

- They also had the challenges of running a full-time clinic and Dr. Zilkha giving birth to a baby girl. They just did not have the time.

“It’s impossible to write something that meets the standards of Big Pharma,” Tal said. The contact at Texas A&M had not reconnected after the treatment of the corgi. I imagine the issues Tal and I faced were very similar to what the vet clinic in Houston encountered when they treated the 150 dogs with the NDV serum.

The heaviness

For me, the daunting problems also fueled another issue I had been grappling with. At this point, I walked with cane and my foot in either a cast or a special boot. I had not regularly exercised since the injury in January 2012. Looking back at spring of 2013, I’ve come to realize I also had an undiagnosed injury: clinical depression.

This book is supposed to be about canine distemper, but the depression does play a small role in the story. Since I believe that stigmas about mental health issues need to be dispelled, I’ll try to talk about it briefly and without being ... depressing.

Compared with many others, my experience with depression created only a temporary setback. My case is more like receiving a sharp injury that took a while to recover. More like that injury to my foot in the marathon.

That foot injury had plagued me for years. By continually using my foot, the tendon could not recover. The point of the surgery was to repair the damage so that the foot could heal and get stronger. The mental injury also needed to be repaired so recovery could happen.

The mental injury happened in the spring of 2010 when both my journalism and teaching careers had ended. In my brain, I had shrugged at this turn of events. "I'll find something else." After all, this was possibly a chance to pursue my fiction writing. I was also glad to have the time to devote to a cause I cared about.

But even though my brain shrugged, my emotions had their own reaction. Letting go of both of those careers had been a big blow to my identity. For 25 years, I had either been a journalist or a journalism teacher.

Simply put, I was sad. This did not surprise me. No big deal. People have sad things happen to them all the time, and much worse than what I had. For example, Amy lost her dad and her sister within six months. So, my career setbacks do not come close to what she went through. However, a counselor later explained to me that after about two years, the sadness I still felt could change the chemistry in my brain. This makes it difficult to attempt tasks.

For anyone who just says depression is "all in your head," they are right. It is. But that doesn't mean it is not real or that you can just "get over it." Back in the 1980s, Rodney Dangerfield had a bit in his comedy routine where he talked about "The Heaviness." He would say, "The heaviness is always there." Now, I understand what he was talking about. Tasks and goals now came with an extra weight. I could feel them grow heavier as I approached them, as if slogging through a tar pit. Anxiety and self-esteem problems also go along with depression. It took great effort to make phone calls, and receiving phone calls from people I didn't know or expect sent me into a tail-spin.

Makes it difficult to be an advocate for a cause. I had fallen a long way from what I had been at the L.A. Times.

As I write this, my feet are stronger than they had ever been. I can walk barefoot without pain. I can run or walk for an hour or more. I just played a game of badminton on my brother-in-law's front lawn IN MY BARE FEET! And just as my feet could be fixed, so could my brain. The damage to my brain chemistry has been adjusted, and the heaviness has gone away. But diagnosis always comes first, and in spring of 2013, diagnosis remained more than two years away.

Project Carré remained at an impasse. Perhaps someday, I might get the data from the project privately published, such as in a book.⁸⁸ As this was going on, a parallel story had unfolded which I haven't had a chance to tell you about yet. So, I'm going to have to roll back the clock a little bit and cover some of the same ground from a different angle. This other story began in South Dakota in May 2012.

I woke up in the hotel room at 6 a.m. and lay in my bed worrying about the book, the studies, the cause and a host of other things.

“Ed, you awake?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

He knew because he’d listened to my breathing as I slept. He recognized the patterns and knew what they meant. He’d been recently diagnosed with sleep apnea, and he realized I probably had it too. When you have apnea, it prevents you from getting enough oxygen as you sleep. You keep waking up – or nearly wake up – throughout the night. This keeps you from getting enough REM sleep, and you feel exhausted every day.

That was the first of a series of issues Jeff helped me recognize on that visit.

We went out to breakfast at a Cracker Barrel, and I caught him up on things that had been going on with my family and other friends.

At one joke, we busted out laughing. Hysterically. Thank God the restaurant was mostly empty. The laughter brought an unexpected and welcome relief. For the rest of the visit, we hit microbrews and bars throughout the area. Wherever we went, we brought the board game I’d invented – now called MetaCheckers. I only had the one real-world prototype of it, but wherever we went it drew attention. Whenever a bartender, waitress, customer or other passerby got excited about the game, it filled me with joy.

By the end of his visit, I realized I was happy. From that, I finally understood I’d been depressed for a long time, probably since the end of my journalism and teaching careers. To be honest, the thousands of emails I’d received about canine distemper also deepened the depression. More dogs were saved than lost, but many were lost. In the past five years or so, I’d received photos and videos of sick, dying and dead dogs from all over the world.

Even though I always explained up front to people that I am not a vet or a doctor and could not possibly diagnose their dogs for them [something that cannot happen over email] I still got copies of lab reports and close-up photos of dry paw pads, dry eyes, poop, diarrhea and rashes. Sometimes owners would send me videos of operations, dogs in seizures, dogs spasming, shaking and scared. Photos of dead dogs on blankets, pillows and next to shallow graves landed in my Inbox.

These owners needed to send these videos and photos because they were scared or grieving. They needed to express what they were going through and know that someone else understood without judging or blaming them. When our puppy Selkie died back in 1996, the vet who euthanized her admonished us afterwards, saying that we should make sure to get our next puppy vaccinated. That still pisses off Amy, the assumption being we had done something wrong to kill our puppy. We'd taken Selkie to our vet immediately for a checkup and vaccinations after adoption, but she had already been exposed.

When a dog gets distemper that is not the time to admonish the owner. A distemper case does not always mean vaccination was neglected. The veterinarian and staff should remember that vaccinations do not always work, especially if the dog is somehow immune compromised. They should at least ask about the dog's vaccination history before leaping to a conclusion.

For whatever reason the dog got infected, it happened. It's a fact that must now be handled. Do what you can to protect other dogs from infection. Most importantly, what you do have is a patient sick with a disease. What can be done now? The best time for the vaccination lesson is before (or at least when) the dog is adopted. If it is clear the owner of a distemper dog did miss the lesson on vaccination, you might find a compassionate way to let them know before they get away. But while I have your attention right now: Always get your dogs vaccinated!

When someone writes to tell me their dog died, I sometimes tell them I still remember what it was like to have puppies die of distemper. Sometimes I skip that part because not everyone feels the loss the same way. So, it's arrogant to assume you know what they are going through, how long the pain will last or whether a new pet will make things better. In my replies to these emails, I usually say some variation of "I'm so sorry for your loss. Distemper is a nasty disease that does not play fair. It is a terrible way to lose a good friend and family member. My hope for you is a future with happy, healthy dogs."

When I write these condolences, I remind myself of the joy of the dogs who have lived and the hope that someday perhaps dogs will no longer have to die of this disease. That's what kept me going.

The other weight that added to the depression was the unremitting silence. The unanswered phone calls and emails. The vets and scientists who refuse to even consider that distemper is a problem worth solving or that a solution is possible. I am aware of the dismissive criticisms online. I have no standing within the veterinary or scientific community, so I understand. Were I in your position I might say the same. But the universe gave me a choice: Do nothing and dogs would certainly die. Do something and perhaps some could be saved. Do something, and maybe canine distemper would stop being such a deadly disease.

So in December 2008, I chose to do something. I chose to try. I made that choice because I don't like dogs dying when they don't have to.

Recognizing the depression broke the hold it had over me. I quickly realized the anxiety and self-esteem issues that came with it and began to deal with those. When I felt dread as I approached a task, I recognized what was going on and fought to overcome it. In the next few months, I gradually got better but I would eventually decide I did not have the power to completely defeat the depression on my own. I'd need a little help.

In November 2015, Clark Audiss called me with a problem. The family had to move, and Nilla couldn't go with them. As he wrote for a post to the website I made the next day:

"I enjoyed visiting with you yesterday and catching up on the progress made in studying the NDV treatment. As I mentioned, we have accepted a new position as pastor of a small church and it appears we will be in a rent situation. Because it is a small town, rent opportunities are very limited and all we have seen currently say 'no pets'. Nilla's amazing story has touched so many people and we cannot just let her go without knowing she is in a loving home and being well cared for. I am tearing up as I type these words..., 'She is family'! Thank you for all you have done for Nilla and thank you for offering to help find her a good home. Jen and I are praying for the day when all the studies and all the research verify what we already know ... there is hope and there is a cure!"

His post circulated on the social media accounts. A month later, they found a solution. "Good morning Ed, We have found a home for Nilla! She will be staying here in SD with a friend of my wife's sister. Thanks for all your help (:"

A blog post on another website changed my life for the better. Wil Wheaton, who played Wesley Crusher on "Star Trek: The Next Generation," had posted a video online describing a panic attack he'd had at an airport. In that moment, his wife helped him realize he had a mental health issue. In his video, he explained how those with depression, anxiety and other issues could get help.

He helped me realize that although I had come a long way to climb out of the depression, I couldn't quite get all the way out of the hole without a little help. So, I went to counseling. The counselor had me get a prescription from my doctor. With the medication, counseling, much longer walks with Romeo at night and the music of Brandi Carlile, I began to climb out of the hole. Brandi taught me to feel joy despite the regrets of the past and to not let others tear me down.

In December 2015, my company – DreamGames¹²² – launched sales of MetaCheckers from a website and online store. After that, we started making sales at game conventions and in local stores around Horseheads. Through all of this, I continued to answer emails about canine distemper as we waited for news from Dr. Harkin.

In early March 2016, more news about the Kansas State study came. But it was not what I had been hoping for. A key issue was the myoclonus – or chorea – the spasmodic, jerky contraction of the muscles. Dr. Harkin wrote:

“Just thought I'd pass on some thoughts/ observations about the NDV treatment. The first few dogs that I treated has an abnormal CSF analysis with lots of inflammation. After treatment that inflammation was gone, so my initial impression was that the treatment effected that response. Having evaluated more dogs, I realize that many of them will have a normal CSF and that this is likely not an uncommon event when the virus becomes dormant. So, in that respect, I'm not sure the treatment really does anything. For those dogs with myoclonus (which has been all but one of these dogs), they do seem to improve within the first 2-3 weeks with less whining, but not really any significant reduction in their myoclonus.