

Spirituality & Health



By: [Jennifer Haupt](#)

Channeling Depression Into a Powerful Tool for Creativity

I wouldn't exactly call depression a gift, but I've come to accept the restless emptiness and nagging sadness as signals from my soul instead of merely the symptoms of an illness to be excised.

This didn't come easy. I spent two decades coping with the side effects of antidepressants, the ups and downs of biofeedback, and expensive weekend seminars, trying to figure out what was wrong with me. Then about 10 years ago, in my early 40s, I decided to take a different tack and listen to my depression instead of trying to tamp it down or explain it away. It's still a daily battle, but there have been joyful triumphs along the way.

Learning to listen to my depression has transformed my career over the past seven years. I'd always wanted to write a novel but was instead encouraged by family and teachers to use my writing skills in more practical ways: advertising, marketing, and then journalism. I enjoyed the work but longed for something more—and I wondered whether that longing might be related to my depression. I began writing fiction, just a half hour each morning, as an experiment: What would happen if I devoted time to something I was passionate about, just for me, at the beginning of every day?

Depression May Boost Creativity

Decades of research have found that introversion, emotional sensitivity, and vulnerability to negativity—seeing the glass as half empty—are all common personality traits of highly creative people. They are also common symptoms of depression—symptoms that I've struggled with since childhood and had always seen as impediments to success. But more recently I've begun to consider that, perhaps, my depression may actually help my

creativity. In fact, artists and writers are eight to ten times as likely as the general population to suffer from mood disorders. Many studies speculate that this is because artists tend to examine their lives more deeply than the average person and that they draw on unpleasant experiences to feed their work.

“Creative people might be more likely to experience negative emotions,” says Wendy Berry Mendes, the Sarlo/Ekman associate professor of emotion at the University of California, San Francisco, who conducted a study while at Harvard University to look at how mood change can affect creativity. In one study, researchers measured levels of DHEAS (dehydroepiandrosterone sulfate), a hormone that when at lower-than-normal levels is associated with depression, before people received either harsh negative criticism or positive feedback in a mock job interview. Then the subjects were assigned a creative task. “Receiving negative compared to positive feedback was associated with enhanced creativity,” says Berry Mendes. “This was especially the case for individuals who had lower levels of DHEAS,” indicating they were predisposed to depression.

Artistic Endeavors Enhance Your Mood

Even as I struggled with depression, I found that delving into a fantasy world of my own making was satisfying and even joyful. Working on my novel settled the restlessness I’d labeled as anxiety and helped to shade in the piece I imagined was missing from my soul. An amazing thing began happening: I wanted more of myself, not less. A friend suggested, half joking, that I might be addicted to writing my novel. But it turns out that the body releases natural opiates as a result of the creative process.

“Creative endeavors are intrinsically rewarding, and you get these little shots of dopamine in the rewards center of the brain,” says Shelley Carson, a professor at Harvard University and the author of *Your Creative Brain: Seven Steps to Maximize Imagination, Productivity, and Innovation in Your Life*. Dopamine is a mood-elevating neurotransmitter that is released with pleasurable experiences such as food, sex, and drugs—and creativity.

Research over the past two decades by Kay Redfield Jamison, co-director of the Mood Disorders Center at Johns Hopkins University, has found a strong link between creative productivity and elevated mood, but it’s difficult to tell which comes first. “As your mood improves, activation of the brain automatically shifts from avoidance to approach,” explains Carson. “When you’re more engaged with your environment—internal as well as external—there’s an increased flow of dopamine. And that, obviously, keeps your spirits up and keeps you writing or painting or whatever is giving you pleasure. Positive emotions and creativity reinforce each other.”

Accepting the Creative Gift of Depression

“All of your emotions color the way you see your environment, the way you recall memories, and, indeed, all aspects of your cognition,” says Carson. “They can either get in the way of your creative efforts, or you can use them to enhance your creativity.”

Mendes's study found that people who produced a higher level of creative work (as judged by a panel of respected artists) had improved their mood considerably by the end of the study, showing that creativity may reduce negative emotions.

As for me, seven years after I began taking my creative "hobby" of writing fiction seriously, my first novel is finally finished. While I still have days when depression dictates that I should be gentle with myself, it's no longer debilitating. Now I know what to do to soothe my mind as well as my soul: pick up a pen and write. —S&H

THE HEALING POWER OF CREATIVITY

Creative therapy—including art, dance, and writing—can be a powerful therapeutic tool. "When someone who's depressed isn't in touch with their feelings, they may be able to project those feelings into the creative process and better understand their emotions," says Amanda Alders, president of the Florida chapter of the American Art Therapy Association.

The connection between art and joy is by no means a new concept, and recent research by Semir Zeki, a professor of neuroesthetics at University College London, connects the mere viewing of beautiful paintings with an increase of dopamine and activity in the pleasure center of the brain, resulting in feelings similar to the throes of romantic love.

"Someone who is depressed may be responding to internalized thoughts and images that are overwhelmingly negative," explains Alders. "Art therapy shifts the focus to creating, enjoying, and sharing positive external stimuli." Patients choose colors and textures they enjoy, and there's often a group aspect of sharing both feelings and finished projects. According to recent studies measuring EEG brain waves, all of these aspects may increase the experiences of joy, raising the levels of dopamine as well as the neurotransmitter serotonin.