



“My doctor is worried I’m depressed, but that’s not how I feel,” Allen told me.

A few years into retirement and pushing three quarters of a century, this generally upbeat fellow found himself flummoxed by odd feelings, a new development he shared with his family physician.

“Most of the time, I’m like I’ve always been. I’m not some clueless optimist, but I usually see the glass half full,” he explained.

What’s more, Allen enjoyed his family, remained active, was in overall good health, and lived most of the time in the moment, rather than ruminating about the past or future. All these capacities strongly correlate with higher life satisfaction. So, what happened?

“It comes out of nowhere. I’m just doing whatever and suddenly I get this bad feeling. I can’t put it into words. I’ve never felt anything quite like it,” he said.

For hours, or sometimes an entire day, Allen’s “bad feeling” co-opted his awareness, making it difficult for him to focus on anything else. It drained his energy, soured his mood, and left him mired in a mental and spiritual darkness that escaped his understanding.

“Let’s make this feeling tangible,” I suggested.

I followed with a series of questions. “Where is the feeling in your body?” His chest. “What color is it?” Black tinged with dark red. “Does it have a temperature?” Hot. “What shape?” Like a jagged lump of coal. “Static or moving?” Dead still. “Texture? Rough and sharp. “If it made a sound, what would that be?” A low moan.

This line of inquiry seemed to help, because he soon declared, “I think I know what it is . . . despair.”

Throughout his life, Allen never considered the big questions of the “What’s it all about?” variety, including musings about existence, death and meaning. So, when recent experience imposed on him a growing awareness of his impermanence and the capricious nature of events, he was unprepared. Previously blessed with few personal losses, the vagaries of our entropic universe simply hadn’t crossed his mind.

“Who died?” I asked, surmising that was a key trigger.

“My parents, last year. Both in a few weeks of each other. Dad had a coronary, and after that, Mom just didn’t want to live. Died in her sleep,” he said.

As one would expect, Allen experienced sadness and grief over these losses, but this eventually passed, and he didn’t become mired in depression. However, months later, without warning, his episodes of despair emerged.

“It leaves me wondering just what all this is for or whether it even matters,” he said, referring to life itself. “Everything ends, nothing lasts, and when I’m in this state of mind, it all seems pointless.”

There were significant differences between Allen’s nameless dread and standard issue depression. Most prominently, it was episodic, not persistent. When not in its grip, he regained his customary frame of mind, one affording him a measure of optimism, hopefulness and life satisfaction.

Together, we crafted a strategy for addressing his intermittent trepidation. This incorporated much more time in nature (he was an indoor sort), which assuages angst through its beauty, balance and life energy. Also, he began a gratitude journal, which focused his awareness on the goodness in his life, and limited his exposure to bad news via the media. Finally, he used carefully selected music to uplift his spirit.

There is no “cure” for the dread that visited Allen. The ephemeral nature of existence, populated as it often is with losses, suffering and decline, is one of those facts of life we can’t shoo away with denial and glib psychological nostrums.

But, in facing this universal challenge, we can remind ourselves of life's goodness, which is, after all, as compelling and valid as its dark side.