

Depression and Woebot

What I Have Learned

Molly was the first one to notice. Despite being separated by the length of the country, she could tell there was more affecting my mood than a winter's case of cabin fever. She was working on Woebot at the time, while it was in beta testing - maybe this made her more aware of a mental health issue when she saw one.

Maybe it was obvious to her, and to everyone, but me. "I am fine" I would tell her. "Things are okay," I would say to my parents, "just a lot going on at work." I did not think I was depressed--that's a word assigned to someone who needs to go to therapy, who needs to go talk to someone.

Nope.

I just needed to get over it, eventually this would all stop. The nearly-schedulable nights spent crying alone in my apartment - they would end if I just gave it more time. My thoughts filled with a continuing thread containing the "truths" about who I was - but it would pass, surely.

Yet there I lay, with the now all-too-familiar carousel doing laps around my head:

A whole day and no one has texted you except your mom? Don't you have friends? Check your phone again - still nothing? Yikes...

Wait, you haven't had sex in how long? Years? Do you even remember what it's like to kiss someone? What is wrong with you?

Check Tinder again - still no matches? Not one? I guess that's not surprising - I mean, look at you.

Don't you know how many people live in this city, how can you possibly be alone?

And so it went.

Seemingly unending reminders of how lonely I was, which sapped me of any motivation to change my circumstances. It seems counterintuitive - one would think that when presented with the problem of "spending so much time alone is making this worse" you would be driven out into the world to fix it.

I have since learned from Woebot that loneliness is not a feeling, it is a state of being - or more specifically, a state of inaction. I continued to isolate myself, because what was the point? There were no dates to go on, and no friends making plans. No one liked me, so I would just sit there until that changed.

It is difficult to argue against this line of thinking, for a pessimist like me, anyway. After all, the carousel of thoughts were all technically true. It was only until I learned the phrase "cognitive distortion" that I realized I was taking these ideas and making the choice to carve them into stone, supposedly defining my future.

The "all or nothing statement" was applicable to many - I am not dating anyone at this present moment because, you are alone and you always will be, and so on. Another was recognizing that when I was comparing myself to others, I was personalizing their lives in way that lowered my own self-esteem: Look at that happy couple, why is that not you?

After a months-long battle with my psyche, Woebot provided me with a tool that both acknowledged the reality of my situation, but also created a way for me to shut off the seemingly-endless loop of negative thoughts.

By stepping back and acknowledging the skewed lens through which I had been viewing my world, the days spent under a dark cloud grew fewer. I had become more aware of the flawed thinking that led me to feel down and be so harsh on myself.

As a result, I found that people were now more drawn to me.

The future that I believed to have been predetermined - one spent friendless and alone - was being replaced with hiking trips and dinner plans. Sometimes I still can't help but see a happy couple and be hit with a twinge of jealousy or the feeling of loneliness.

The difference is being able to acknowledge that this is an inevitable experience if you are single and do not want to be. Now, I'm armed with the knowledge that loneliness is a feeling that can only exist for as long as I choose to let it, and that this isn't a defining characteristic of who I am.

Even with the benefit of hindsight, it is not clear to me why I initially chose isolation over seeking help. It could have been denial, or an acceptance that people could feel "down" for weeks on end and that it was not indicative a larger issue.

Perhaps it was the well-documented stigma of discussing one's mental health that encouraged my silence. Regardless of the reason, I am grateful that someone noticed I needed help.

Although loneliness was specifically what I was feeling, each mental health issue we encounter feels like a lonely journey. "Who could possibly understand what I'm going through?" we ask ourselves, "and why would they care?"

Whether it is through posting here, chatting with Woebot, or having an in-person conversation, my hope is that everyone realizes there is someone who is ready to listen.