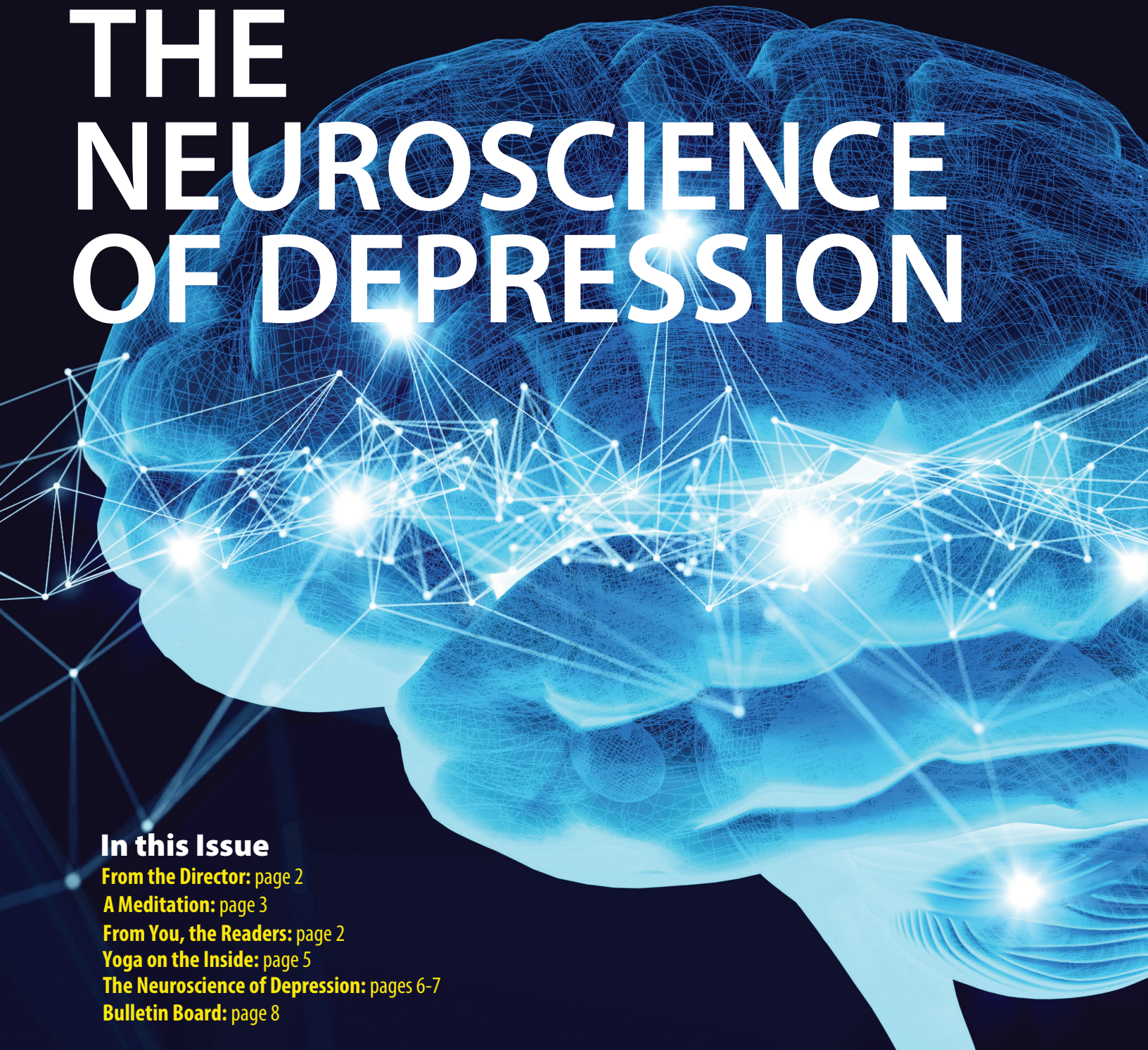


COMPASSION WORKS FOR ALL

Dharma Friends

For people in real and imagined prisons | Issue 235 | October 2021

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF DEPRESSION



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ATTENTION ALL BUDDHISTS IN TEXAS PRISONS (TDCJ):

Buddhist Prison Ministry and the Inner Liberation Prison Sangha have joined forces to advance the rights of Buddhist practitioners in TDCJ. Before they can fight for things such as a Buddhist New Years spend, a true vegetarian diet option, a 2-hour peer led service twice a week; a Buddhist ITP for parole (and much more) they need to conduct a survey of the current state of Buddhism in TDCJ. To participate in this important survey, send a SASE to:

Buddhist Prison Ministry

RE: Texas Survey

PO Box 426

Orcas, WA 98280

- Scott, TX

In response to Issue 234:

Can I be Happy in Prison?

"Happiness? In prison? You're joking, right? That's what I would have said a year ago had you asked me then if it was possible. Like a lot of folks I lost everything when I fell. Wife, three kids, house, and a good job. All of it. And you end up in a place that has no interest in helping you become a better person. Sure, there might be posters on the wall with quotes about happiness that you usually see on quilting patterns in a craft store, but you can tell that the staff believes it about as much as you do. It wasn't until I read in a Buddhist book that I had a choice in how I feel about every experience I have, that it hit me. It was such a profound statement. I'm sure that I've read something similar a million times but this time it stuck. I don't have to let my emotions control me like a little boat being tossed to and fro in a storm. Instead, I get to decide. No one else gets that power. At first I thought the goal was not to experience emotion. Not to have those thoughts that bring about anger, frustration, or loss. I've come to realize that it isn't about that at all. Experiencing sadness, pain, and frustration are as normal as joy and happiness. Now, instead of getting in the car with them and letting them take me for a ride, I see them for what they are and wave at them as they pass me by. It's truly a liberating feeling. I've found happiness and peace for probably the first time in my life. Enlightenment? Nah! But hey, I'm only human. I just wish sometimes that it didn't take the pain I caused others to get me here. I just turned 51 and actually had a good day. In prison. Only 14 to go. If I can get this far then anyone can.

-Rob, OR

From **The Director**



I walked in my house, said nothing to my wife or kids, went straight to my bedroom, climbed on the bed and pulled the blanket all the way

over my body, head and all. I laid there still as a rock for close to half an hour. My wife came to check on me: "You okay?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.

I really didn't know what was happening. I just knew I couldn't do anything else except lay in total darkness without anyone asking for anything, without any responsibilities, without any pressure. I just needed to be done for a while.

That was about five years ago, and it was my first bout with depression. It lasted about 24 hours and then I slowly crept back into a functional mindset. A week or so later I was completely myself.

Sometimes depression is like that: it hits us hard for a day and then moves on. But oftentimes it lasts much longer - days, weeks, months, years. When it just seems like we can't quite get back to being ourselves, and when the

slightest thing overwhelms us to the point of paralysis, and when those feelings seem to always be around, it might be time to talk to someone about depression.

Unfortunately, there's still a stigma that comes with being depressed.

Some folks continue to see it as a weakness rather than what it is: a mental health issue. And the more we try to will it away, the longer it persists.

In this issue we'll talk about depression and its effects, especially during the turning of the seasons. Prison is a place where it's vitally important to address any mental health concerns. You're not weak if you're depressed - you're human. Prison is, by design, a depressing place. So if you think you're struggling with depression, ask a physician or mental health provider if they can do anything to assist you. Make mental wellbeing a priority and keep suffering to a minimum during your incarceration.

Namaste,

Cory
cory@compassionarkansas.org

KINDNESS AND SERVICE

A Meditation

By ANNA COX, CWFA Founder

I suspect that compassion grows most swiftly through those meditations that allow us to deeply experience life. There is much benefit in analytical meditations, the samadhi of silent meditations, chanting, prayers and visualizations. All enhance our capacities as awakening beings. In my practice, I have found that all of these tools help to prepare and enable me to go ever deeper into the experience of each moment as a living being. It is only when we can go to the depths of our feelings in a difficult or glorious moment, that we can extrapolate from that event what every other being who has ever lived also experiences. If we are only thinking about how they might feel, or if we are critically evaluating how someone should or should not have done what they did, there is no deep identity with another. When we enter totally into the experience that unfolds, there is no longer a 'self' or an 'other'. There is the experience that we share. In that union, we can feel emphatically and compassionately what we both are

experiencing. We are fully present without judgement. In such a moment, we want the best for them and we offer all that we are. In that moment, there is no self-serving ego withholding from fear or taking with greed. We taste Buddhahood in that shared moment of compassion.

How can we meditate in a way that allows us to feel our shared true essence? His Holiness the Dalai Lama teaches endlessly that we should practice kindness at all times with others. He urges us: "It is necessary to help others, not only in our prayers, but in our daily lives. If we find we cannot help others, the least we can do is to desist from harming them." (From "**The Path to Tranquility: Daily Wisdom**") Here is another quote along the same lines. "Strength of heart comes from knowing that the pain that we each must bear is part of the greater pain shared by all that lives. It is not just 'our' pain but "the" pain, and realizing this awakens our universal compassion" written by Jack Kornfield in "**A Path With Heart**".

My husband jokes that he has a Bodhicitta deficiency. It is often hard to feel the motivation to grow the quality of compassion. Our goal is

not to engender guilt if we do not naturally strive to be kind and giving to others. But, it is good to plant seeds that we trust will grow. As much as possible, make one aspect of your daily meditation practices the practice of **service** to others. Part of this meditation of service activity in the world is to be **FULLY PRESENT** to our experience. If we find ourselves resenting what we offer, or if we feel depleted instead of fulfilled, then we are probably doing more than we have the capacity to do right now. We must be kind to our self too. If we feel any negativity, then that is our pathway into understanding the suffering or our self and all beings. Feel deep caring for you and for all who suffer in this way. When you feel joyful and grateful that you have shared a profound moment with another, then you are blossoming with true compassion. One experience is not better than another. Both are an opportunity to recognize the true essence of all beings.

Remember: Be Involved with Life. OPEN to it ALL. Stay Mindful. Feel ALL that YOU Experience. Let your Actions and Words be KIND. Everything is in EVERY MOMENT.

Poetry

The Tree

By John, TX

Not just any old tree, mind you,
One of such majestic might,
But the beauty of the tree outside my window;
The one that has contentedly captured my sight.

As it grew there, this wonderful tree,
Through the ages knowing,
For me it would confide,
Both of us spiritually growing.

Forty feet, if ever a root took.
Its trunk wide and stout, nearly half, plus a foot.
Wispy crops of sinew branches wave from atop,
Laughing and dancing, bestowing me with gentle,
lighter thought.

Sparrows spring from limb to limb in excited chatter;
Morning rush hour seems to them all that really matters.
The twigs bend and stretch in a wayward breeze,
Welcoming the daily social, greeting with safety and ease.

The leaves above are young, bright, and fresh,
Playing in the sunshine, no time to rest;

While the heavy branches below are broad and shadowed,
The elders too once danced with the sparrows.
Although their leaves will soon fall,
so shall the old limb too,
But the knot left behind, its legacy, beauty true.

As the foliage abound rustles the sound of applause,
I guess it's just a gifted thing, happiness without a cause.
And if there was ever a more personable tree,
In my reflection, this tree outside my window...
Well, it must have grown there...just for me.

Yoga On The Inside



1. Toe Stretch

Sit on your heels with your feet together, then bring your weight forward and tuck your toes under (little toes too!). Bring your weight back on the balls of the feet. Hold for 1 to 3 minutes. To come out of the pose, bring your weight forward and slowly release your toes.



2. Cobbler's Pose

Soles of the feet come together, let the knees fall out to the sides. Option to forward fold, hinging at the hips. Hold for 1 to 3 minutes.



3. Bounded Side Stretch

Place the right hand to rest on the left knee, and while exhaling raise the left hand to the ceiling. Hold for 1 to 3 minutes, and then switch sides.

The Neuroscience of Depression

By Cory Jones and Hali Wilder

Nearly 1 in 5 Americans will experience depression in their lifetime, and that number seems to increase every year. Depression is classified as a mood disorder characterized by:

- feeling sad
- distressed
- unmotivated
- excessively tired
- and losing interest in once pleasurable activities (known as anhedonia)

Many with depression also have anxiety. For most people, depression is brought on by stress and the causes of stress. So for people spending extended amounts of time in the incarceration system, the odds of experiencing depression increase exponentially.

One of the primary factors keeping depression in circulation in a prison setting is the fact that many people believe they cannot talk about the things that cause their depression. It's risky to say things like, "I'm scared," or "I'm sad," or "I wish I could see my mom," out loud to a fellow group of incarcerated individuals - even though they might be feeling the exact same way!

Depression takes different forms and manifests in different ways. Some people feel frozen, like they cannot move. Some report feeling like a wet, heavy blanket is smothering them. Depressed people might feel like crawling under a blanket and lying still. They might explode in unjustifiable anger over the smallest occurrence.

Depression is more than just a bad mood. Mood normally fluctuates. Everyone experiences highs and lows in their lives that don't necessarily mean they're depressed. But sometimes changes in mood can become long-lasting, debilitating and impair one's ability to hold down a job or meaningful relationships. And that's when a bad mood might have evolved into full-scale depression.

Regardless of the form it takes, depression has to be managed. And in order to be managed, it has to be acknowledged.

Your brain and depression

Neuroimaging studies reveal that many brain circuits that normally regulate mood are dysregulated in depression. Deep in the brain, the amygdala processes stimuli such as rewards and potential threats. In depression, the amygdala is overactive and responds

excessively to negative events. In turn, the amygdala connects to a set of brain regions that hone the physiological and behavioral response to emotional stimuli. These areas include the medial prefrontal cortex, the nucleus accumbens, the hippocampus and the insula. The hippocampus is involved in memory formation and with the prefrontal cortex, is vulnerable to stress. Depressed people are more susceptible to stress, which can cause physical changes in the brain including atrophy of the hippocampus. This and other changes in depressed people may cause inappropriate responses to emotional events. The medial prefrontal cortex is involved in regulating how strong we react to emotional stimuli. Treatments such as antidepressants, cognitive behavioral therapy and electroconvulsive therapy affect the structure and function of these and other brain regions.

Causes of Depression in People Who are Incarcerated

Some of the main factors that can lead to anxiety and depression in a detainee are as follows:

- *Memories of illegal acts:* During their time in prison, people tend to relive the moments of their crime. This can make them feel guilty and remorseful. Constantly having these thoughts may result in severe depression.
- *Prison:* People are confined to a restricted space. Prolonged stay in the prison may lead to intense depression, which can persist even after their release.
- *Missing loved ones:* Prisoners feel loneliness, as they are isolated from their family and loved ones. They recall the days spent outside prison. These thoughts of loneliness create the mental conditions of anxiety and depression.
- *Life with other prisoners:* Living with other prisoners who may be violent can raise serious feelings of insecurity and fear.

Low Mood vs Depression

Low mood and depression are interrelated. A low mood is characterized by sad feelings that often come and go; however, the presence of low mood that does not go away even after two weeks is a symptom of being at risk for depression. Prison can create an environment ripe for various kinds of low moods, such as:

- *Constant frustration:* After a few days in prison, prisoners can feel as if they are avoided

by society. They may agonize over what others in the outside world would think about them. This arouses feelings of frustration, which are revealed in their behavior with fellow prisoners and their daily activities.

- *Deep sadness:* Sadness might arise due to feelings of deep loneliness. Many prisoners are made to stay in solitary confinement for long periods of time. After a point the loneliness can create intense sadness.
- *Feeling anxious:* Prisoners repeatedly think about the crime they have committed. These thoughts about the crime make them feel guilty and result in severe anxiety. They exhibit unusual nervousness and restlessness.
- *Unnecessary worry:* Once affected by depression they worry about unnecessary things or without any reason. They look anxious all the time, thinking of something or thinking nothing at all.
- *Frequent tiredness:* They lose interest in life, and display significant reluctance to do activities inside the prison. They give the impression of being tired all the time.
- *Low self-esteem:* Self-esteem has an important role in determining the severity of low mood. People with depression consider themselves worthless; this may constantly disturb the mind and lead to thoughts of self-harm or suicidal ideation.
- *Getting hyper or angry:* Recurrent depressive thoughts make prisoners unable to take things, whether good or bad, easily. Hence, they express anger over every small matter. They may not even know the exact reason for their anger.

Depression and seasonal changes

Right now people in the free world are decorating their porches with pumpkins and getting outside to enjoy the cooler weather. But changing seasons doesn't bring positive vibes for everybody.

It's common to find yourself getting more fatigued during seasonal changes, especially during fall and winter. The earlier onset of dusk and later dawn can make it seem like there aren't enough hours in the day to complete desired activities. These feelings of fatigue and possibly subsequent oversleeping can be symptoms of **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)**. Some people with SAD report increased

See **Neuroscience on Page 7**

Neuroscience

Continued from Page 6

appetite, almost like we are preparing to go into hibernation. Your body is actually responding to the changes in the seasons, specifically the exposure to sunlight. As everyone knows, when fall and winter approach, dusk comes earlier, not leaving a lot of time to soak up the sun that our bodies rely on. Whether or not you spend a lot of time outdoors, our bodies are reliant on the sun for the body's circadian rhythm. The circadian rhythm is a chronological process that is maintained partially through light exposure and controls when and how we sleep. This circadian rhythm is also what controls when our bodies release melatonin, an important hormone for sleep.

What is SAD?

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) can be recognized by excessive feelings of tiredness mostly in the seasonal changes between summer to winter. Simply put, it is common for most people's bodies to interpret darkness as time for rest. Light, or lack thereof, travels through the eye to the brain structure called the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus then communicates with the pineal gland, which releases hormones such as melatonin. Through this neural journey we maintain a circadian rhythm and thus a sleep-wake cycle. In people with SAD, melatonin stays present in the body longer which is why there is an increase in sleep and feelings of low energy.

All of this to say, our sleep habits can greatly affect our level of depression, and when the earth descends into the colder, darker months of fall and winter, our sleep patterns

can suffer, even if we're not exposed to sunlight all that often.

What should I do?

If you believe you might be depressed, it's important to let a physician or mental health provider know as soon as possible. They might prescribe anti-depressant medications or possibly offer some tools to help combat the feelings you're experiencing.

At Compassion Works for All, we're big fans of mindfulness and meditation practices and, while those can help our mood, they're not always successful in combating mental or major mood disorders. Pausing a few moments each day to be present, to find your breath, and to calm your central nervous system can certainly help. But it's important to speak to a mental health professional if you believe you're experiencing symptoms of depression.



“Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.”

~Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search For Meaning

Bulletin Board

Write To Us!

Ask Tim

Tim answers letters asking for help with those things that we know you cannot do in prison. Tim looks up resources, but there are a few things he cannot do: Tim is not qualified to counsel about personal and/or relationship problems. Money or 'things' will never be given to any writer. We will not provide addresses of individuals in the free world to anyone. We cannot provide information obtained from Facebook or other social media websites.

Request Topics

Let us know what topics you'd like to read about. Whether you're brand new to mindfulness and meditation or a seasoned pro, let us know what piques your interest and it might be featured in a future newsletter.

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Buddhist Prison Ministry
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BUDDHIST PRISON MINISTRY: BODHICITTA BEHIND BARS

AN INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM

**A TWELVE-
LESSON
CORRESPONDENCE
COURSE
WITH
HOMEWORK**



This workbook "An Introduction to Buddhism" is the first in a series written specifically for the incarcerated population. It is a presentation of the core elements of non-sectarian (Ri'me) Buddhism, teachings common to all schools and sects of the Dharma. Thanks to generous donors and the Khyentse Foundation, this workbook is available free of charge to the incarcerated population.

Tools, skills and practices from the Buddhist tradition written specifically for the incarcerated population.

Rev. Susan Shannon, M.Div., BCC,
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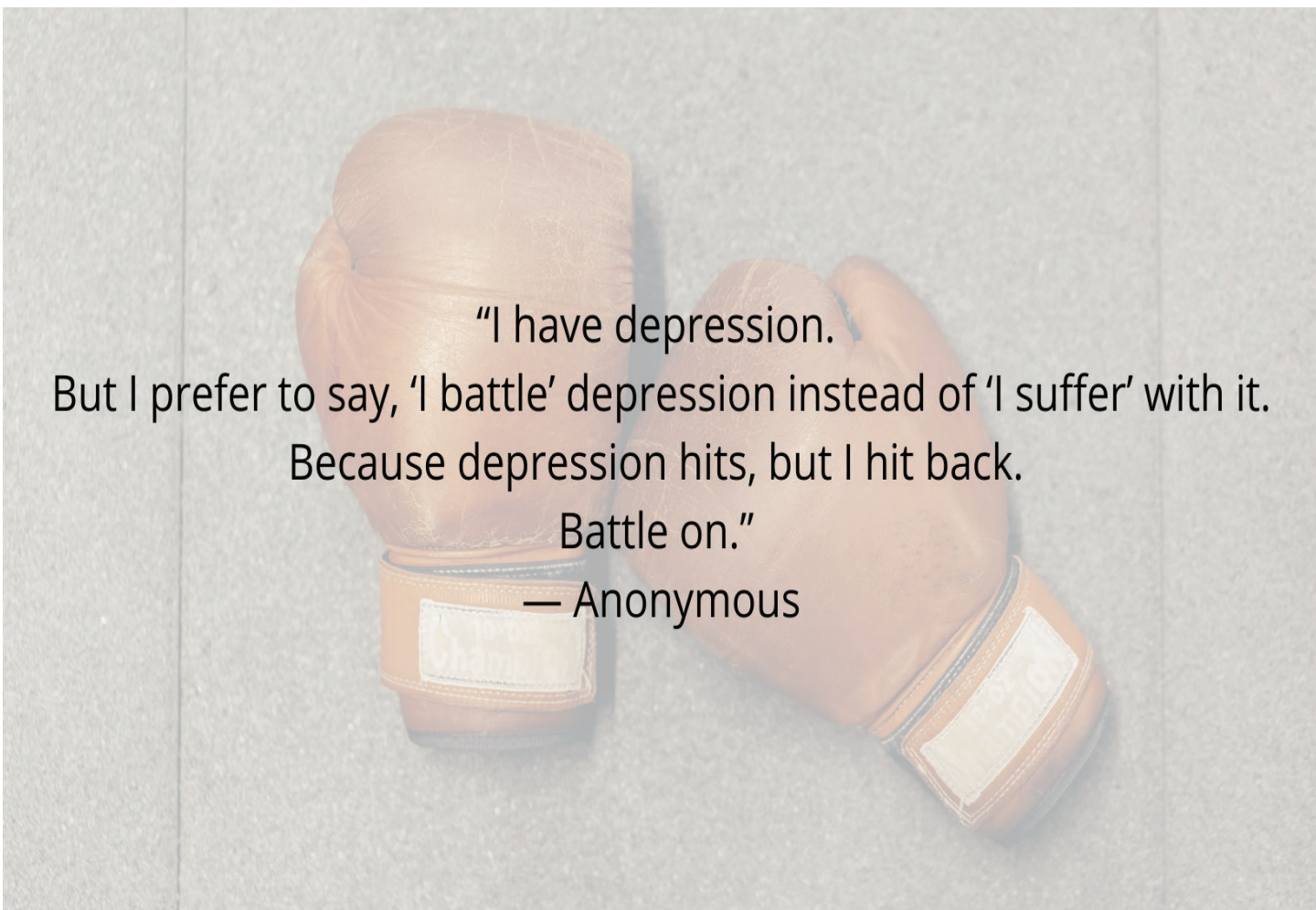
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FREE RELIGIOUS MATERIAL



“I have depression.

But I prefer to say, ‘I battle’ depression instead of ‘I suffer’ with it.

Because depression hits, but I hit back.

Battle on.”

— Anonymous