

The Lincoln Strategy:

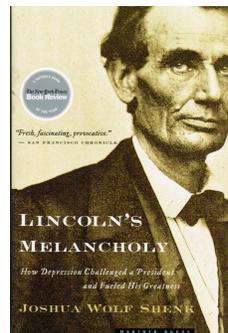
Clinical lessons about effectively dealing with depression, suicidality and suffering from a great leader who suffered



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Lincoln's Melancholy



Lincoln's Melancholy

"I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better I cannot tell; I awfully forbode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better, it appears to me."

Lincoln's Melancholy

"Lincoln went crazy—had to remove razors from his room—take away all knives and dangerous things, etc. It was terrible." — Lincoln's best friend, Joshua Speed, on Lincoln's second major depressive episode

"Poor man. He is reduced and emaciated in appearance and seems scarcely to possess strength enough to speak above a whisper. His case at present is truly delorable." —description of Lincoln at that time by his friend James Conkling

Lincoln during this time was "delirious, to the extent of not knowing what he was doing," said another friend, Orville Browning

Inclusion of opposites

- Fatalism and self-improvement
- Pessimism and optimism
- Depression and humor
- Isolation and social connection
- Willing to embrace enemies and critics



Inclusion of Opposites

- Lincoln's friend and law partner William Herndon wrote about Lincoln:
- "Let me say to you that he had a double consciousness—if not a treble consciousness. First, he was a terribly gloomy—sad man at times—2ndly he was at times full of humor—'joky'—witty & happy. Gloom and sadness were his predominant state—3rdly at times he was neither sad nor humorous, but simply was in a pleasant mood—i.e. he was not in a gloomy nor a mirthful fit—was kindly thoughtful, not serious ever—a state of thought and good feeling united for a moment . . . This last state was not of long duration. Lincoln was a curious—mysterious—quite an incomprehensible man. Do not think I exaggerate."

Inclusion of Opposites

- After Lincoln unexpectedly won the Republican nomination for president and then the general election against far more well-known, well-educated and more experienced rivals, he invited all of those adversaries to join his cabinet. Dolores Kearns Goodwin has called this a "team of rivals."
- Some of them hated and disrespected Lincoln and were bitter about their own defeats. These competitors who had originally disdained Lincoln came to admire and even love Lincoln. One of them, Bates, coming to view him as an unmatched leader, "very near being a perfect man." Another, Stanton, cried uncontrollably for weeks after Lincoln's assassination.

Inclusion of opposites

- How to apply this strategy to clinical work:
 - Permission to and permission not to
 - Inclusion/recognition/validation of opposites within clients
 - Recognizing and including exceptions

Purpose/Sense of Meaning

- Unwilling to kill himself until he had proved useful and fulfilled his purpose
- Thought he was destined for great things
- Found meaning and wisdom (empathy and understanding) through his own suffering and defeats

Purpose/Meaning

Lincoln said that he could kill himself, that he was not afraid to die. Yet, he said, he had an “irrepressible desire” to accomplish something while he lived. He wanted to connect his name with the great events of his generation, and “so impress himself upon them as to link his name with something that would redound to the interest of his fellow man.” This was no mere wish, Lincoln said, but what he “desired to live for.”

Purpose/meaning

- Applying this strategy to clinical work:
 - Find the driving energy for the client
 - Blisped, blessed, pissed or dissed
 - Find their purpose
 - Why are they alive on the planet?
 - In their best dreams, what positive difference will their lives have made?
 - If they could accomplish something of note, what would it be?
 - Finding the meaning in suffering
 - Any understandings of/greater compassion for oneself and others through troubles?

Future-oriented strategies

- The Miracle Question
- The Crystal Ball
- The Time Machine
- Writing one’s own obituary (with a purposeful, positive spin)
- Giving advice to others in the future about solving or coping with similar suffering and problems

Social Connections

- Lincoln made friends readily
- His friends helped keep him from killing himself during his first major depressive episode by sitting with him 24/7
- His loyal friendships led to his being nominated for Republican presidential candidate when he was the underdog

Social Connections

"Lincoln was invariably the center of attention [in social gatherings]. No one could equal his never-ending stream of stories nor his ability to reproduce them with such contagious mirth. As his winding tales became more famous, crowds of villagers awaited his arrival at every stop [on the court circuit] for the chance to hear the master storyteller. Everywhere he went, he won devoted followers, friendships that later emboldened his quest for office." (from *Team of Rivals*, p. 8)

Social Intelligence

- Lincoln had an uncanny ability to "read" people and their intentions and states of being
- He had great empathy and could readily join people where they were, especially if they were depressed, discouraged or angry

Lincoln's social sensitivity and empathy

Dear Fanny

It is with deep grief that I learn of the death of your kind and brave Father; and, especially, that it is affecting your young heart beyond what is common in such cases. In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and, to the young, it comes with bitterest agony, because it takes them unawares. The older have learned to ever expect it. I am anxious to afford some alleviation of your present distress. Perfect relief is not possible, except with time. You can not now realize that you will ever feel better. Is this not so? And yet it is a mistake. You are sure to be happy again. To know this, which is certainly true, will make you some less miserable now. I have had experience enough to know what I say; and you need only believe it to feel better at once.

Research on the importance of social connections

- Countless studies document the link between society and psyche: people who have close friends and confidants, friendly neighbors, and supportive co-workers are less likely to experience sadness, loneliness, low self-esteem, and problems with eating and sleeping.
- The single most common finding from a half century's research on the correlates of life satisfaction, not only in the United States but around the world, is that happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social connections.

Putnam, Robert D. (2000). **Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community**. New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 332)

Research on the importance of social connections

- “By far the greatest predictor of happiness in the literature is intimate relationships.”

– Sonja Lyubomirsky, researcher at UC-Riverside, author of **The How of Happiness**

Research on the importance of social connections

Being with someone else during an earthquake is protective against PTSD.

Armenian, H. et. Al. (2000). “Loss as a determinant of PTSD in a cohort of adult survivors of the 1998 earthquake in Armenia: Implications for policy,” *Acta Psychiatr. Scand.*, 102(1):58-64.

Research on the importance of social connections

Post-traumatic stress disorder sufferers in group treatment recovered at a significantly higher rate (88.3%) than those in individual treatment (31.3%).

Beck, J. et.al. (2009). “Group Cognitive Behavior Therapy for Chronic Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: An Initial Randomized Pilot Study,” *Behavior Therapy*, 40(1):82-92.

Research on the importance of social connections

Robert Biswas-Diener and Ed Diener surveyed life satisfaction of the homeless and prostitutes living in the slums of Calcutta and found that healthy bonds with family and good social relationships were correlated with higher life satisfaction levels.

Biswas-Diener, R. and Diener, E. (2001). "Making the best of a bad situation: Satisfaction in the slums of Calcutta," *Social Indicators Research*, 55, 329-352.

Research on the importance of social connections

People with five or more close friends (excluding family members) are 50% more likely to describe themselves as "very happy" than respondents with fewer.

U. of Chicago, General Social Survey

Social Connections and Intelligence

How to use these in clinical work:

- Matching and leading
- Encourage isolated and depressed clients to make or keep/nurture social connections

Humor/Storytelling

- Lincoln distracted himself from his depression, made positive social connections and coped using humor and funny stories
- When not in this mode, he tended to sink into a gloomy, withdrawn mood

Humor



- After being accused of being two-faced, Lincoln responded to his critic: “If I were two-faced, would I be wearing this one?”

Humor/Storytelling

- “I was once accosted by a stranger, who said, ‘Excuse me, sir, but I have an article in my possession which belongs to you.’
- ‘How is that?’ I asked considerably astonished. The stranger took a jackknife from his pocket. ‘This knife,’ said he, ‘was placed in my hands some years ago with the injunction that I was to keep it until I found a man uglier than myself. I have carried it from that time to this. Allow me to say, sir, that I think you are fairly entitled to the property.’” – Anecdote told by Lincoln

Humor/Storytelling

- Applying this strategy to clinical work:
 - Use self-deprecating humor
 - Find the absurd in the situation
 - Tell engaging stories

Depressive Realism and Fatalism

- Lincoln anticipated the worst
- Lincoln saw the horror, suffering, tragedy and unkindness in the world
- And he strove to forestall those bad outcomes by looking with clear eyes at them and making efforts to prevent them; he also expressed great compassion for people’s, even his enemy’s, suffering
- He thought everything was pre-determined or fated to be as it would be

The Stockdale Paradox

Jim Collins: Who didn't make it out (of the P.O.W. camps)?

James Stockdale: Oh, that's easy. The optimists.

Collins: The optimists? I don't understand.

Stockdale: The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come and they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.

This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the need for discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

Depressive Realism and Fatalism

- This, in many ways, made him the perfect leader during the civil war.
- He saw the possibility of the North losing when others in the military and government were overconfident and did what he could to change this course of events
- He was resigned to whatever outcome might be and to the likelihood of his assassination, given the strong passions on the other side

Hope in the Face of Tragedy

- Recognized the brutal reality of his day and of life in general
 - Death, illness, suffering, inhumanity
- Saw the inevitability of failure in his and others' endeavors
- Believed in life as fated
- And still strove to improve himself, his condition, the lives of others and the world

Depressive Realism

- Applying this strategy to clinical work:
 - Help people face the brutal truth and hard reality of their current situations
 - Help them also make efforts to change those current conditions with their efforts
 - Help them accept the things that are out of their control

The Lincoln Strategies:



Summary

- Include opposites
- Find meaning and purpose in life
- Make positive social connections
- Use humor and storytelling
- Use depressive realism (with hard work and hope to make change)