

Dear [RECIPIENT'S NAME],

I am giving you this letter because you are someone who is very important to me, and because I would like to think that if one of us is ever going through a difficult time, that we could be open about it, and in return, be listened to and supported. This is really hard for me to talk about, [RECIPIENT'S NAME], but as it so happens, I am in fact going through something extremely hard right now, so I'm getting in touch with you firstly, to help you understand why I may have been acting a little differently from usual lately; and secondly, so that I can suggest a few helpful ways for you to support me if you'd like to. You may be wondering why I'm writing to you instead of just calling or speaking to you face-to-face, to which I would ask you to please bear with me, because due to the stigma surrounding depression, it can be really, *really* difficult to talk about. It's also not something I'm used to doing, so right now, I feel I have the best chance of expressing myself the way I want to in writing. After you've finished reading this letter, you're welcome to ask me questions if you have any, and in time, I hope to be able to talk about my depression with you in the same way that we talk about everything else.

Anyway, like I said, right now I'm struggling with depression, and before I tell you about a couple of the ways you could help me through it, I'd really like to share with you what suffering from this illness actually feels like. It's really important to me that I explain this to you, because while you may already have a pre-existing idea of what depression is, it can affect different people in very different ways, which means that your understanding of depression may not match my own experience. Also, because depression carries a stigma and isn't openly talked about very much, it's unfortunately very common for people who've never been through it themselves to underestimate just how difficult, painful and life-affecting depression can actually be. In fact, it's so difficult, painful and life-affecting that personally, I find it really

challenging just to put its severity into words. But, to try to help you understand it – and to help you understand how depression affects me individually – I’ve written some of the ways that other people describe this condition below – each of which I can really relate to:

[NOTE: Below, we have included almost 50 short descriptions of depression – all of which have been voted “extremely accurate” by The Depression Project’s community. If you find it hard to put your depression into words, then we encourage you to include the ones that most resonate with you into your own personal letter (the more the better, we tend to think). Of course, you can also include your own explanation of depression here, too.]

“Depression is seeing no future, and no answer for any of the problems in your life.”

“When you have depression, nothing is enjoyable. Nothing can make you smile.”

“It feels like you're a ghost ... not a part of the real world.”

“It's like drowning ... except you can see everyone around you breathing.”

“Depression is a dark, inescapable place. It's like being locked in a room with no light, windows or door. It's so dark you can't even see your hands in front of your face let alone find a way out.”

“Depression is the inability to construct or envision a future.”

“Slipping into depression feels like falling down a dark bottomless shaft, wondering if and when your fall will ever be caught. And as you look back to where you fell from

– which is where you know you need to get back to – you can see it receding further into the distance, the proverbial light becoming dimmer and dimmer, while the shaft into which you are falling becomes deeper, darker, and all the more enveloping.”

“Depression to me is like having your mind replaced by another one that makes me feel worthless and numb to life – even to my friends and family. It deprives me of feeling anything other than a sense of perpetual sadness, never quite knowing the source of it but knowing that feeling well. Depression has stolen my confidence and now I no longer feel I am worthy of anyone's love. Depression calls me names and makes me have awful thoughts, and there have been times when depression has felt so overwhelming that I've wanted to kill myself.”

“It's like being stuck in a box that you can't get out of – a very dark place where you feel so low that even simple tasks are difficult. You feel completely alone.”

“A total loss of who you are.”

“Standing underneath a floor of glass, screaming and banging on it trying to get the attention of the rest of the world going about their lives without you. The problem is no-one can hear you or even knows you're trapped there.”

“Depression is like the heart or the mind breaking.”

“Depression is a state in which nothing tastes, smells, or feels right and you are unable to think or make decisions – yet you still have to carry on doing all those things.

And so much of the time you just don't have the energy or the desire. But you still carry on anyway."

"The belief that you just don't matter."

"Like the death eaters in Harry Potter have caught you and sucked all the goodness from you."

"Swimming through treacle."

"Multiple emotions: fear, despair, emptiness, numbness, shame, embarrassment and an inability to recognize the fun, happy person you used to be."

"Depression is losing the desire to partake in life."

"It's like trying to breathe when you're covered in tar."

"Depression makes you feel like you're an actor playing you – one that's always forced to smile."

"Being depressed sometimes feels like tunnel vision – regardless of anything going on in your life, you can feel miserable and overwhelmed for no reason at all."

"Nothingness."

"Cancer of the soul."

“Torture.”

“It's just like being inside a wheel that's spinning and spinning and you don't know when it's going to stop.”

“Living in fog all the time – a world without colour or laughter.”

“Like living in a dark tunnel with no light at the end, and no air to breathe, no matter how deep a breath you take.”

“Feeling completely alone – even when you're surrounded by people.”

“Complete and utter hopelessness.”

“Living in hell.”

“Like mourning the death of someone you once loved – you. When you look in the mirror you see only dead eyes. There is no spark. No joy. No hope. You wonder how you will manage to exist another day.”

“Trying to keep your head above water when it's up to your nose. And getting deeper. And you can't swim.”

“Feeling numb inside. The world and time just passes by and nothing brings you joy.”

“Feeling dark, lonely, scared. Sleep is the only escape from your pain.”

“It's like being a prisoner and the jailer both.”

“Waking up to another disappointing day, and feeling that heaviness in your chest that never goes away.”

“Just wanting to stand in a field and scream your head off – but you don't know why.”

“Like your mind is paralyzed.”

“Depression is silence. It's total isolation in a room full of people. It's feeling the drag and pull of life making you smaller by the day.”

“It's like falling into a well or a deep dark hole and having no ladder to climb to help you get out of it. You get trapped in the darkness feeling cold and numb.”

“It makes me feel like I'm a tiny seed stuck at the bottom of a pot plant – the more I try to grow and break free, the more dirt and soil falls on me, suffocating me and pushing me down.”

“Depression for me is a force so powerful that I fear I may never be free of it.”

“Being depressed is all your emotions taken away from you – apart from negative ones like sadness, anxiety and fear.”

“It's a ten tonne ball of lead in your gut that you've no choice but to drag everywhere with you. And you've got to try and look normal doing so.”

“Every day is a struggle and I feel like it’s ground hog day – same shit, different toilet.”

“It’s a thief ... it takes everything from you and leaves you to die.”

“It’s peaceful water to the outside world, but a raging tsunami below the surface.”

“It’s more painful than any physical pain I’ve ever experienced. And NO-ONE can see it.”

“Depression is hating yourself so much you can’t look in the mirror.”

“Depression is waking up wishing you’d died in your sleep.”

Like I said, [RECIPIENT’S NAME], unfortunately, I can relate to so many of these descriptions, and I hope they help you understand a few things in particular about depression that I really want you to know.

The first is that suffering from depression is much, *much* more than just having a bad day or feeling sad. As you of course know, a bad day is just that – a bad *day* – and sadness is a temporary emotion. But, as a lot of the above descriptions indicate, depression can make people feel utterly miserable – not for just one day, but for weeks, months, or even years on end. It can make people feel exhausted. It can make people feel completely worthless. It can make people hate themselves. It can make them self-harm. And worst of all, it can make them feel suicidal, and drive them to carry out those thoughts. Depression is a word many people throw around pretty casually – e.g. “I have to go to work on Monday, that is so depressing” – but when it’s used in its clinical sense, it describes a debilitating, torturous, gut-wrenching illness

that unfortunately, affects every aspect of my life. This is why I may have – unintentionally – been acting a little differently from normal lately, or why you may have found me to be less responsive to communication or a bit more isolated. If that’s the case, then I am sorry. I promise you it’s nothing personal and that I’m not angry at you or anything. It’s just because I’m going through something excruciating right now, and almost every day, it’s taking its toll on me.

The second important thing I’d love for you to understand is that depression is an illness – one that has been shown to have many different contributing factors such as chemical imbalances in the brain, negative life events, excess stress, an unhealthy lifestyle, distorted thinking patterns, low self-esteem, any number of painful emotions like anger or heartbreak, and even the weather. And, because depression is an illness, then even though it means that I’m going through some really difficult things right now, it doesn’t mean that I’m “crazy” or a “freak” or anything like that. I’m still the same person I’ve always been – the same [YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE LETTER RECIPIENT] that you’ve been close with for a long time. The only difference is that now, I’m also battling an illness as well. So, in the same way you wouldn’t think any less of me if I told you I had diabetes, a broken leg or any other physical injury or illness, I really hope you don’t think any less of me just because I’m now telling you that I struggle with a mental illness.

Thirdly, not only is depression an illness, but it’s also an extremely complicated one. For this reason, I can’t just “snap out of it”, or get over it just by “thinking a bit more positively” (believe me, if it was that simple, I’d do it). Unfortunately, depression doesn’t have an easy quick fix like “just going for a run”, “getting out of the house more” or “doing something fun” (again, if getting rid of depression was this simple, then there wouldn’t be 350 million people in the world who suffer from it). Like I said above, depression is usually caused by a number of complex factors like negative life events, excess stress, distorted thinking patterns, etcetera – all of which “mutate together” to bring about this illness. This means that, in reality, trying

to overcome depression is much more comparable to putting together a ten thousand piece puzzle, than it is to just doing “A”, “B” or “C” and being instantly cured. What makes “putting together this ten thousand piece puzzle” even harder is that treatment methods that work for some people don’t work anywhere near as well for others – unlike with, say, a broken leg, where the road to recovery is relatively straightforward. In this way, an even more accurate metaphor for recovering from depression than “having to put together a ten thousand piece puzzle” would be: “having to put together a ten thousand piece puzzle when you have no concrete instructions to follow, and no exact picture of what the puzzle is supposed to look like”. This is why breaking free of depression is really, *really* hard, and while I’m doing my best to try to get better, there are days when I feel exhausted, hopeless, confused, and terrified that I’ll never be able to recover.

If you’d like to help, [RECIPIENT’S NAME], then there are a couple of things you could do that, while they may seem small or insignificant, would really, *really* mean a lot to me.

The first is to just try to understand what I’m going through, and to not judge or belittle me for it. It’s hard enough having to battle an illness like depression, but if the people you care about most in the world don’t take it seriously or think worse of you for it, it not only makes someone with depression feel really upset, but also extremely alone and abandoned. On the other hand, by acknowledging how difficult and painful depression can be and doing your best to understand it, it makes us feel respected instead of belittled, and goes a long way towards helping us feel less isolated.

Secondly, it would really mean a lot if from time to time, you’d be there for me if I need someone to talk to. As you probably know yourself, it can often be really cathartic to talk about what’s troubling you – and this is particularly true when it comes to depression, because like I’ve said, it can be an extremely, extremely lonely illness. Of course, I’m not expecting you to be available to support me 24 hours a day or anything like that, but just knowing that I’m free

to call you if I need to makes me feel very loved and cared for. The same goes for if you call or text me from time to time to ask if I'm OK, or to invite me to do something fun together like go for a walk in the park or to watch a movie, for example. I may not always feel well enough to take you up on your offer, but again, just knowing that you're there for me will in and of itself make me feel much, much better.

Lastly, when we do talk, it can help if you remind me that even though what I'm going through is really, *really* hard, that it is possible for me to overcome it. Unfortunately, one of the cruellest features of depression is that it can trick the sufferer into thinking that their pain is permanent, and that they're destined to be miserable for the rest of their life. Sometimes this happens to me, and if we're talking on one of those days when everything feels really hopeless, it's helpful if you remind me that if I get the right help and keep on fighting, that it will be possible for me to take back control of my life from depression and start to enjoy myself again.

OK, [RECIPIENT'S NAME] – I don't think I have anything else more to say in this letter except for THANK-YOU. This has been a really difficult letter for me to write, because like I said at the start, it's hard to open up about something as personal as depression – particularly because it's an illness that a lot of people stigmatize. But the fact that you've read this far means the absolute world to me, so once again, I would like to say thank-you.

All my love,

[YOUR NAME].

P.S. If you have any questions about anything I've written, then feel free to ask! I promise I'll do my best to answer them.