

# ***Please Try This at Home***

## ***Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life***

### **A Balanced Diet of Self Pity?**

Is there such a thing as a “balanced diet” of self pity? Does it have a legitimate, healthy purpose that should be nurtured? Or should it be stomped out of existence as soon as possible like a disease-carrying cockroach? I’ve been wondering about that recently, since I keep running into folks who seem to be on the extremes of the self pity spectrum.

#### **The Self Pity Anorexic**

On one extreme, there are people who have been run over, not by a truck or two, but by a whole convoy. They crawl away from the wreckage back into a culture that pressures everybody to buck up and bounce back quickly from setbacks. Or they stagger back into communities that say the universe or God or the American Dream rewards virtuous people who work hard. So if something bad happened to them, at some level, it’s gotta be their fault. So now, they are not only run over, they are also responsible for it.

The people in their lives who should be offering them compassion (often including themselves!) seem allergic to the idea that bad things can happen to good (or at least average) people...at least for very long. Out of that fear, they refuse them the right to say, “I am a good, worthwhile human being trying just as hard as other people. Valuable, important things were taken from me in ways I could not prevent. I need to thoroughly acknowledge and mourn what was stolen!” It seems like affirming a bit more of this kind of self pity—thoroughly acknowledging and mourning what was lost personally and in community—is what could be healing for this kind of person. Soldiering along as if nothing has happened is keeping them stuck as the “walking wounded,” not helping them to heal. They need a healthy booster shot of pity from self and others!

#### **The Self Pity Glutton**

On the other extreme, there are people who have been hurt by something a long time ago. The hurt may have been a huge trauma or one of the inconveniences and disappointments that the majority of us encounter as we bump along through life. But rather than mourning the event, doing the work to repair the trauma, and then moving on to see what else might be going on with life, these people become stuck in self pity. No matter how often you talk to them, the conversation eventually (if not immediately) turns to all that they could have been if “X event” had not happened, how X makes it so hard for them, how other people can never really understand X, how because of X they will never be able to do what other people can do, how they could never think of the world or God or people as being good because of the existence of X, and so on.

What feels extreme is not so much the *content* of this litany. Certainly, there are things about life that make each of those feelings feel deeply true. Rather, it’s the *frequency and repetition* of these things that feels extreme, making even the most patient, giving friend wonder if listening supportively, yet once again, is just feeding the self pity parasite that is sucking the person dry of any present or future joy, hope, or excitement that might interrupt the endless stream of

victimhood. The question here is how to stop the self pity sucker before it consumes all of the person's life.

Considering the dangers of both of these extremes, how are we supposed to know—both for ourselves and those we love—when self pity is an important part of the healing process that needs to be encouraged, not bypassed, and when it is a destructive parasite that drains the energy and meaning from life and relationships?

## Reading the Times

It seems like the *amount of time that has passed* is a key element here for determining whether to feed a self pity anorexic or starve a self pity glutton. The tricky part that I am finding is that it is not so much the amount of time that has passed since the hurtful event as the time that has passed *since the person has started to be able to talk through the details and emotions of the event* with supportive others.

If less than a year has passed since the person first started talking about what happened, the person probably still has some healing to do. Healing needs feeding and support, not withdrawal and starvation. In our culture, it often seems like our tolerance for mourning is about a month after the event, or maybe 90 days if we are super patient. But when people have had a major trauma or loss, this may only give them enough time to put a band aid on the most acute pain. Working through the change in world view, the changes in the logistics of life, and re-crafting their identity and community in light of what has happened takes a lot longer. It's not unusual for someone to legitimately need support a year or so after they have started to be able to talk about what happened.

If after over a year of being able to talk meaningfully about the details and emotions of the event, there is not a decrease in the amount of time and focus spent on re-hashing the event, that may mean: 1) that the person's brain is stuck in the trauma and they will probably need help from a trauma-focused therapist to get un-stuck; 2) the person may be in danger of *allowing their victimization to define who they are*, cutting themselves off from meaningful activities and relationships that could still afford them joy, even in light of the terrible losses they have experienced. The support offered to these folks may need to shift from empathetic listening and care-taking to ongoing encouragement to engage in meaningful activities and relationships that make a contribution to the present and the future, gradually focusing less and less on the past.

Below, I've listed some ways to figure out what you or others are experiencing in the way of self pity and some things that you can do to help yourself or others, depending on whether there's too much self pity or not enough. As there are quite a number of signs and suggestions here, feel free to skip ahead to whatever is helpful to you!

## Detecting and Supporting Self Pity Anorexics

***Signs of needing more self pity.*** If you or someone important to you experienced a significant loss within the past year, the following may be signs that you need an increased level of validation and support to help you heal from your pain:

- loss of interest in activities;
- irregularities in sleeping patterns, including more frequent nightmares;
- feeling like you are maxed out and don't have enough energy to give to anyone else;

- feeling jumpy and scared often;
- irregularities in appetite;
- drawing back from community,
- low energy;
- short fuse, quick anger;
- tears right beneath the surface;
- feeling emotionally numb;
- suddenly feeling as if the loss is happening all over again in the present;
- needing to drastically simplify life to make it through;
- feeling stuck in a “waiting” place, unsure of what you could possibly do next;
- having a hard time using emotion words about the hurtful event, or just about life.

***Self-help for insufficient self pity.*** If you are experiencing several of the signs above, the following things may help:

- joining a group of others who have gone through similar events to talk about what has happened to you;
- writing down what you are tempted to believe is true about you based on what has happened and asking trusted others to lovingly evaluate the list with you;
- figuring out what kinds of get-togethers feel good to you and making specific requests to trusted others to initiate these things on a regular, but not overwhelming schedule to help you when you can't reach out;
- figuring out what kinds of things others say and do that are not helpful, then telling them what these are and asking them to try to avoid these things with you;
- scheduling a specific amount of time each day or week to fully experience your emotions about what you have experienced;
- cutting yourself some slack in your regular tasks, just as if you were healing from a significant physical injury;
- finding between 5-10 trusted friends, family members, therapists, mentors, or groups you could talk to about your experience so that you don't wear out those closest to you;
- getting lots of rest, exercise, and eating as nutritionally as you can to give yourself the energy you need to heal;
- giving yourself permission to distract yourself and not feel the hurt intensely all the time;
- finding a specific and meaningful way to memorialize the loss—dedicating a work of art, holding a service, taking a trip, making a photo album, getting a tattoo, etc.

***Help for others who lack sufficient self pity.*** If you are supporting someone who has been through a significant loss in the last year or so, the following things may be helpful:

- letting them know that it is okay for them to take a long time to work through what they are feeling;
- listening and being with them rather than giving suggestions about what to do;
- telling them that based on what they have experienced their feelings make sense;
- telling them that what has happened is a significant loss that really should be mourned and that they are not weak for feeling the loss;
- telling them they are still good people even though hard things have happened to them;
- reaching out to be with them more often than they reach out to you;
- not saying that you understand what they are experiencing, only that you are sorry for what has happened;

- encouraging them to cut themselves some slack;
- asking permission before offering any suggestions and not giving advice if they refuse it;
- assuming they are doing the best that they possibly could to recover;
- affirming them for all steps they take to recover, including intense grieving;
- being willing to follow their lead in needing fun and distracting things to do or needing to talk about what happened, often in the same get-together.

## Detecting and Supporting Self Pity Gluttons

**Signs of stuck pain.** If it's been over a year since you or someone important to you started talking about a major loss with supportive others, the following may be signs that you may need help from a trauma therapist to get unstuck from your pain:

- persisting problems with sleep, eating, nightmares, or flashbacks;
- continuing to be easily startled;
- continuing to need to make a fast getaway from certain stressful environments;
- continuing to avoid people, places, and things that remind you of the hurtful event.

**Signs of excessive self pity.** If the above things are not occurring and it's been over a year after the event, the following signs may indicate that self pity has begun to take over your identity and cut you off from a meaningful connection to current and future activities and relationships:

- the amount of time spent discussing the event or grieving is not gradually decreasing;
- difficulty thinking of meaningful plans for the future or finding meaning in present activities;
- difficulty following through on plans that would put the event further behind you: moving to a new place, changing routines and hobbies, starting a new career, trying a new relationship, investing in a new community, finding a new group of people to care for, etc.;
- difficulty showing a genuine and consistent interest in others because thoughts constantly return to what is hard about your life because of the event;
- the event is one of the first things you talk about when meeting a new person or in social situations;
- noticing that close friends or family who were previously caring and sympathetic now seem bored, short with you, or seem to change the subject when you talk about the event.

**Self-help for excessive self pity.** If some or all of these things have become true of you, you may want to try:

- thoroughly writing out a description of the event, what it meant to you, how it has affected you, how you expect that it will continue to affect you, and what meaningful things you could expect the future to include despite the event (This can help to reassure you that you have thoroughly thought through the event and what it has meant to you, allowing your mind to begin to move on to other things);
- every day, making a list of 20 things that you are grateful for about your current situation and state of life;
- keeping a checklist/calendar where you note days in which you did not dwell on the event in thoughts and conversations, seeing if you can increase the number of these days as time goes on;

- limiting mourning and self pity to a particular schedule—15 minutes a day, one hour per week, with a particular support group only, etc.
- thinking through what things about the present and future feel most meaningful and setting a plan to increase the amount of time you devote to these things;
- asking friends and family to help you stay on track with increasing meaningful present and future activities;
- finding another person or cause to invest in and whenever your own pain comes to mind, finding a way to positively contribute to that person or cause.

***Ways to help others stuck in self pity.*** If you suspect that someone in your life has become trapped in self pity to the point where they are missing out on good things they might experience, you may want to:

- lovingly tell them that, while what they experienced was a legitimate hurt, continuing to dwell on it is robbing them of joy and that you would like to do what you can to help them invest in a more meaningful future, whether that involves helping them set goals or gently noting whenever they return to talk about past events, allowing them to change the subject;
- assure them that their regrets and hurts are not the only or even the most interesting thing about them, that what is going on in their present and their hopes about the future are even more interesting to you;
- expressing the need for them to ask you more questions about your life and show interest in your struggles more evenly, so there is more back and forth to the relationship;
- telling them that you will begin to change the subject or shorten conversations about the past because you want to gently help them focus on new things and other people;
- congratulating them on any new goals they set and follow through on.

If you or someone you know would like help with processing or moving on from grief or traumatic events, free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email [info@jenniferdiebel.com](mailto:info@jenniferdiebel.com).*

Thanks for reading!

Jennifer Diebel, MA, NCC  
Psychotherapist

303-931-4284  
[info@jenniferdiebel.com](mailto:info@jenniferdiebel.com)  
[www.jenniferdiebel.com](http://www.jenniferdiebel.com)  
3393 Iris Avenue, Suite 104  
Boulder, CO 80301

**Jennifer Diebel, MA, NCC** is a psychotherapist who works with adolescents, adults, couples, and families in her private practice in Boulder, Colorado. For more information about her areas of expertise, background, and methods, as well as additional helpful resources and past newsletters, go to [www.jenniferdiebel.com](http://www.jenniferdiebel.com).

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