

Bears & Health

Bears, Binging and Depression - Part 1

In a survey conducted several years ago by bears-and-health pioneer Steve Albert, bears ourselves identified depression as a leading health concern. Is it just a coincidence that overeating and depression are so common among us? Is there a connection? Is overeating an addiction? Does being a bear help with or rather does it encourage the

binge eating, and that he is an advocate for persons with mental illness. For *American Bear*, he was happy to have an opportunity to say more.

I have been struggling with depression since the early 1980s. For years I perceived it to be a "normal" feeling that one would experience in the course of daily life. I never thought it

was something that would alter the course of my life the way it did in 1993 when I was hospitalized for an accidental overdose of medication. I say accidental because I wasn't attempting suicide. Rather, as I experienced it, I was trying to escape the pain I was feeling.

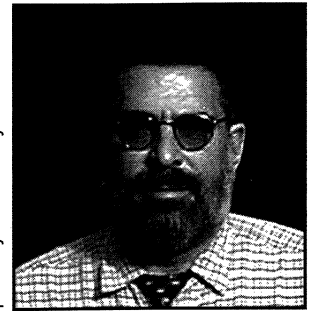
My diagnosis was "major depressive episode." I had lost all interest in things pleasurable, including sex. I had also withdrawn from people and began isolating in my apartment. What limited social contact I had with friends and family soon ended. The only

individual I had any contact with was my roommate.

Food also played a prominent role in my depression. I would binge eat every day. It seemed a source of comfort in trying to overcome the sadness I was feeling. Although I had no history

Lawrence D. Mass, M.D., is a co-founder of Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City and the author/editor of four books, including, most recently, *We Must Love One Another Or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer* (St. Martin's Press). You may address questions or comments to Dr. Mass via our mailing address or Email address.

photo by Joel Bradley



of anorexia, once hospitalized I stopped eating for almost three weeks - a symptom of severe depression - and I had to be given nutrients intravenously. Later, it was determined that my depression went undiagnosed for almost 12 years, and that it ran in my family.

Today I'm doing much better. It was a long and hard road to get me to the point I'm at now, especially finding the right medication and psychotherapy.

I can't generalize about the bear community and the issue of depression because it's an illness that affects people differently. But binge eating, weight gaining and encouragement of these behaviors are common in our community. I wonder if depression might not be a factor in some of these situations.

One of the major symptoms of depression is isolation. After 4 years of hiding out in my apartment, of having virtually no contact with anyone, and with the help of antidepressant medication, I finally began to venture out. It was scary, made worse by another major symptom of depression - low self-esteem. But one thing that motivated me to get out and about was the bears. I attended a Metrobear meeting at the Gay & Lesbian Center, where I felt included, where I discovered a sense of self and identity I didn't know existed. Its been an uphill ride ever since.

Part 2 will look at some patterns and treatments of binge eating and depression. Rich Poploff can be reached online: Rubadubbear@aol.com.



problem of overeating?

In an interview in the June issue of the New York City Metrobears newsletter, woofy MemBear of the Month Rich Poploff [photo above] candidly acknowledged that he suffers from depression bound up with patterns of