

Transitions and Depression
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I first saw lots of river runners as a specific group in 1968–69 when I worked at Marble Canyon Trading Post. Some of the factors which stood out as pretty unique were, for some, difficult. It was a young community overall, filled with kids who desperately wanted to be on the river. They had dreams of adventure and of being heroes. Often they were thrown into leadership roles with little training and no established norms. The pressures were great because boatmen were, (and are) in a way, expendable. An impatient and eager group was standing right behind them to take their place if they didn't get it and get it fast. These were young people thrown into a culture which was scrambling to define itself. Often it defined itself as party hearty, fast and furious, fearless by living out many people's dreams—being a boatman—Huck Finn reincarnate. Pretty heady stuff, and not conducive to planning ahead for other seasons.

Ability to solve serious problems was quickly developed, but the nature of river running doesn't encourage long-range planning with an eye to the future. The adrenaline rush, the easy availability of adoring young and often temporary partners, was in direct contrast to the end of season scrambling for that winter job to survive until the next season. For the many of our community who gravitated to winter jobs as simply a way to survive until next river season, the time to be still and assess didn't happen then either.

What I've seen in the survivors of that quick moving unique world is the ability to develop deep caring for each other while maintaining the easy acceptance of here today, gone tomorrow. Add the absolute denial of most river companies and some river people themselves to plan for long-range security, retirement, a second career, or basic health insurance in many cases, and the stage is set for potential trouble.

For that guide who is literally swept into the current, the reality of more and more intrusive governmental controls on the river, the demands of an often chronically injured and aging body, the golden time of living only in the present diminishes. He now finds him/herself unprepared and apprehensive for, "What next?" Facing high water at flood stages may be easier than facing that your chosen way of life is being threatened and restricted due to personal and societal changes.

Low water ahead with previously unseen obstacles now visible. The tightest friendships often are with those who are facing the same challenges. The usual problem-solvers may not work anymore. This can be a setup for depression—I'm not talking about the occasional down-in-the-dumps day everyone experiences. I'm talking about the real thing—a disease, curable, but a serious disease which gradually saps the joy out of living, which makes hope an illusive word in a sappy

song, and the future an idea filled with confusing choices and unprepared for changes.

New channels need to be explored, but first some of the warning signals of depression need to be mentioned:

1. Absence of joy—a flat feeling that doesn't ever quite go away.
2. Chronic tiredness—feels like slogging through mud emotionally and physically.
3. Quick to anger and/or a pervasive sadness—not necessarily tied to external events.
4. Absentmindedness—the inability to remember why you're standing in the boathouse with an oar in your hand.
5. Eating a lot more with less relief, or suffering a loss of appetite—nothing tastes good.
6. Either sleeping too much and/or an interrupted sleeping pattern—both with exhaustion.
7. Suicidal thoughts and plans crop up as a reasonable way to solve problems—but maybe not enough energy to follow through (most suicides happen when people are recovering from depression because they have more energy and don't know they're on the way back up.)
8. Alcohol or drug abuse.

If you or someone you care for has all or some of these signs, it may be an indicator of Clinical Depression. The key to treating depression is not to ignore it—it does not go away on its own. It is, however, highly treatable. The earlier the better—the sooner diagnosed and faced the sooner people get to plot their new channel.

As the summer season begins to swing into full gear, take time on the back of your boat to ask yourself, “What other explorations are possible, what do I need to do in order to prepare for my next fulfilling challenges?” If the Whale Foundation can help let us know!