Chapter 7
Learning with a Curve: Young Women’s “Depression” as Transformative Learning

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ABSTRACT
This feminist arts-informed study investigates “depression” as transformation in the lives of young rural women in Nova Scotia, Canada. The author facilitated interviews and zine workshops with four young women who experienced severe depression in their early 20s and remain “angled toward it.” Drawing from Transformative Learning theory, the author asks: How does lived experience of severe psychic suffering affect the “habits of minds” (Mezirow, 1978) of young women? By doing so, the author responds to calls for adult education research on mental health and the intersections between women’s emotions, bodies, transformative learning, and the arts. The author addresses the dearth of research on mental illness and transformation and offers preliminary implications for Transformative Learning theory.

INTRODUCTION
As time passed and I moved from seat to seat in the theater of my own psyche, my perspective shifted along with my sight lines. I came to see my story as an ordinary story. I was and always would be a woman with a curve. I no longer live on the planet of depression, but I am angled toward it. (Dormen, 2001, p. 240)

Up to my 21st year, I worked hard to conform to what a “good” young woman should be. I studied hard, wanted to be kind and beautiful; I forgot my body, denied its appetites, and aimed to please. I strove after that mythical life “balance” that seldom includes one’s own true heart. In the final year of an undergraduate degree, however, this delicate fiction began to tear at the seams. I began to attract the wrong kind of attention. And what happened next was only the beginning.

In early adulthood, my life story acquired an omniscient narrator: the voice of science, a deep (male) voice punctuated with assurances and certainties. Bestower of diagnoses, standardized tests, and pharmaceuticals. Over time, as I worked at healing, I became aware that my life was unfolding within wider cultural, political, and social contexts, that I was one of a growing number of...
Learning with a Curve

people experiencing emotional dissonance in North American society. I read about depression’s gendered contours, recognized stigma as my own seamless veneer was painfully chipped away. There I was, living with my parents, all tangled hair and pajamas.

I soon learned that by stepping into this gap, I was disrupting a very powerful narrative, and I was not alone. Indeed, there is an emerging literature in adult education on the ways women learn through disruptions, interruptions and transitions in their bodies (e.g., Armacost, 2005; Lawrence, 2012; Malkki, 2012). This feminist arts-informed study investigates “depression” as a disorienting dilemma in the lives and bodies of young rural women in Nova Scotia, Canada. In 2011, I facilitated informal interviews and zine workshops with four young women who experienced severe depression in their early 20s and remain “angled toward it.”

Drawing from Transformative Learning (TL) theory, and using qualitative and arts-informed methods, I ask: How does lived experience of severe psychic suffering affect the “habits of minds” (Mezirow, 1978) of young rural Nova Scotia women? By doing so, I respond to calls for adult education research on mental health (Brookfield, 2011) and the intersections between women’s emotions, bodies, transformative learning, and the arts (Irving & English, 2011). I address the dearth of research examining “mental illness” and its relationship to TL, and situate depression as valuable transformative learning on behalf of the societies and communities in which women live.

BACKGROUND

Scientific statistics reflect skyrocketing rates of depression around the world. Depression is predicted to become the second most common global cause of disability in the next decade (WHO, 2002). Despite its well-documented prevalence, however, there is a marked lack of research on lived experiences of depression (Ridge & Ziebland, 2006), particularly in young adulthood (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005), and in adult education literature more widely (Brookfield, 2011).

The growing field of Young Adulthood Studies reveals the changing circumstances in how life stages are structured. A highly competitive economic climate of extended education and delayed onset of work has rendered this life-stage longer, more pronounced, and increasingly complex (Lee & Gramotnev, 2007; Settersten et al., 2005). Emerging mental illness increases existing stress and contradicts expectations of this stage, as many young adults encounter physical and emotional fraility for the first time and divert from intended plans.

Depression is a highly gendered phenomenon. Globally, women are diagnosed twice as often as men; in fact, it is the most common mental health issue for women, with North American women’s risk of depression estimated to range from 10 to 25 percent (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In Canada, young women between the ages of 20 and 44 are most frequently diagnosed with and treated for depression (The Ad Hoc Working Group on Women, Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addictions, 2006). Research suggests that young women who live in rural communities are especially vulnerable to depression, as they confront social stigma and barriers to healing, including economic instability, geographic isolation, and traditional gender roles, all known to increase risk of depression (Scattolon, 2003).

Feminist critiques of madness as a tool for social control have been present since at least the 1970s. Even today, the majority of North American electroshock survivors are women, many of whom are elders, and many of whom experience devastating damage and loss (van Daalen-Smith, 2011). As feminist psychologist and historian Phyllis Chesler described in her classic 1972 book, Women and Madness, husbands were permitted to lock disobeying wives up in madhouses as early as the 16th century. Since the late 19th century,
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