Call No Man Happy

How Depression in Men Puts a Whole Life on Trial

Depression in men doesn't just darken the present. It puts a whole life on trial — and rigs the court.

Jeffrey Young, MA, LMFT · Clinical Director, The Relationship Place

In this essay: why depression feels like clarity rather than distortion, how it rewrites memory, why depression in men so often looks like anger, overwork, or withdrawal instead of sadness, and four ways to reopen a case depression insists is closed.

THE PREMATURE VERDICT

Why Does Depression Feel Like the Truth?

Herodotus tells of a meeting between Croesus, king of Lydia and the richest man of his age, and Solon, the Athenian lawgiver. Croesus walks his guest through the treasury, then asks him who the happiest man in the world is, fully expecting to hear his own name. Solon names an obscure Athenian who lived decently, saw his grandchildren grow up, and died well in battle for his city. Croesus, irritated, asks again and gets two young brothers who died in their sleep after an act of devotion to their mother. When the king finally demands to know why his own fortune counts for nothing, Solon gives the answer that has outlasted the kingdom: no one can judge a life happy until he has seen how it ends. Until then, a man is at most fortunate.

Croesus sent him away thinking him a fool. Years later, his city taken by Cyrus of Persia and himself bound on a pyre, Croesus called out Solon's name three times.

Solon's point cuts in both directions. It warns the fortunate not to declare victory early. It should also stop anyone from declaring defeat early. A life still being lived has no final verdict, because the evidence is still coming in.

Depression does not accept this. It is, among other things, a mood that claims to have read the last page. It looks back across decades and announces what they meant. It looks ahead and announces that nothing will change. And it speaks in a voice unlike any other mood. Anger knows it is heated. Joy knows it is buoyant and a little foolish. Depression presents itself as sober, as though every earlier hope was the distortion and this is the moment the fog lifted.

For a while, psychology half-agreed. A well-known 1979 study suggested that mildly depressed people judged their control over events more accurately than others, a finding nicknamed "depressive realism." The idea has not held up well under replication; later reviews found at most a small effect, and recent attempts to reproduce it have found little or none. But the reason it spread so widely is the real puzzle. It confirmed what depression already says about itself: that it is the one who finally sees the truth.

So the question this essay pursues is not whether depression distorts. Clinicians and anyone who has lived through it know that it does. The question is harder and stranger: *how does it persuade?* How does a mood convince an intelligent, accomplished man that the bleakest reading of his own life is the accurate one, and that every other reading was self-flattery?

The answer, I think, is that depression doesn't argue like a mood. It argues like a court. It holds a trial, follows a procedure, enters exhibits, and reaches a verdict. And like any court, it can be fair or rigged. To see how it is rigged, we have to watch it in session.

THE TRIBUNAL

How Depression Rewrites Your Memories

Depression convenes a court, and it fills every seat itself. It is the judge, the prosecutor, and the clerk who decides which exhibits get admitted. And every one of them speaks in the defendant's own voice.

The clerk works first. Since Gordon Bower's research in the early 1980s, psychologists have known that mood shapes what memory can retrieve. In a low state, painful evidence comes to hand at once. Exculpatory evidence is ruled late, irrelevant, or tainted. *That was before. That didn't count.*

Then the testimony changes. Mark Williams and his colleagues found that depressed people struggle to recall specific memories and fall back on summaries: *I always*, *I never*, *those years*. A specific memory is a witness, and witnesses can be cross-examined. A summary is a closing argument presented as fact.

Shame brings the final move. In June Tangney's terms, guilt says *I did a bad thing*, while shame says *I am the bad thing*. Real courts generally refuse to let a prosecutor argue *he did it because that's the kind of man he is*. Character evidence is barred because it convicts the person instead of judging the act. Depression's court runs that rule in reverse. Every act is entered as proof of character, and character is the only charge.

That is why the verdict feels true. No evidence has been forged. The court is rigged in its procedure, not in its exhibits.

THE GALLERY

What Does Depression in Men Look Like?

Depression in men rarely shows up looking like sadness. It looks like irritability that seems out of proportion, longer hours at the office, a third drink, a short fuse at home, a sudden appetite for risk, or a man who stops returning calls from the friends he once organized everyone around. *A 2013 study in JAMA Psychiatry*, led by Lisa Martin, found that once anger, aggression, substance use, and risk-taking were counted alongside the classic symptoms, men and women met criteria for depression at nearly the same rates. Much of men's depression was never absent. It was dressed differently.

There is a reason for the costume. Many men are raised to build a self that lives largely outside themselves: in the title, the reputation, the record, the regard of peers. That works well while the record keeps growing. Then something changes the terms. For one man it is a layoff at forty-five; for another, a career-ending injury at twenty-eight, a business that failed, or a retirement party that marks the last day anyone needed him. Midlife is a common setting, but the trial can open at any age. For a self kept mainly in public, these transitions feel less like changes than charges. And the inner tribunal now has a gallery.

The Athenians had a word for what the gallery can do. Once a year, the assembly voted on whether to hold an ostracism. If it did, citizens scratched a name on a shard of pottery, an *ostrakon*, and if enough shards bore the same name, that man was exiled for ten years. Ostracism was not a punishment for a crime. It was a punishment for being too prominent. Plutarch tells of Aristides, called "the Just," being approached by an illiterate voter who didn't recognize him and asked him to write *Aristides* on his shard. When Aristides asked what the man had done to him, the voter answered: nothing, he was just tired of hearing him called the Just.

The court of public opinion is real. Prominent men do fall, and colleagues do talk. An honest essay can't pretend every verdict is imagined.

But here is what depression does with that real possibility. It doesn't wait for the vote. The defendant scratches his own name on the shard, hands it to the crowd, and leaves the city before anyone else has written a word. He stops attending, calling, and showing his face, sure he already knows what everyone has decided. Withdrawal feels like protection from a judgment, but it does something worse: it makes acquittal impossible. No one can testify for a man who has left the courtroom.

The Romans took it further. What historians now call *damnatio memoriae*, the condemnation of memory, meant chiseling a man's name off the monuments, as though he had never lived. Depression invites men to do this to themselves: to erase the record before the public does, and then to point at the blank stone as proof.

Yet the Athenians, for all their cruelty, put a term on ostracism. Exile ran ten years, the exile kept his property, and the door stayed open. Aristides himself was recalled early, when Athens needed him against the Persians. The gallery's verdict, it turns out, was never meant to be final.

REOPENING THE CASE

How Do You Challenge Depression's Verdict?

If depression's court is rigged in its procedure, then winning on the facts was never the way out. Nearly everyone who loves a depressed man tries it anyway. They list his accomplishments, remind him who showed up for him, and insist the verdict is wrong. He nods, and nothing changes, because you can't win on facts in a court where the clerk chooses the exhibits. The way out is not a better defense. It is a change of procedure.

First, notice the court is in session. The verdict feels like the world, but it is something the mind is doing. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy has a simple practice for this: add a frame to the thought. Not *I wasted my life*, but *I'm having the thought that I wasted my life*. That sounds like a trick of grammar until you try it. The sentence stops being a ruling and becomes testimony, one voice in the room, and you are moved from the defendant's chair to a seat where you can watch the proceedings. Nothing about the past has changed. What changes is that you are no longer required to treat the prosecutor's closing argument as the court record.

It helps to remember that every seat in this court speaks in your voice. The judge, the prosecutor, and the clerk often turn out to be old protectors: parts of a man that learned long ago that convicting himself first was safer than waiting for someone else to do it. They don't need to be defeated. They need to be heard, and then relieved of a job they were never suited for.

Second, plead to the real charges. This is where the essay has to be honest, because depression is rarely made of lies alone. Most men in this court have done real harm somewhere: words they can't take back, promises broken, times they weren't there when it counted. The task isn't to deny those things. It is to answer for them as *acts*. Guilt says *I did this*, and guilt can do something shame never can. It can apologize, make amends, change behavior, and wait. Shame refuses all of that, because it has already decided the defendant is beyond repair. So plead guilty to what you did. Refuse the charge of what you are. Only one of those pleas leaves room for repair, even when repair takes longer than you would like.

Third, bring new evidence. The past is fixed, but the record isn't closed. Every phone call returned, every hour spent showing up, every small task finished on a bad day enters the file. Clinicians call this behavioral activation, and its central insight runs against intuition: action usually has to come before the feeling, not

after it. A man waiting to feel worthy before he re-enters his life is waiting for a verdict the court won't deliver. A man who acts anyway is building the case the clerk can't suppress forever.

Finally, come back to the city. The gallery is real, and some of its members will keep their shards. But exile ends when the exile returns, and he can only return by walking back in: to the friendship, the old team, the standing lunch, the call he has been avoiding, the room where he expects to be judged.

Some of the verdicts he feared will turn out never to have been given.

Herodotus didn't end the story of Croesus on the pyre. Cyrus, hearing him cry out Solon's name and learning why, was moved by it. He ordered the fire put out and kept the fallen king beside him as an advisor for years afterward. The man who thought his story had ended on the pyre lived long enough to prove the fire wrong.

That is all Solon was saying. The verdict on a life belongs to its end. Until then, the court is still in session, the evidence is still coming in, and the man in the defendant's chair is also, every day, the one writing the record.

> **If the verdict feels final**
> If you are in the place this essay describes and the verdict has begun to feel final, please don't wait to bring someone else into the room. Call or text **988**, the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (988lifeline.org), or reach out to a therapist. Depression is very treatable, and you don’t have to argue this case alone.

SOURCES

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> **About the Author**
> Jeffrey Young, MA, LMFT, is Clinical Director and co-founder of The Relationship Place in San Diego. A Gottman Method–trained couples therapist who integrates ACT and IFS, he holds degrees in philosophy and classics and writes on the meeting point of ancient wisdom and modern clinical practice.