

Dear Friend, This Is Depression

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I wrote the following letter as a response to a conversation with a friend I have known since college. She wondered why I used the term “death thoughts” in my writing. But I wanted to publish it for all of the people closest to me, who have never seen me wail from the hollow place in my heart or throw things across the room in rage of this illness. I am writing it for my friends and relatives who wonder why I choose the words I do, if I’m exercising a creative license to keep a reader’s attention.

This year my purpose has been made clear — to help people who are tormented by constant death thoughts, just as I am. This will mean rejection from those closest to me who cannot understand what I mean or why I would disclose such ugliness to the public. But it also means I have tapped into the freedom to do what I was born to do.

<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/07/06/dear-friend-this-is-depression/>

Dear Friend,

Thank you for being honest the other day when you told me that you found the words “death thoughts” in my writing to be jarring, that they make you want to stop reading, that they make you think I am different from you, like a Rain Man sort of character.

I appreciate your honesty because I think a lot of people feel that way but never tell me.

I spent some time thinking about how I could soften the phrase “death thoughts,” but there was no way around the reality that I think about death when I am depressed, about ways I can get cancer, or accidents that I can stage, or just calculate over and over again the average lifespans of relatives from both sides of my family to come up with the number of hours that I have to hang in there for.

I know this must make you terribly uncomfortable, like when I read the word “retarded” or a pejorative term for an African-American. The unbecoming terms make me want to stop reading, as well.

I asked my husband if he found my use of the words “death thoughts” to be jarring. I told him you thought they were. He explained to me something I guess I never realized: I have hidden my worst depression from you. In fact, I have hidden it from everyone in my life except for him.

He is the one who has caught me in the bedroom closet on my knees, begging God to take me. He found my stash of prescription drugs meant to flatten my pulse. He has held me when my body convulsed with acute anxiety and held my hands when I sat at my desk wailing, crying tears of frustration and anguish and rage.

He has seen what my death thoughts look like.

“I don’t think the term is jarring enough,” he explained. “Not to someone like me who has lived with severe mental illness. Yeah, it’s an ugly term. It’s unbecoming. It sounds as though you are exaggerating things, being melodramatic like a typical writer. I suspect when my family reads that, or your family reads it, they think you’re throwing in an extra adjective and adverb that you’re making up a good story and trying to get a reaction. But I know the reality. To me, the term isn’t jarring enough.”

You’re right in that they are obsessions. They are like Rain Man stuff. But I can’t just call them obsessions. Because the kind of suffering involved when I panic about being alive is different than

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when I obsess, for example, about saying the wrong thing at a dinner party. There is a hopelessness that absorbs every ounce of joy in me, a darkness that steals my smile. There is a peculiar desperation in obsession about death — like I am running out of air and desperate to find the way out of the haunted house that is life.

I suspect my frank writing is why so many of my family and friends don't read my stuff. They wish I would stop using those ugly terms. But I don't write for them. I don't write for the people who are reading Gretchen Rubin's *The Happiness Project*. I am writing for the five percent of people who experience the same kind of raw death thoughts that I do. I suspect they haven't met anyone who is as frank as I am, and so they might cry once they hear that someone else in the world adds up the ages of all their relatives to get the mean average of hours they have left on the planet. That's the person I write for.

I want her to know that death thoughts can make you feel so terrified that you only see one way out, that they can cloud your thinking for days and weeks and (in my case) years on end. But that they don't stay in one's brain forever. And they are just thoughts. Painful, convincing, manipulative, harrowing thoughts. But JUST thoughts. You never, ever have to follow through with their directions. You don't have to move into action, even though they threaten you with all kinds of repercussions if you don't, kind of like those annoying chain letters you get from friends. They are not real. They just hurt like they are real.

And sometimes, not always, when you have them as often as I do, it's possible to know what triggers them, aggravates them, makes them louder and more frequent.

For example, I now know that anything made with white flour or sugar will create death thoughts, and not exercising even for one day does it too. I have to live my life with the discipline of Lance Armstrong or an Olympic athlete, because even one piece of bread or a shortened workout, and I'm again back to averaging the ages of Grandma and Grandpa Johnson and Grandma and Grandpa Staley, hoping that I discover a weak or defective gene in the family that causes premature death.

I did make a video once of a bad day. I thought I'd share it with you (you can view it at the bottom of the page). Not many people would publish such an unflattering video. But it's my way of showing the world that I'm not a phony. I'm not making it up. I'm not throwing in extra words for better prose.

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I was glad that you feel so comfortable with me that you could laugh when you read my quote, “the hardest thing some people will ever do in their lifetime is stay alive.” But here’s the thing. It IS the hardest thing I will ever do in my lifetime. I wasn’t overstating that. Weird, right? It doesn’t make sense. Why would staying alive be so hard? If you are asking yourself that, though, you probably haven’t experienced severe depression. And so, you’re probably not the person I am writing for. My guess that anyone who has fought suicidal ideation for longer than six years (continuously), as I have, would nod in strange relief, not laugh.

So, I thank you for your feedback, but I’m going to keep the term “death thoughts.” Unfortunately, there isn’t a better way of describing the kind of rumination that happens when I’ve hit a fragile spot.

Maybe someday, when I feel really brave, I will show you what my death thoughts, or my severe depression, looks like.

Thanks for your friendship.

Love,

Therese

Continue the conversation on ProjectBeyondBlue.com, the new depression community.

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