

# The Lincoln Strategy:

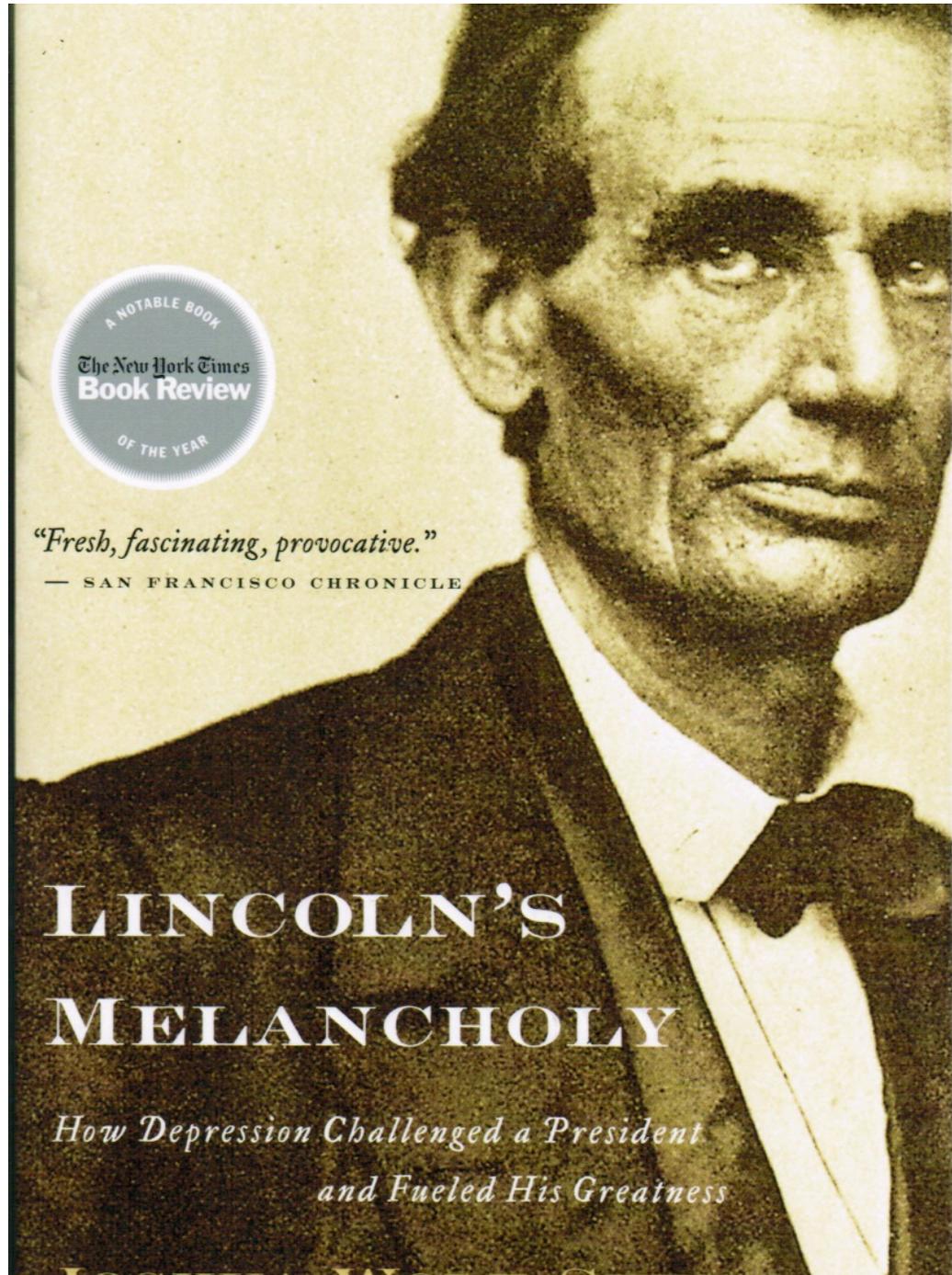
Practical lessons about effectively dealing with depression, suicidality and suffering from a great leader who suffered



Bill O'Hanlon

[www.billohanlon.com](http://www.billohanlon.com)

# LINCOLN'S MELANCHOLY



*"Fresh, fascinating, provocative."*

— SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

## LINCOLN'S MELANCHOLY

*How Depression Challenged a President  
and Fueled His Greatness*

Joseph W. ...

# Lincoln's Melancholy

now the most miserable man living. If what I  
were equally distributed to the whole human  
race, there would not be one cheerful face on  
the globe. Whether I shall ever be better I cannot  
say. I only forbode I shall not. To remain as I am is  
impossible; I must die or be better, it appears to

# LINCOLN'S MENTAL ILLNESS

Lincoln went crazy—had to remove razors from his room, all knives and dangerous things, etc. It was terrible.” —Lincoln’s best friend, Joshua Speed, on Lincoln’s second manic depressive episode

man. He is reduced and emaciated in appearance and 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

# 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  
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  
gloomy nor humorous, but simply was in a pleasant mood—i.e.  
was not in a gloomy nor a mirthful fit—was kindly  
thoughtful, not serious ever—a state of thought and feeling  
being united for a moment . . . This last state was rare

in duration. Lincoln was a curious, mysterious, and

# 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 in his cabinet. Dolores Kearns Goodwin has called this a “team of rivals.”

Some of them hated and disrespected Lincoln and vented their anger about their own defeats. These competitors who had originally disdained Lincoln came to admire and respect Lincoln. One of them, Bates, coming to view Lincoln as an unmatched leader, “very near being a perfect man.” Another, Stanton, cried uncontrollably for weeks.

# 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 "press himself upon them as to link his name with something that would redound to the benefit of his fellow man." This was no mere ambition, Lincoln said, but what he "desired to live for."

# Purpose/Meaning

Applying this strategy to clinical work:

Find the driving energy for the client

- Blissed, 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

# 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

17

his loyal friendships led to his being nominated for Republican presidential candidate when he was the underdog

# Social Connections

John was invariably the center of attention [in social gatherings]. No one could equal his never-ending stories nor his ability to reproduce them with such religious mirth. As his winding tales became more famous, crowds of villagers awaited his arrival at every [on the court circuit] for the chance to hear the great storyteller. Everywhere he went, he won devotees, friendships that later emboldened his quest for more." (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.

# and empathy

Fanny

With deep grief that I learn of the death of your kind and  
r; and, especially, that it is affecting your young heart be  
s common in such cases. In this sad world of ours, sor  
s to all; and, to the young, it comes with bitterest agon  
se it takes them unawares. The older have learned to e  
t it. I am anxious to afford some alleviation of your pre  
ss. Perfect relief is not possible, except with time. You  
ow realize that you will ever feel better. Is this not so?  
is a mistake. You are sure to be happy again. To know  
is certainly true, will make you some less miserable no

# of social connections

ntless studies document the link between society and  
he: people who have close friends and confidants, frien  
highbors, and supportive co-workers are less likely to  
erience sadness, loneliness, low self-esteem, and proble  
eating and sleeping.

single most common finding from a half century's rese  
he correlates of life satisfaction, not only in the United  
around the world, is that happiness is best predicted b  
dth and depth of one's social connections.

m, Robert D. (2000). **Bowling Alone: The collapse**

of social connections

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

nja Lyubomirsky, researcher at UC-Riverside, a  
**the How of Happiness**

of social connections  
ing with someone else during an  
thquake is protective against  
SD.

enian, H. et. Al. (2000). "Loss as a determinant  
D) in a cohort of adult survivors of the 1998  
quake in Armenia: Implications for policy," *Acta  
iatr. Scand.*, 102(1):58-64.

of social connections  
post-traumatic stress disorder  
benefiters in group treatment  
covered at a significantly higher  
rate (88.3%) than those in individual  
treatment (31.3%).

... J. et.al. (2009). "Group Cognitive Behavior Therapy for  
Chronic Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: An Initial

# of social connections

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

as-Diener, R. and Diener, E. (2001). "Making the  
of a bad situation: Satisfaction in the slums of

of social connections  
people with five or more close  
friends (excluding family members  
50% more likely to describe  
themselves as “very happy” than  
respondents with fewer.

# 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 critics: "If I were two-faced, would I be ashamed?"

# 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.'" —

# 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 effort  
to prevent them; he also expressed great compassion  
for people's, even his enemy's, suffering

He thought everything was pre-determined or f

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

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 go and they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would go and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then Thanksgiving would go and then Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.

Collins: That's a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith with a belief that good will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose. There's always the need for discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

Depressive Realism and

# Fatalism

his, 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 the course of events

He was resigned to whatever outcome might be the likelihood of his assassination, given the st

# 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 conditions

# 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

# Lincoln Strategies: Summary



Include opposites

Find meaning and purpose in life

Make positive social connections

Use humor and storytelling

depressive realism (with hard work and h  
to make change)