

# 6 Ways to Cope with the Limitations of Depression

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“I ask not for a lighter burden, but for broader shoulders,” says a Jewish proverb. A member of my online depression group, [Project Beyond Blue](#), posted it recently. I asked them for ways they cope with the limitations of depression because I needed inspiration.

My kids have had **maybe** eight full days of school since before Christmas break. This is a big problem for a highly-sensitive manic-depressive whose desk is in her son’s bedroom. Every time I get a coherent thought — which isn’t often — I am interrupted by a yelp or some gross twerking motion, thanks to Miley Cyrus.

Even when the kids are in school, living with chronic depression demands an acceptance of one’s condition and a willingness to learn how to live **around** lasting symptoms. In this regard, I am inspired by Toni Bernhard, author of [How to Be Sick](#). She is so capable and intelligent, but has been constrained by an illness ([chronic fatigue syndrome](#)) that few people understand. Nevertheless, she has found a way to rise above her condition to teach others how to live fully even when you’re sick. I hope to encourage the same kind of perseverance. Here, then, are six ways to cope with the limitations of depression.

## 1. Stop Trying to Make People Understand

This is wasted energy, and people like me who battle [chronic depression](#) must conserve all the energy they have. I love [The Spoon Theory](#) by Christine Miserandino. If you've never read it, you must. She tries to explain her illness to her best friend, and the analogy of spoons is perfect.

The other day I tried to explain to someone why I can't devote 20 hours a week to fundraising for my new foundation like other executive directors. It fell on deaf ears, of course. Afterward, my husband told me to stop trying to convince the world that I am a hard worker. It really doesn't or shouldn't matter what they think.

"Until they live it, they can't possibly understand the monkey you have on your back," he said. "You should save your energy for writing and things that do make a difference."

## 2. Compare and Despair

Theodore Roosevelt once said that "Comparison is the thief of joy." That is certainly true if you compare yourself to New York Times bestselling authors like I do, or renowned doctors or psychologists, or people so successful they hire a staff to tweet for them. What if we followed Helen Keller's advice? "Instead of comparing our lot with that of those who are more fortunate than we are, we should compare it with the lot of the great majority of our fellow men. It then appears that we are among the privileged."

I am trying to do this lately when I have difficulty living within the [limitations of my illness](#) — when I am interrupted mid-sentence by a 13-year-old twerker.

Last December, I spent a day at [Way Station](#), a Maryland program for persons with severe mental illnesses. After speaking with a few of the patients, I returned home with a completely different perspective of my condition. Although it feels like my symptoms are disabling, I am able to be in a marriage — one that has lasted almost 20 years! — and I am a halfway decent mother.

I have also found a way to work and contribute to the world. That is so much more than those people have or will have because of their bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or other mental illness. Sometimes all we need to do is to take a field trip — even if it is a virtual one — to see the situation a little differently.

## 3. Embrace Your Inner Snail

This exercise consists of repeating the first line of the serenity prayer until it sticks: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change." Much like a stroke, depressive episodes are associated with the loss of volume in parts of the brain, namely the hippocampus, which is important

in the consolidation of information from short-term memory to long-term memory. The more severe the depression, the greater loss of brain volume. There's always the possibility of neurogenesis, the rebirth of brain cells, but you have to stay depression-free for that to happen.

There's no denying that I have lost brain cells with each major [depressive episode](#). In my young thirties I could crank out an essay in under two hours. After my first breakdown, it took twice as long. Since the depressive episode of 2013—2014, it takes between eight to ten hours to complete a blog, four times the amount of time it did just ten years ago. I now have a pothead chilling out in my head that traded my vocabulary for a doobie, “Dude ... the word was so here, and now it's gone ... sorry, dude.” Every time he inhales rather than gives me the right word, I return to the first part of the serenity prayer and I try like hell to embrace my inner snail.

#### 4. Adjust Your Expectations

This usually involves some math. For example, theoretically I know I only have between 9 am and 2:30 pm to work. I can't afford to not work out — that's [the most important thing](#) I do for my brain all day. And, if you average all the half-days and breaks for which the kids get off school (Mardi Gras, Ash Wednesday, Bishop's Holiday, Principal's Birthday, Vice-Principal's Mother-In-Law's Birthday, Teacher Appreciation Day, Catholic Schools' Week), they are only in school four days a week.

That means I have 22 hours to get my stuff done. Great, if I'm only producing my blogs. But I'm also editing a book for a friend, running an online community, responding to reader emails, and fundraising for a new foundation. Add that and you have over 40 hours of work, which explains why I am stressed out, working evenings and weekends to get everything done. It's bad math.

People with good brain chemistry can afford to live with some unrealistic expectations, at least for small periods of time. But not persons for whom stress makes them very ill. If I am to embrace my inner snail, I must get back to good math.

#### 5. Move 'Your' Pain to 'The' Pain

Whenever I think about quitting everything because I have no brain cells left thanks to my depression, I try to move **my** pain to **the** pain — that is, the collective pain of the human race. Plato said, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” I truly believe that. And that is one reason I felt so adamant about creating online communities like ProjectBeyondBlue.com where we can learn from another and share our stories. When I think I am the only person with a pothead in my

brain, I can log on and find many fellow depressives with potheads inside their brains, and my bitterness turns to compassion.

## **6. Remember Wabi-Sabi**

The quintessential Japanese aesthetic is known as [wabi-sabi](#): “Beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete.” In fact, when the Japanese fix broken objects, like pots or vases, they fill in the cracks with gold. They believe that something becomes more beautiful when it is damaged or has a history. So according to wabi-sabi, I remind myself often, a blog that I labor over for 10 hours is more precious than one that can be cranked out in under two hours.

Artwork by the talented [Anya Getter](#).

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