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I'm a little late with this...my best wishes for a healthy and happy 2015.

We wish good health for others and ourselves; what is good health though? We all hopefully have some sense of what it feels like, but it is not so easy to express what this feeling is. Good health is certainly an absence of illness but that doesn't say much about the state of health itself. I think of health as a physical and mental state of *freedom* and illness is ultimately a restriction on this. So for a child who has eczema for instance, with successful treatment, the child is freed from the discomfort of a distressing skin condition and can then enjoy life as a child ought to. For an adult, say with depression, successful treatment helps to free them from their symptoms so they are more ok within themselves and freer to express who they are. When we feel a sense of freedom within ourselves, good things come of it – we're naturally happier, more considerate of others and work better.

I chose depression as an example as I've wanted to write about depression for years but haven't been sure how to go about it, fearing I would be misunderstood. Now is the time!

I've been concerned for many years at what I've observed as the 'industry of depression'. The increase in depression and the astronomic rise in the prescription of antidepressants is well known. People have come to see me over the years who have been diagnosed with depression and want to get off their antidepressants but find it really difficult. Eighty-five percent of antidepressants are prescribed by GPs and yet GPs are not trained in psychiatry. I'm not criticising GPs as they are on the front line of medicine, under huge pressure by the NHS and patients to do something, every 7-10 minutes.

I've seen severe depression in patients in psychiatric hospitals and what a devastating mental illness it can be. Of course, people diagnosed by GPs with depression are in need of help, but most do not necessarily need antidepressants. If this seems a medically irresponsible statement, please read on as I am not discouraging people from consulting their GPs.

I was recently sent a link by a colleague to a website of an Australian GP, Karen Hitchcock. Karen is a busy GP and also a writer. Here is an excerpt of what she has recently written on depression. I've quoted at length as I think it is brilliant -

“The story of how antidepressants became the *most widely prescribed and profitable drugs* (my italics) in the history of medicine is an interesting one. In the 1950s, a collection of symptoms was given the name “depression” and defined as a disease. In the following decades, drugs to cure this disease were marketed heavily, mostly on the strength of their hypothesised mechanisms of action. Pharmaceutical companies funded clinical trials and published the results of the ones that showed statistically significant benefits of drug treatment. National guidelines recommended the drugs be prescribed for patients who suffered severe depression; doctors extrapolated from that and gave

them to everyone...There is scant proof in the neurosciences that the theory of chemical imbalance is correct. It is closer to myth than science...Mild to moderate depression is generally a short-lived experience, which waxes and wanes...Perhaps most importantly of all, recent re-evaluation of the trials has shown that these drugs do not work for the majority of patients who are prescribed them. Researchers used freedom of information laws in the US to uncover dozens of trials the pharmaceutical companies had suppressed. When they combined the published and unpublished trials, they found that half showed the drugs worked (barely) better than placebo and half showed they did nothing at all. I do not think the psychic consequences of physical debility, loss, poverty or abuse are necessarily a disease called depression. I wish it were true that there was a safe pill that could ease ordinary misery. The so-called antidepressant drugs have minimal benefit to the average individual that presents to a GP, have multiple side effects (including the possibility of a small increase in the risk of suicide) and are difficult to get off. ”

(Karen's website can be found by searching 'Karen Hitchcock the monthly').

Of the people I have seen diagnosed with depression there are common symptoms – feeling generally low, lack of energy, a general indifference to life accompanied by varying physical symptoms. 'It's stress-related' is a common statement. As human beings, we are built to handle stress; life has always been stressful for us in some way. Heightened stress over a prolonged period is a different matter though and will in time produce symptoms as our natural physical and psychological defence mechanisms are unable to cope. And this prolonged stress may be a job, relationship, recovery from a traumatic incident; there are many triggers.

As a homeopath, I have the time to listen to people and this can undoubtedly help. Many people feel they have not been properly listened to and for some, it is the first time anyone has really listened to them. Being compassionately listened to can of itself be very healing. My experience has been though if I am to make a real difference to health over a period of time, a good homeopathic prescription is usually necessary. Symptoms then improve, people begin to feel better in themselves and feel ready to gradually reduce their antidepressants.

There is no single medical or therapy modality that has all the answers. People may need some form of therapy in addition to or instead of homeopathy such as psychotherapy/counselling or professional help with relationship problems. It is also well known now that regular exercise and a healthy diet can significantly improve the symptoms of depression. All of us can benefit from regular time-out, whatever works for us - meditation, time in Nature, music and dancing... whatever helps us to empty our minds of excessive mental activity and re-energise us.

Increasingly, people feel a sense of outrage, helplessness or grief at the state of the world; at the escalating madness of greed and violence directed at ourselves and the natural world. As a species we find ourselves at the top of the evolutionary tree, a responsibility we have handled poorly. Every day the media is full of horror at the way we treat each other. We are capable of the most uplifting creativity and compassion and yet the most appalling destruction and cruelty. It has always been thus but the scale of our destruction is now exponential. For some, this is a cause of real despair and yet if our lives are to be fulfilling, it is important that we reconcile ourselves with these feelings. It may not be an easy journey and it's a journey I really sympathise with. I do believe though we have to arrive at a place of hope and connect with the vitality and joy of being alive, to feel life is really worth living.

With best wishes,