zone, a restrictive and limiting existence. I see that now. The truth is that my friends have enriched my life in a way I could not have conceived of before.

Sonia Choquette's course/workshop helped me define who I wanted to be and how I wanted to live in the world by focusing on some key elements:

**The Thing**—It is my job as co-creator to set the intention for what I want, clarify my desire, and experience the associated passion in the body, using all of my senses. Speaking out loud what I want to create, when it is accelerated by love, is the most dynamic sound (vibration) there is—and very powerful.

**The How**—This is where the fear comes in, which is the contraction. We want to know how it will all shake out and





how much it will cost. Can I can afford it, and how will it affect my inner circle? But this is the universe's job; the Higher Power is who takes care of this part, not me.

**The Why**—It's the joy of expansion, the opening, the dynamic vibration, the smooth transition from past to present. It never ceases to impress and amaze me.

For every step you take, the universe matches you; it dances with your heart's desire (not with your intellect). It is our feelings that create, that activate creation; *the thing* (our desire) begins to have a life of its own with its own heartbeat.

I learned that it is important to exercise the imagination muscle, like any other muscle we want to strengthen. As children, most of us had active imaginations and we frequented them without giving it a second thought; it came naturally to us. I learned that it can be that way for us again.

If we intend to co-create a desired reality in our lives, we need to rediscover the art of imagination. We need to imagine our heart's desire as being alive and then give it a heartbeat. We need to listen for the ping as we watch that desire take shape within the imagination and in our feelings. We need to imagine it all the time throughout our day.

Our heart energy activates the vibration of joy in the body. If we "listen" for it, we can almost hear a ping, it's so perfect. It's like hearing the penny drop in our hearts or observing perfection sliding into home plate. It's something we recognize when it happens, but it's darn hard to explain it to someone who has not experienced it for himself or herself.

We can neutralize fear by asking it what it is, what it represents for me, and what it wants. Name it, and it loses its power.





With our outside voice, we name the fear, release it, and feel the vibration shift. Taking a big breath into the fear turns it into adventure. Fear is natural; everyone experiences it some-

.....

“Open your mind to your limitless potential.”

—Wayne Dyer

.....

times. That doesn’t mean you need to let it lead or control you. It can tag along, but it can’t be in charge. You are aware of its presence, but it has lost its hold over you. It could even become a friend, one that keeps you on edge just enough to capture creative solutions.

TAKING OWNERSHIP (I AM MY OWN SPECIALIST)

In Western society, we have been trained to defer to doctors and other medical experts when seeking treatment; we answer their questions and wait for their instruction or prescription. While some doctors encourage patients to do their own research, we often tend to hold back on expressing our knowledge so as not to be perceived as too forceful or non-trusting. It’s how most of us have been trained.

While having the right team of professionals to treat and advise me was absolutely necessary, I learned that my own self-awareness and keen instinct were crucial for achieving wellness.

Having the confidence to know I am the best judge of my personal needs and limitations—in particular, of what I can and cannot do work-wise—remains central to ensuring my ongoing mental health. My path to wellness has not been a straight or a smooth one. And I continue to encounter potential pitfalls and unforeseen challenges from time to time. But by keeping my senses sharp and attuned to any uneasiness within, even when I don’t quite understand the reason for the discomfort, I can





usually abort a potential trigger. I have successfully sidestepped several likely backslides, as a result of paying close attention to my “un-wellness” radar.

I have met people who have experienced mental health issues such as anxiety or severe stress response but either don’t possess the self-knowledge to identify their triggers and how they might counteract them or, if they do know where the hairline cracks are in their own foundation, they seem to lack a strong enough voice to express their personal boundaries. They might be caught in a web of old childhood or family beliefs, especially ones tied to their unworthiness, and this inhibits them from valuing their right to expression and to mental health.

I feel sad for those individuals, because without the ability to set limits for themselves, they run the risk of triggering a more serious response, one when the mind and body together decide to nullify the threat, in whatever way possible. This could take the form of severe generalized anxiety, depression, or panic attacks (events described as “the universe running you into a brick wall” by my sister Lorraine). I believe such a dramatic event can occur when a more “reasonable” approach is continually overlooked by the conscious mind, leaving the unconscious mind to choose how to ensure self-preservation.

Witnessing someone hit that wall is not fun for anyone; having it happen to you is even less so. But it is sometimes the only option left for our psyche when we insist on maintaining the familiar yet unhealthy *status quo*. Unfortunately, it is sometimes the only way for people to give themselves permission to look after their own needs. We tend to look elsewhere for permission when we should really be looking inside ourselves.





I am grateful to have inherited a ready-for-battle attitude from my mother, which has served me well in taking a stand with and for myself. Taking a stand within myself was the first and most demanding step for standing up and getting healthy.

#### PIVOTAL POINTS

There were pivotal points in my journey that changed the game for me. Their importance was such that, had any one of them not occurred, I would be telling a quite different story.

1. I learned that even good things can cause anxiety (and potential relapse) and that there really can be too much of a good thing. I learned that for me, balance must always be at the forefront of my mind, in all things.

2. My family doctor laid it out quite simply. I had three choices and I needed to pick one:

- Keep my job and continue with increasing depression events.
- Quit my job and eliminate what triggered my illness (my work environment).
- Change how I think about my work environment so I could return.

This seemingly obvious decision path gave me my power back; I had put the illness in charge of my future, but my doctor helped me to see that I was still in charge, that I had a choice.

I eventually chose the third option by flipping my thoughts and envisioning what I needed to get from work in addition to a paycheck. I say *eventually*, because my first decision had been to quit my job and taste what freedom from the shackles felt like, and it was delicious.

3. I found a medication that worked for me. What a thrill it was to rediscover my personality! I literally hadn't been myself in more than twenty years.





4. One more thing I learned from cognitive behavior therapy: Just because you think it doesn't mean it's true; and just because you feel it doesn't make it true, either. This opened my mind and helped put the controls back where they belonged, in my capable hands.

#### RESOURCES

##### *My Joyful Life Action Plan*

We must create an action plan, ideally while we are feeling well, so we have something trusted to latch onto when we are unwell.

1. Replace negative thoughts with neutral thinking. Situations don't have to be black or white.
2. Be creative. Indulge your soul and make meaningful use of your hands.
3. Establish a daily routine with a positive focus.
4. Connect with Spirit every day, ideally at a regular time as part of your routine.
5. See personal discipline in a positive light. It's powerful for you. Find small ways to employ self-discipline and notice how it uplifts your mood.
6. Exercise self-care every day; you know best what you need, and you deserve the care.
7. Regularly visualize your best self, with intention. You can become that person.
8. Exercise at least three times per week for thirty to forty minutes.
9. Spend time in nature especially where there are mature trees, running water, or mountains if you are lucky enough to live close by.
10. Connect with people. Social contact is critical for being well and staying well.







11. Create a “High-Five” book to compliment yourself and record your progress. (A written high-five to yourself, so to speak.) Only you know what warrants noting and only you need to see your book—make it as joyful as you can!
12. If you feel stuck, write down a plan (even the start of a plan will do) to get you moving again. Take charge of your wellness.
13. Lastly, be kind and gentle with yourself; treat yourself as you would your dearest friend.

#### PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS

When things go wrong or I am faced with a problem, rather than panic, I attempt to apply the problem-solving process, which I learned from my CBT doctor/therapist:

1. Identify the problem.
2. Gather information on the problem or situation.
3. Generate alternatives (options).
4. Choose one.
5. Do it.
6. Evaluate it.

While applying the above process, practice transforming your negative thoughts into neutral ones; once you have mastered neutral thinking, try to further transform them into positive thoughts. One step at a time!





TAKING CHARGE

LIST OF DOS AND DON'TS

DO	DON'T
Set achievable goals.	Wait for things to happen or change.
Reward yourself for your achievements.	Focus on disappointments.
Simplify or change goals that are not working for you.	Get stuck continuing with goals that you find frustrating.
Make plans for your free time.	Sit around with nothing to do.
Regularly review your goals and achievements.	Catastrophize.
Make contact with friends at least once a week (preferably more often).	Isolate yourself when feeling down.
Discuss and share the positive parts of your life with friends.	Focus too much on the negative.
Be consistent with your daily schedule (i.e., regular and reasonable bedtime and rising time).	Just "float" through your day, letting your mood dictate your schedule.
Seek out and initiate pleasant activities and events.	Get stuck in a routine that does not serve you and allow you opportunity to enjoy life.
Stay aware of automatic thoughts that affect your mood; try to correct these thoughts if you can.	Let negative automatic thinking go unchallenged.





## A JOYFUL LIFE

Don't feel you need to do all of the above right away—take one at a time; you don't want to exacerbate feelings of being overwhelmed. Think of these dos and don'ts as part of your action plan for developing healthy skills over time as a precaution against relapse.





## CHAPTER SEVEN | THE BALANCING ACT

We hear a lot about balance, especially work-life balance, so much so that it has lost much of its substance. Most people would agree that it's a nice thing to have in our sights, but for me, balance is critical. I can't function without it.

While balance in all areas of my life is the goal, I accept that this ideal is not always possible all of the time. However, I especially guard those certain areas that are essential for me: creativity and spirituality. They *must* have a strong place in my daily life.

Healthy eating and sleeping are important things for the body, and they help me in managing migraines.

Connecting with good people is important for my mind and my spirit. I wouldn't have thought that having friends was necessary for my health, but depression taught me that it is so.

Before depression knocked me off my feet, I had few friends and didn't put much thought into it. As a working mom, I was busy and I found it hard to make friends anyway. I was more self-conscious than I cared to acknowledge—it's only in hindsight that I see that.

I often felt that I had nothing in common with most of the people I met socially because I lived so much in my head. I often felt unworthy of their company and didn't pursue budding





friendships, believing it wasn't worth the hassle. I told myself I didn't want or need friends because I had so many hobbies to keep me company. It took me some time to understand the value

..... of having friends—not to mention the importance of *being* a friend. I am so thankful for having learned that lesson, because my friends enrich my life in a way I can't express. (You know who you are, and I *love* each one of you!)

..... "Authentic power. It happens when purpose aligns with personality to serve the greater good."  
—Oprah Winfrey

Balancing a life must be learned and practiced; it is not an automatic thing. Maintaining balance takes discipline and self-respect—self-respect for

helping to identify those things that are important for *you*, and discipline for ensuring that you make it happen for yourself and continue to do so. It sometimes calls for a lifestyle change.

My personal balance is unique to me, and yours will look different from mine or a friend's. We each create our own recipe for what constitutes good balance in our lives. If you are feeling out of balance, it might be a call to review your current activities and perhaps reconfigure some of the bits that made life go out of kilter.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF BALANCE

Thankfully, I am now able to manage most of my triggers for depression and anxiety by keeping balance in my life.

For the work-specific triggers, it's my job to ensure that my manager has a clear understanding of my needs and limitations and that she understands and accepts her role as my sometimes-protector from the minefields of potential triggers. She is also





my coach for dealing effectively with certain colleagues known to hold live charges for me. This, too, is a balancing act—one for which clear and ongoing communication is essential.

My previous manager understood what work I could and could not do. If she wasn't sure, she knew to ask me and have a discussion about it. It was my job to become aware of my internal responses and to communicate that information to her. Together for three years, we built a mutually trusting relationship.

But because change is ever present, learning to navigate through evolving circumstances is also part of staying healthy, especially for someone with depression and anxiety (whose first response might be to run rather than learn healthy coping mechanisms).

This balance was severely tested when my manager retired and I found myself reporting to someone new. Despite having initiated a three-way meeting with both managers to discuss my circumstance, the transition to a new manager was rough. Happily, our working relationship improved quickly and I can now simply chalk up an initial, unfortunate experience to a rough start. No more and no less. All normal.

The experience did confirm, however, that knowing *about* managing an employee with mental health issues (which many managers have been exposed to from attending a one-day workshop offered by my organization) and *doing* it are not the same thing. Not at all.

In addition to keeping my manager apprised of my mental health temperature, I try to keep my colleagues informed of major changes, as well. I recall asking to speak at one of our





section meetings to inform them that I was on the edge of relapse and had entered into crisis-management mode.

I introduced the topic by giving a brief history of my depression, because only a few in attendance were aware of my struggle, and went on to explain that I was working with our manager to determine what work I would drop for the time being and what new tasks I would take on as part of an altered workplace accommodation.

Their response was compassionate; they wanted to know how they could help. I told them their willingness to hear what I needed was already helping. I thanked them for their support, and we moved on to the next item on the agenda. I was very pleased with their reception and felt better and stronger having told them.

I have always been open about my mental health problems. I feel it's better to keep my colleagues informed of changes rather than having them wonder about my performance—or non-performance, as the case may be—and letting them fill in their own information where they see gaps. That is what people will do. They will make up their own stories—often not the most flattering ones, either.

It's important that I feel safe in my environment; without that, fear and anxiety can and do take over my world and lead me straight to falling apart. And I never want to return to that dreadful pit called depression.

It is worth repeating that learning to maintain balance takes conscious effort, planning, and lots of discipline: being present through mindfulness; planning for solitude and stillness in my day and week, a time when I can connect with the Divine, my





source, and ground myself; and focusing on keeping my energy vibrating high, healthily, and positively.

With a chronic anxiety condition, when too much is happening in my life, whether or not I have control over it, it can cause me to become overwhelmed and can make it very hard to get back on track. I feel as though I get sucked into a vortex or a treadmill of a zillion things that need my attention, right now. I find it difficult to focus or make choices, to prioritize what to work on next. I get pulled into the work one hundred percent and have difficulty letting go of that mental stronghold and focusing on other things in order to achieve balance.

Sometimes, I need to take a step back and away from activity, to spend time rebalancing with the right side of the brain, with intuition, spirit, and creativity. And I must consciously spend time relaxing my mind.

Within balance, success is mine; outside it, I crash and burn.

I continue to learn skills to protect myself and to better manage my world—because my life depends on it.

#### ABOUT STIGMA

What is stigma? A compilation of dictionary definitions reveals that it is “a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person’s character,” and gives the following example: “The stigma of having gone to prison will always be with me.”

But why should there be shame, disgrace, humiliation, or embarrassment associated with an illness? The stigma is very real, and I believe it stems from fear and a lack of understanding—from not knowing how to manage or have a discussion about depression.







I am doing what I can to raise awareness of mental illness and the value of mental health. And that starts by sharing my own story with anyone who shows interest. I am not a famous person with a public profile that demands attention, but my story is no less real and valid. As someone with lived experience

.....  
"It's better to be kind than right. We don't need a brilliant mind that speaks, but a patient heart who listens."  
.....  
—Anonymous

of a mental illness, I have a role to play in the battle to debunk the stigma that weighs heavily on those touched by the illness—whether as victims, survivors, or their friends and family.

If you don't think the stigma is real, perhaps it's because you haven't experienced it first-hand, and that's understandable. But have you spoken recently with the spouse or family member of

someone who died of suicide? I'm thinking of the one who refuses to publish an obituary for fear that "people will know," or, if the notice of death is written vaguely enough to skirt the actual cause of death, people might telephone the house wanting to know about the circumstances. And they'll need to be told or lied to. Even if they don't voice it, callers might hold the closest survivors somehow responsible.

Some relatives feel it's better (or more comfortable) to ignore the death altogether, to treat the suicide in a way that perhaps mimics how the individual might have felt during his or her life: invisible and unworthy.

On the other hand, some families of suicide are helping to fight the stigma by speaking out. I commend them for turning a highly traumatic and sad occurrence into something that could





help those who are troubled by mental illness today, or who will be in the future.

Do you remember hearing about the “C” word or the “big C”? That’s what we used to call cancer a few decades ago because the word was too emotionally loaded to be spoken aloud. Older generations sometimes still use that term, perhaps out of habit or a lingering discomfort.

It was through publicly raising awareness over many years that the unmentionable started to take in air. It was by everyday people gaining notice in the public arena through acts of courage and using their own illness to raise funds for research. It was as a result of high-profile fundraising campaigns that the stigma eventually faded, coupled with an increasing number of success stories from people who beat the disease thanks in large part to funded research.

This opening of thought is beginning to happen concerning mental illness. In Canada, we are raising awareness about it locally and nationally through media and publicity campaigns; by establishing the Canadian Mental Health Commission; by employers like the Ontario Public Service declaring 2014 the Year of Mental Health; by public figures speaking out about their personal struggles with mental illness; and by people like you and me talking about it and sharing our stories. In this fight, the little person can have a huge impact by being the change she wants to see in her community.

Because mental illness is an invisible condition, some are quietly opting to mark their bodies with semi-colon tattoos, often on the wrist, as a way of reaching out and opening conversations with other survivors, their friends, and their families.





The symbol signifies that mental illness need not be a permanent sentence, ending with a finite period. It can end with a semi-colon and be an unfinished sentence, allowing for more of the person's story to unfold.

The current estimate is that 20 percent of Canadians suffer from severe depression (that's one in five people!) and fewer than 6 percent ever receive treatment. I like this quote by Brian Day, MD, former president of the Canadian Medical Association, which produced these numbers: “[the stigma of mental illness is the] final frontier of socially acceptable discrimination.”

Part of the divergence is due to the stigma that mental illness carries, and part is because we don't know where to find help.

We haven't grown up knowing these things. It is something we need to learn. Thanks to programs like Mental Health First Aid, making its way into the Western Hemisphere and being offered through an increasing number of workplaces and communities, our society is slowly learning about these things. Education is the only way out.

#### ACCEPTANCE TAKES TIME

Self-stigma was a huge hurdle for me, because I felt undeserving—undeserving of happiness, undeserving of having work that I enjoyed, undeserving of a fulfilling life.

And I felt unworthy. I experienced what I have heard described as Imposter Syndrome, feeling surrounded by super-competent people, all much better than I. I found myself forever lacking. I felt unworthy of being loved, that I was just taking up space. Somewhere along the way, I had lost my purpose. I perceived myself as having unreasonable expectations that could never be satisfied, and I wasn't able to lower my expectations, either. No matter how hard I tried, I could never be happy.





I had struggled with this weight strapped to my solar plexus since my early teens. Having children brought some respite from my dissatisfaction (because I loved mothering), but even that was temporary; as a stay-at-home mom, I soon felt isolated and unworthy in that arena too, and I yearned to find value from the business world, then the nonprofit good-causes world, and finally I hoped to find it in the for-the-public-good government world. While this final stop did bring about my breakdown, it also helped me to crack the riddle of life—how to feel fulfilled and happy.

In 2010, I began working hard at changing my self-image to better reflect the reality that others saw in me and that I eventually came to see in myself. My husband helped me on this journey to self-acceptance by helping me to accept my illness and to see the person I had become.

I took the time to grieve over the loss of those years when the illness was at its worst. One fine day, as Robert and I sat in our field on what we called the shade shelter, observing the wind as it played with the tall grasses in the surrounding farm fields, I apologized for having put him through those agonizing years. Though he felt my words were unnecessary because it was the illness and not me who was responsible, my heart needed to apologize. Being the gallant man that he is, Robert accepted my apology. It is what my soul needed, and I felt a release from the process.

Grieving allowed me to let go of the past and accept the present. I will never forget those “lost” years, and honestly, it’s better that I don’t. You see, the memory protects me from the worst of the illness.





## A JOYFUL LIFE

I can't control how others respond when they learn that I have depression, but I can help them to better understand my experience of it. I also can teach them how I want to be treated—with consideration and respect, the same as everyone else.

My illness and I have evolved to where I can now harness my disability—I use it to help shine a light on mental illness and to help to lift the stigma. And perhaps, if I am at the right place at the right time, along with Spirit's guidance, I will help someone out there who is buried under his or her own struggles. My deepest desire is to help someone see hope for himself or herself. Hope is something we all need.

My illness taught me...

- to develop and express my voice
- to recognize when it's time to reach out
- to know what is worth fighting for
- to grow my compassion for others
- that I am my own specialist and advocate
- that true acceptance takes time and patience
- that friends are necessary for my health
- that grieving has a place in the healing process
- most important, that I am a happier person because of my illness.

## A LESSON FROM PERU

I spent two months in 2008 volunteering for Awamaki, a nonprofit organization that supports weaving cooperatives of indigenous women located in rural villages in the highlands of Peru. These communities practice traditional, back-strap weaving and help to support their families with the sales. I put my talents to use there by developing product designs that





incorporate the artisans' weaving, in an effort to broaden the appeal and expand their reach. I created samples and sewing patterns that could later be fabricated by the women themselves using regular sewing machines on their premises. I was pleased to contribute to such a worthy cause. And what I learned while there will serve me for a lifetime.

The project allowed me to experience what true joy and contentment feels like and to enjoy the beauty of marrying talent with work. And I determined to get some more of that once back in Canada. I knew I was meant to be productive in a creative space. I felt I had unlocked the secret to my happiness and that I had been created to do nothing less.

I could feel Mama Bear's power inside of me, joyfully radiating from my every pore. I spent most days inside of my power while in Peru, shining my light and discovering my inner beauty. I was gleeful, a fully content, peaceful, happy, and joyfully creative woman, engaged with her community. It was heaven on earth.

I recall a scene one clear morning near the end of my Peruvian sojourn, the fog at Machu Picchu having completely lifted. I was walking away from the Sun Gate where I had stopped for a rest and snack and I was ambling down the cobbled path by myself with no one else on the trail, when a sudden wave of warmth filled and lifted my heart and I knew this was as good as it gets! It was the first time I had experienced such purity of joy.

I had to find a way to connect with that treasure once back home, because my soul's very essence depended on it. Now that I had tasted it, I felt I would die without it.

When I was six years old and in first grade at a Catholic school in Northern Ontario, my teacher told the class that each





of us was born with a special talent that was uniquely ours and that it was our job while here on earth to grow that talent, that we were not to return to God with our talent undeveloped. It was clear in my child's mind that I would need to become an artist, because my talent was in drawing and coloring. There was no doubt in my young mind, because everyone just knew it was my talent—the other kids, my teacher, and my friends. I'm not sure what my family thought of my abilities, because my siblings were even more creatively talented than I, the youngest of five at the time.

I returned from Peru eager to try the small business route, selling my creations online and at craft shows. I began making cuddly, warm winter coats and sold a few of these. Then I crafted one-of-a-kind jackets, vests, and tote bags accented with hand-weaving from Peru. And finally, I attempted to launch MaBelle, my one-person workroom for custom drapes and window treatments.

While none of these business ventures took hold in the end, I certainly have no regrets about testing these ideas because of the lessons they afforded me. Having instead made the choice to finish my career at my government job, I am hugely thankful to have retired with a pension that can support my creative hands.

#### ON TALENT AND OLD BELIEFS

Growing up in a family of artistic siblings, I thought that having drawing ability was normal, because it was present in everything that we did. I also believed that I was far less talented than my brother and four sisters, because they were *really* talented in my estimation. (My younger sister, Louise, would arrive seven years after me to bring the count to six.)





As the youngest, it made perfect sense that my abilities would be less developed than my siblings', but that fact didn't occur to my young mind; I just knew I was forever trying to catch up and imitate whatever they were doing. This meant I didn't develop my own creative voice until well into adulthood.

Another belief I grew up with was that seeking work that called for artistic talent was foolhardy, unrealistic, and plain dumb. In my family, it was an accepted fact that no one could make a living with art and the only artists out there were the starving ones. The decision to ignore any artistic field for a career was made long before I was of an age to be considering these things. I knew only that my work life wouldn't have anything to do with art—not architecture, not graphic design, not drafting, not interior design, not even organizing art events. How unfortunate.

In actuality, my family didn't discuss careers of any kind. We had a very short view of life, based on the realities of living on the poverty line and sometimes below it. The goal was to get a job and make enough money to pay the rent and eat. And that's as broad as my view got in those days. From what I can gather, the same was true for most of my siblings.

Many years later, having gone through some periods of significant depression, I was compelled to do some serious soul-searching. I finally figured out that it wasn't the talent that was lacking in me. Not at all. What I had been missing all along was self-esteem. I inherited a frail self-esteem and inadvertently built up the wrong self-image. Ah, I was at the crux of it now!

Over the years from my childhood to the present, this breach in my foundation had not found new strength. On the contrary,







the psychological weakness had just permeated into more areas of my life. It needed a makeover so that its power could be realigned to its proper position—where it was controlled by me, not me by it.

*Okay, I need to strengthen my self-esteem and rebrand my self-image, I thought, I can do that!* This was good, because then I had something concrete to focus on, something to get my teeth into. The task appealed to my action-oriented personality. Until I stopped to think. *Uh... now, how does one go about doing that exactly?* How could I reverse the image I carried of myself, when my self-esteem was virtually non-existent?

I could not afford to spend \$100 an hour for a therapist. This would be a long-term effort over months and perhaps years. I didn't have that kind of money, so I made up my own method, and it worked for me and my circumstances.

As is wise when launching chartless endeavors, I started small, by documenting the tiniest of successes until they became greater in number. I built upon these until my successes broadened and took on a more significant stature. Eventually, I was able to observe my successes and capture a more realistic picture of myself.

Today, I believe I have a healthy sense of my creative abilities and qualities, while keeping well within the boundaries of humility and good taste. And I know what I am capable of creating—anything I so desire!

I don't remember how I came up with this strategy. I suspect it must have been through reading and listening to inspiring audiobooks and web-based radio shows.

The fourth belief that I learned early in life—and this is





one I am keeping, because it's a good one—is that I can do anything I set my mind to. When I am feeling well, there is no obstacle I cannot surmount or get around. My mom taught me that. As a single parent of six rambunctious and “creative” kids (read: what interesting and original mess can we get up to now?), she was the most resourceful and self-reliant person I have ever known. She taught me that if I wanted something that we couldn't afford (which was most things), I should just go ahead and make something like it. In my house, being bored was seen as a reflection of a lack of ingenuity, of which I learned by example to develop plenty.

When I was nine years old, my mom made me the most beautiful magenta-colored pants from the satin lining of an old fur coat (at a time when up-cycling wasn't a thing!). We certainly couldn't afford to buy fabric, and besides, no stores were open at the late hour that she came home from the evening shift working the switchboard of a local motel. That is when she found my scribbled note explaining that I *needed* clean pants to wear to school the next day, as a treat instead of the usual school uniform. She knew that my only pants, which I wore for playing outside, would never do. So, she stayed up all night cutting out and sewing my rich-kid pants. I was never so proud to go to school as I was wearing those beautiful, tailor-made pants. (Thanks, Mom!)

#### MY THINKING CAPACITY

One of the nasty things about having depression is that while the illness is in flare-up mode, you are deprived of the very thing you need to help yourself: your thinking abilities. Because the brain is not firing at full capacity during these periods, it





becomes difficult to convey accurate information on your state of being—for example, in updating your boss, your spouse, or your friends, or in filling out notoriously long and complex forms for insurance purposes.

Ironically, as my condition began to improve, it became clear to me—because I could think a bit better then—that I couldn't fully trust my own thinking. It wasn't that I would engage in manic or unpredictable thoughts, but that I couldn't gauge things properly. I couldn't be sure when it was time to discuss a change in medication with my doctor. I was never sure if my self-assessment, from my insider's viewpoint, was accurate, and if it was similar to what I presented on the outside. How did my "inside experience" compare to my husband's experience when interacting with me? I trusted his opinion but not my own. Because the illness was affecting the very part used in processing thought, I felt at a great disadvantage. I never felt that people fully understood this dilemma.

Perhaps this deficiency is one reason why I was more adept at sensing insights with my intuition rather than thinking something through, and why I was able to rely on my intuition so thoroughly. It was probably my best asset.

• • • EXERCISE • • •

*Setting Your Personal Boundaries*

This exercise, from a workshop with Sonia Choquette, is great to do anytime, but especially in the morning as a way to set the intention for your day.

I find the actions especially useful when I feel like I am being encroached upon by people who sap up my energy, when I find them crossing over into my personal space more than I like, and





when I find myself more concerned with their issues/topics/needs than my own. When I first returned to work, I felt quite vulnerable and used this technique to protect myself from encroaching energies. I needed to focus on establishing my emotional boundaries. This exercise enabled me to be in my power in a quiet and sure way.

- Standing in the center of your space, take five or six deep and calming breaths to center yourself.
- Raise your arms wide, palms open and facing out in front of you, as if you are pushing a wall out. Stretch those arms and push forward.
- While speaking, “I will not be stuck between a rock and a hard place,” now push with your hands to the right of you.
- Repeat as above, this time with your hands to the left of you.
- With hands facing down, push down the personal history and whatever is keeping you stuck—push down the rising tide.
- Raise up your arms and push as if to raise the ceiling.
- Turn around, flicking the imaginary stuff off your shoulders, telling any monkeys to get off your back.
- End with a “spiritual burp”: pound your fist to the heart chakra and expel the sound “HA!” in a strong voice.
- Enjoy your day!

