



# A personal reflection on “depression”: Not only a problem but also a learning opportunity

by Barry Sullivan



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## Abstract

For most of 2022, I was challenged by depression. One of its effects was to derail action-taking skills in my personal and professional life, leading to a sense of paralysis. This paper documents the narrative therapy skills and knowledge that helped me to move out from under depression’s dark cloud and shows how I applied learnings from my personal experience to my work with clients, including those also dealing with depression.

**Key words:** *depression; ageism; personal failure; statement of position; narrative practice*

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## Background

In Westernised countries such as Australia, depression currently seems to be constructed as an individual issue that can be addressed through medication and psychological interventions. I have chosen to use both of these to address my experience of depression and found them helpful. However, this is far from the full story. The use of labels such as “depression” and “mental health issues” reflects an individualistic and medicalised understanding of problems. Narrative therapy offers a different perspective: that problems are not only individual but rather social and socially constructed. Deconstruction of social contributors to the understanding of depression and how to respond to it is therefore important.

In her preface to *Narrative therapy classics* (White, 2016), Carolyn Markey (2016) asked a young person she was working with whose dad had been struggling: “As you watch your dad at home, what do you see your dad doing now that is helping the medication to work even better?” (2016, p. 4). This question, echoing Michael White’s questions to people he worked with at the Glenside Psychiatric Hospital (Stewart, 2016), reminds me that attention to insider knowledge, choices and actions assists the development of a sense of agency. This is a vital consideration when it comes to responding to issues named as depression, whether or not medication is used.

## Externalising, naming and deconstruction

As I continued to respond to depression in my own life, I realised that I could apply to myself some of the narrative ideas that I regularly used with clients in counselling. I referred to the Statement of Position Map Version 1 (White, 2007, pp. 40–59) and recorded some reflections.

A name or definition that accurately reflects my experience of depression over this year is “the Harsh Judge”. The impacts of this Harsh Judge include:

- *Impacts on my feelings:* The Harsh Judge led me to feel “down”, which was often accompanied by a sick-in-the-stomach sensation. It seemed that my energy levels were low, and the Harsh Judge was draining away my joy in life.

- *Impacts on my relationship with my partner:* The Harsh Judge had me withdrawing from my partner, Kerrie, and failing to notice her contributions to our relationship.
- *Impacts on my work:* I was being invited into a sense of no longer being able to cope and of not doing a good enough job. The Harsh Judge was reducing my sense of satisfaction with my work and trying to convince me that I was letting down my clients and colleagues.
- *Impacts on my thoughts about myself:* Because maintenance of physical fitness is important to me, the Harsh Judge tried to twist this into negative self-judgement: “You should be doing more. You should be fitter.” Because providing useful and helpful service to clients and colleagues is also important to me, the Harsh Judge tried to use this against me: “You used to be able to provide good service, but you can’t do it anymore.” The Harsh Judge was also trying to convince me that the problem was located inside me, trying to talk me into the idea that there’s something wrong with me and it’s somehow an aspect of my identity.

### Supporters of the Harsh Judge

The Harsh Judge employed two supporters to aid its attempt to have more power in my life: ageism and failure. My desire to deconstruct ageism and its effects on me was initially inspired by my supervisor, Belinda Emmerson-Whyte, at Relationships Australia NT. During a supervision session, she named that ageism might be a factor in my struggles. As I considered this further, I found myself agreeing with Belinda that individualism and capitalist discourses of productivity can promote ageist ideas. Unlike more collectivist societies in which the wisdom and experience of age are honoured and valued, Australian society seems to place more value on the supposed energy of youth and middle age. Particularly in work contexts, this can invite ideas such as “You’re past adding value at work once you move beyond the age of 60 or 65” or “You’ve lost your energy, no wonder you are struggling”.

White (2004a, pp. 168, 174) argued that our Westernised culture has constructed norms for becoming an adequate and worthy member of society. Failure is characterised by ideas such as not measuring up, not realising one’s full potential or falling short of the mark (2004a, pp. 152–153). This exercising of “modern power” (2004a, p. 157) leads to “people being induced to actively participate in the judgement of their own

and other's lives ... through routine and culture-wide practices of normalising judgement" (2004a, p. 169).

Through this analysis, I was able to take a clear position on the Harsh Judge, internalised ageism and failure: I want to reduce their power in my life because they locate the problem inside me and drag me down; they have no interest in what's best for me or for my partner or for my clients and colleagues. Pooja Raina (2022, p. 53) quoted one of her clients: "I'm not a depressed person. I have a relationship to depression". This statement offered me hope that I could change the status of the Harsh Judge, internalised ageism and failure to that of minor players in my life.

### ***Privilege and disadvantage***

Before I explore what I have learnt from the above reflections and how I applied this to counselling with clients, I note that as a white, middle-class, male, cisgender and heterosexual person, I sit in a position of unearned privilege that advantages me when it comes to dealing with problems that might be positioned as mental health issues. Many of the clients I work with do not enjoy the same level of privilege. They might be grappling with the patriarchal structures that increase the trauma experienced by survivors of domestic abuse; the effects of colonisation and entrenched racist structures; or the effects of homophobia and transphobia. Social issues that are beyond the person's control can affect their ability to respond to problems. Not only that, but rather than locating problems in the dominant social and cultural structures that shape people's lives, persons can be assigned the label of "experiencing mental health issues" as though the problems existed within them. This is not to imply that there is no chance to uncover an alternative, preferred story. It is, however, important to acknowledge the realities of privilege and disadvantage, and to uncover where possible their effects on people's lives.

### *Learnings for my work with clients: Experience-near naming and deconstruction*

Some clients arrive already carrying the label "depression". I might ask questions like: "Where did this label of depression come from? Did you perhaps hear it from someone like a doctor or from friends or family members?" My intention here is to invite the client to think more about the name depression. I don't want

to presume that the name depression either works or does not work for the client, but simply to invite further exploration. I might then continue: "The name 'depression' does not work well for everybody. How does it work for you?" If the client expresses interest in this, I will tailor my questions to their context and previous responses. I might ask: "Would it be okay with you if we explored together possible helpful insights from your culture? Does your culture give you any ideas about an alternative name for a problem like depression? If you were to ask an elder or someone else you respect, what name would they use for a problem like depression?"

As indicated in the above discussion concerning ageism and failure, it can be useful to uncover and deconstruct socially constructed ideas that contribute to problems. Tim Donovan and Dale Johns (2022, p. 79) provide a valuable reflection: "Picking the right time to promote broader thinking is crucial ... Otherwise there can be a shifting of power towards and centering of the practitioner."

When working with Aboriginal clients for whom a problem is named as depression, I try to keep in mind possible impacts of colonisation and ongoing racism. However, I want to allow the client to develop trust and a level of comfort with me before I attempt deconstruction. This may take several sessions and involve, with client permission, consultation with an Aboriginal colleague about "collaborative yarning" (Christensen, 2022, p. 3) with the possibility of this colleague also attending and participating in some sessions. Once I sense that there is sufficient trust and comfort for the client, I might ask: "It seems to me that there is a significant level of racism in Australia towards Aboriginal people. What do you think about this? Is this something you have experienced? If so, what's this been like for you?" I might then add: "Experiencing racism can talk you into thinking that problems like depression come from inside you, rather than from things outside you that you can't control. Does this make sense to you?"

### ***Suicidal ideas***

It's an unfortunate reality in Australia today that problems named as mental health issues can become so dominant in a person's life that they can lead the person down a path to self-harm or suicide. In situations where a client expresses suicidal ideas, it could be argued that it is important to prioritise risk assessment and safety planning. Narrative understandings invite

me in my therapist role to also consider the complexity of the situation and to continue to explore possible alternative responses. I am starting to ask myself questions such as:

- When suicidal ideas are around, how can I maintain a decentred client focus at the same time as being aware of organisational procedures and requirements to do with risk assessment and safety planning?
- How can I continue to invite the client into meaning-making while facing my own fear about giving more power to suicidal ideas?

I might direct questions like these to a client experiencing suicidal ideas:

- How are you responding to suicidal ideas in ways that make you stronger?
- Are these ideas in any way an expression of protest about the conditions imposed on you by the way our society is structured?
- Are these ideas based on a desire to protect yourself or other people who are important to you? (David Newman, personal communication, 2023)

## An alternative identity project

I used the Statement of Position Map Version 2 (White, 2007, pp. 233–243) to reflect on my responses to depression and the Harsh Judge. An experience-near name emerged that captured my response to the Harsh Judge as I attempted to reduce its power in my life: the Confident Learner. I recorded my reflections in writing:

- *Impacts on my feelings:* As I focused more on the Confident Learner, I began to experience more frequently at work and at home feelings of hope, joy and satisfaction. I noticed a sense of being able to enjoy times of rest, and to resist the Harsh Judge as it tried to convince me to “give myself a hard time” (White, 2004a, p. 197).
- *Impacts on my relationship with my partner:* I was able to accept the invitation of the Confident Learner to return to giving voice to expressions of affection for my partner. I was able to experience more enjoyment as I spent time with her.
- *Impacts on my work:* The Confident Learner helped to bring an important realisation much more to the forefront of my mind: I have skills, in particular narrative therapy skills, to bring to

my work with clients. Under the influence of the Harsh Judge, I had been struggling at work to find an appropriate balance between meeting commitments and finding time for myself. The Confident Learner opened up other possibilities for me: I want to be continually learning without taking on too much. It’s okay to say “no” at times.

- *Impacts on my thoughts about myself:* As the Confident Learner became more embedded in my home and work life, I found myself engaging in positive identity conclusions: I can reflect on other ideas that I encounter as I read articles and books and listen to music, and use these to expand my own skills. I can handle the tasks and challenges of life and seek professional and personal help when needed.

### **Landscape of action examples**

I reflected further on how I was putting into practice some of the above ideas inspired by the Confident Learner and began looking out for “landscape of action” examples (White, 2007, pp. 84–86). These were associated with my relationship with my partner, and my thoughts and feelings about myself. I chose to talk more to Kerrie about how I was feeling, and to set aside time to do enjoyable things with her, such as going to lunch, having a swim or going for a walk. Such choices helped me to feel more confident in myself, and helped me continue to learn about my relationship. I also chose to continue regular physical exercise, either early in the morning or later in the afternoon. At times, I needed to set aside feelings linked to the Harsh Judge, like reluctance and lack of energy, in order to proceed with the exercise. Practices associated with the Confident Learner enabled me to experience satisfaction and to engage in positive identity conclusions.

Another significant landscape of action example was associated with the passing of my mother, who died in August 2022 at the age of 92. While this was a sad time for me and my three brothers and one sister, there was also the opportunity for me to choose where to place my focus. The Confident Learner enabled me to share with my siblings our memories of Mum, what she meant and still means to each of us, her contributions to our lives and our ideas about how to continue her legacy. These steps were further reinforced when I presented along with two of my brothers the eulogy at Mum’s funeral service. Thus, the Confident Learner helped me to resist the invitation of the Harsh Judge to withdraw inside myself. This resulted in my engaging in positive identity conclusions.

## **Responses to internalised ageism and failure**

Landscape of action examples do not stand alone but need to be assigned meaning in the landscape of identity or consciousness (White, 2007, pp. 78–84). For me, meaning-making and important identity conclusions were linked to my Confident Learner responses to the two allies of the Harsh Judge: failure and internalised ageism. In his Failure Conversations Map, White (2004a, pp. 196–201) described a response to failure expressed in unique outcomes and underpinned by a “system of rules/body of values and principles” (2004a, p. 199). My Confident Learner response to failure was shaped by a value of respect for myself, my clients and my colleagues. What did this say about me as a therapist? It said that, despite the presence of the Harsh Judge and ideas about failure, I had not lost touch with the value of respect, and I had tried to maintain expressions of it. I had been able to continue to give time and energy to reflection on my work with clients as a Confident Learner.

As I reflected on my alternative identity project outlined above, I recalled a question posed by Michael White about evaluating the effects of an initiative: “What’s it like to see this happening in your life?” (2007, p. 238). My answer to this question was that the Confident Learner gave me hope that I could continue to make choices and take actions to reduce the power of the Harsh Judge, internalised ageism and failure in my life. I could justify this evaluation by referring to the effects and examples listed above.

It’s important to add that this alternative identity project has never been a solo affair. Throughout this year, the Confident Learner was supported by my club or team of life (White, 1997, pp. 22–23). I want to continue to reflect on what it is that these members bring to my life, and what they might say about what they value about me as a person, partner, family member, colleague and therapist.

## *Learnings for my work with clients*

As I reflect on the above, I’m asking myself this question: How can I best support clients to move beyond a focus on the problem and towards an alternative and more helpful sense of identity for themselves or their relationship? In the case of an individual client dealing with a problem named as depression, I would first use the Statement of Position Map Version 1 as outlined earlier in this article.

The client may of course come up with an experience-near name that fits better than “depression”; however, I will use depression for ease of description. I might then say: “My guess is that there is more to your life than this depression story. Is this correct? Would you be interested in exploring this idea further?” My intention here, guided by the Statement of Position Map Version 2, is to tentatively and respectfully scaffold exploration of a preferred alternative story. I’m keeping in mind that my role as therapist here is to “step back from assuming primary authorship” (White, 2007, p. 233) and invite the client to assume the primary author role.

If the client expresses interest in further exploration, I might then ask: “Can you think of a time when depression seemed to be around less strongly, or have less power in your life, or you resisted or responded to depression in some way?” If the client seems unsure, I might then scaffold further: “This does not need to be something spectacular; it could be something quite small. It might have happened in the last few days or perhaps a month or two ago.” Once the client is able to give a couple of examples, I might then invite an experience-near naming of this possible initiative: “How were you able to take these actions? What name might you give to these actions you have taken?” I have deliberately used the term “possible initiative” above because it is important that I invite the client to assign significance (or not) to their examples: “As you think more about these examples, would you say they have some meaning for you or do they just seem like a bit of a fluke?”

Assuming the client does assign significance, I might then explore the effects or possible effects of the initiative in various domains of life: “If [initiative name] were around more in your life, what effects might it have on your thoughts and feelings about yourself? On your relationship? On your work?” Again, guided by the Statement of Position Map Version 2, I might invite the client to take a position on the initiative: “Is [initiative name] something you want in your life? Is this something important to you?” Presuming a positive response, I would then invite the client to justify their position: “Why is this important to you? Is [initiative name] linked in any way to a value or values you hold in your life? Can you tell me about another example that illustrates putting [initiative name] into action?” (see White, 2007, p. 239). By continuing to explore this and other initiatives, I am hoping to thicken an alternative story, to work with the client so that they can highlight their preferred ways of being and acting (Donovan & Johns, 2022, p. 89) and to focus on their choices and initiatives.

## Documenting and sharing skills in responding to depression

A couple of years ago, Jasmine (pseudonym) and I spent a number of counselling sessions exploring the effects of depression on her life, and her responses to these effects. Michael White and David Epston made frequent use of letters to clients to help thicken alternative preferred stories and the skills that supported these stories. Keeping this in mind, I invited Jasmine to co-author a document that highlighted the skills she had been using.

### Keeping depression in its place

Get regular exercise.

Use my depression-managing strategies, e.g. name for myself that I can sense depression trying to take over, use breathing exercises from Beyond Blue.

Remind myself about helpful ideas such as:

- I'm worthwhile and deserve a good life
- I have competence in my life and in my relationships
- I want to move away from the idea of myself as a victim to the idea of having the courage to stand tall
- I can grieve and be real and these support self-appreciation and self-understanding
- I can claim my own power
- I can accept and forgive myself
- I can say "no" and not feel guilty.

It's important that I manage my depression even when I'm not feeling depressed, e.g. by taking action such as:

- journaling
- establishing a routine and sticking to it
- reading helpful books such as *Breaking the patterns of depression* by Michael Yapko (1998) and *How Dante can save your life* by Rod Dreher (2017).

Invest my energy in things that are important and valuable to me in my life, such as looking after myself, my relationship with my children and my relationship with my partner.

Jasmine agreed to share this document with two other clients struggling with issues named as depression. One of these clients sent a message of thanks to Jasmine. Jasmine also let me know that the process of co-authoring the document, sharing it with others and then having a copy available to refer to whenever she chose was very helpful. Re-reading this document was also useful for me and helped to thicken my own preferred "Confident Learner" story. Particular statements that stand out for me are "I can accept and forgive myself" and "I can say 'no' and not feel guilty". "Managing depression even when I'm not feeling depressed" is now more of a focus for me and I regularly re-read my Confident Learner skills to render them as accessible as possible. Therefore, it's important that I acknowledge Jasmine's contribution to my alternative identity project.

To conclude this section of the article, I will discuss two topics that involve an overlap of the personal and work domains of my life as I respond to the Harsh Judge and remain open to the Confident Learner: making a contribution and music.

### Making a contribution

One of the actions I took earlier this year when the Harsh Judge seemed to be interfering strongly in my life, was to make a contribution to someone else also being challenged by depression. Recalling the document co-authored with Jasmine helped me to take this action. I was also assisted by my understanding of the value and importance of "linking stories and initiatives" (Denborough et al., 2006), and my continued contact with a former colleague, Lucy.

Lucy had moved interstate into private practice, and we were both enthused by the possibility of linking together some of our respective clients through sharing of story. Lucy and her client Ray had documented their work together on responding to depression and had sent a document to me titled "Just start moving: Getting out of the horror nightmare that is depression". The original intention was that I would share this story with a couple I was working with at the time whose relationship was being dragged down by depression. Unfortunately, I lost contact with the couple, so I made the decision to honour Ray's sharing by sending my own response. Both Ray and Lucy have given their consent to the sharing of their words. Shaped by the four categories of inquiry for inviting outsider witness responses (White, 2007, pp. 190–191), I put together the response below.

My name is Barry and I work as a counsellor in Darwin. Lucy passed on your story to me.

Ray, some of your words really stood out for me:

Depression told me I couldn't seem to do anything good, and it started to affect my confidence.

I had to speak up. I had to own it and tell them "I'm depressed".

If I see someone else struggling,  
I can turn around and reach out to them.  
I have different insight.

As I read your story, I get a sense of you as someone who puts a lot of value on relationships with family and friends, likes to take action, and is determined not to allow depression to rule your life. The image I have of you as I read your story is of someone climbing a mountain, slipping back sometimes but overall making steady progress.

The reason that your words I've listed above stood out for me is that my life has also been impacted by depression. My confidence was also really dragged down, and it was only when I spoke up to one of my co-workers, to my wife and to another counsellor that things started to get better.

Ray, reading your story has made a difference to me. It's reminded me that if depression tries to come back into my life, I can use the skill of speaking up, just as you did. In my role as a counsellor, I do work with a number of people affected by depression. I will try to keep in mind your words about "reaching out" and "having different insight" so that I can keep encouraging them to stand up to depression.

Ray, assisted by Lucy, then sent me his response to my sharing.

Dear Barry,

After reading your message, it had me wondering if you had got into counselling after your experience of depression or before. And I wonder if that has been helpful in your work. It's good to know there is someone else out there with lived experience who is helping others. I think it makes a real difference to people. In my own experience, having depression has helped me talk to others and help them understand it.

I liked your analogy of conquering a mountain. It's not the kind of image I would have thought of. When I was in depression, it felt like I was in a hole and it was hard to see a way out. But the image does fit for me now I'm out of the hole. I can picture myself as if climbing a mountain, and I'm about half way up. I'm trying to conquer other things.

I imagine you're probably a similar sort of guy to me, wanting to move forward and be stronger, which is perhaps why you clicked with certain words I had written like "speaking up", "reaching out" and "having different insight". It seems this is going to be useful in speaking to your clients too. I'm glad my words resonated with you.

I'm also realising I'm not on my own in this lived experience. That's the biggest thing. It's why more of us should stand up. We can help other people through it and make a difference to their lives. I've learnt that sharing a story can change one's whole thought process.

It feels good knowing something I've said has been taken on board. When I look back at my own story and read "Just start moving", it's a big reminder to me to just do something. I don't want to go back to that hole; I want to keep moving up the mountain. It doesn't matter what you do, if you just do something, you will be moving forward.

Thanks for your message.

It seems that this process has made a positive difference to Ray, and it has certainly been of significant help to me. Choosing to re-read both of the above responses at different times this year, as well as the knowledge that I made a positive contribution to Ray's journey through depression, helped me to reduce the power of the Harsh Judge in my own life. It also reinforced the Confident Learner and therefore strengthened my alternative identity story. As with Jasmine, I want to acknowledge Ray's contribution to my journey through his willingness to share his original story and then work with Lucy to respond to my sharing.

## Music

In a 2020 article, US family therapist Chris Beels was invited to recall an interaction he had witnessed between family therapist Israel Zwerling and "a family with a very disturbed and distracted young man who was upset about something that happened prior to the start of the session" (Beels et al., 2020, p. 34). Israel Zwerling found out that the young man knew the song "Moon River" and he invited the young man to sing it with him. This resulted in a sense of calm arising at the start of the family session. The reason that this touching interaction stood out for me is that it demonstrates the unique power of music to transport someone to a different emotional place. It also aligns with the history of my own love of singing and music, which I can trace back to my mother. I have clear memories of her listening to songs on the radio and singing along. Singing and music also offer possibilities for me both personally and professionally. Throughout this year, as I've been trying to minimise the influence of the Harsh Judge, I've found listening to music, singing along and sometimes breaking into song in private moments to be a great source of joy and comfort for me. Music and singing have helped to nourish the Confident Learner. I've listened to and sung along with "Moon River" (Mercer & Mancini, 1961) a number of times since reading the interview with Chris Beels. Some of its lyrics have particular meaning for me. "I'm crossing you in style some day" speaks to me of the hope associated with the Confident Learner. "Two drifters, off to see the world" reminds me of the members of my club of life who support me in my alternative identity journey.

David Denborough's (2008, p. 164) statement that "music, melody and songs in some way shape our identity, who we are in the world" prompted me to think about how I can make use of aspects of literature such as music, song, story and poetry in my work

with clients. I'm aware that I need to be careful to remain "decentred but influential" in these professional interactions, to not allow my enthusiasm for music and song to draw me away from a focus on the client. At the same time, I would like to be able to harness the Confident Learner so that I can remain open to possibilities. For example, as I listen carefully in a counselling session, I might pick up a hint of interest in literature and extend an invitation such as, "Are you saying that there is a particular story, poem or song that speaks to you in a special way, that perhaps provides support for you when you are dealing with hard times, that *offers you company, support or sustenance?*" (Denborough, 2008, p. 166). If this invitation is received positively, I might continue: "Can you tell me a bit more about this story, poem or song and its history in your life? What is it about this story, poem or song that makes it special for you? Who else in your life either already knows about this or would have an understanding of why it is important for you?" Asking such questions when appropriate would be something new for me, but hopefully I can use the Confident Learner to help me to step into new territory and to invite clients and colleagues to take a similar step on their alternative identity journey.

## A last word

An article that has stayed with me over the years is "Folk psychology and narrative practice" (White, 2004b). In it, White argued that "wisdom" is not confined to academia or to experts but can also be found in the "domestic", the everyday interactions of life. The last word I've listed below is such a domestic example. I've always been a lover of cricket, despite its past and current associations with colonialism. My partner is aware of my interest in the sport, and noticed a book about cricket being offered at a bargain price – an autobiographical account of the life of current English cricketer Jonny Bairstow. She bought it earlier in the year (when the Harsh Judge was strong in my life) and gave it to me simply because she knew it was about cricket. As I read the book, I realised it was also about depression – for most of his life, Jonny has had to deal with the ongoing impacts of the depression-related suicide of his father, which happened when Jonny was a teenager. Towards the end of the book, Jonny offers the following piece of "wisdom":

Life goes on. It must. And you have to catch happiness as it flies, enjoying it there and then and for however long it lasts.  
(Bairstow & Hamilton, 2017, p. 291)



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