

Recently, Cavs guard Delonte West took the bold step of sitting down in front of reporters and coming clean about why he had been absent from the team for nearly two weeks. Delonte is battling bouts of depression, an issue that hit home with our phenomenal columnist Erik Cassano. In this excellent piece, Erik talks about Delonte, and talks about dealing with anxiety and depression, a fight he has also personally waged.



"I am an island."

This is what depression does to you.

Depression isolates you. No matter what kind of support system you have in place, how many family members and friends would do anything to help you, the feeling of isolation, the feeling that no one on Earth understands you, understands your problems, that's the constant, bitter taste in your mouth. You feel like you're alone. Sometimes you wonder if the fight's even worth fighting.

At least that's the way it has been for me.

I'm 29, and I've dealt with depression and anxiety in many forms since as far back as I can remember. So when Cavs guard Delonte West took the bold step of sitting down in front of reporters and coming clean about why he had been absent from the team for nearly two weeks, I figured it was time for me to do the same.

I've never been diagnosed as clinically depressed. I've never had my specific set of symptoms neatly packaged into a condition with a name. As I've come to realize over the young-adult years of my life, I'm like a lot of people dealing with emotional issues. That is to say, I have a mish-mash of symptoms, some of which come and go, some of them which might need treatment, some of which might simply be traits of my personality.

Depression is messy and confusing like that. You don't know what part of yourself to fight, and what part to accept. If you're quiet and tend to keep to yourself in large social gatherings, is it a symptom, or just the way you are? After all, the world is full of people who exist all across the personality spectrum. Some are outgoing and jovial. Some are introverted. Just because you're quiet and don't work the room like a politician doesn't necessarily mean there is something wrong with you.

Still, when you feel like the only introvert in a room of outgoing extroverts who are being outgoing and extroverted toward each other, and ignoring you because you're not interacting like they are, it just makes you feel all the more isolated. Which makes you feel even more worthless, which makes you feel even more depressed. It becomes a snowball effect.

The self-loathing and feeling of worthlessness leads to anger. You might not even realize that's what's triggering your anger, but it literally feels like a weight making your head sink and shoulders slump, pulling down your eyebrows and the corners of your mouth.

For Delonte, his anger manifested itself in a verbal altercation he had with a high-school referee who was officiating a Cavs intrasquad scrimmage several weeks ago. Whether the ref deserved Delonte's anger is not the point -- it's that whatever occurred between the ref and Delonte served as a trigger for Delonte to act out.

It's perhaps one of the least-recognized symptoms of depression among the general population. The popular image of depression is a person who is lethargic, is frequently sad, and maybe has thoughts of self-harm or suicide in extreme

cases. But depression affects your temper.

Anger affects different people in different ways. Delonte took it out on someone else. I quietly seethed at perceived slights -- someone passing me on the freeway even though I'm doing five miles per hour over the speed limit, getting honked at in traffic, a total stranger failing to hold the door for me even though I'm five steps behind.

None of it should dampen my day. But to me, it meant "You're too slow," "You're a lousy driver" and "You aren't worth waiting the extra three seconds to hold the door."

Depression does that, too. It whispers in your ear. Not in the crazy, hearing-voices sense, but in the sense that you believe the things that happen to you every day are all somehow negative reflections on you as a person, reinforcing the belief that you're right to feel like you are worthless.

With all the misery that depression and anxiety-related disorders can inflict on the sufferer and those who are close, it should seem amazing if someone doesn't seek treatment. Yet many -- probably a majority -- don't seek treatment. Some don't have the means. Some are ashamed to admit they have a disorder. Some aren't even aware they can be treated.

That's why Delonte West's story needs to be told. It's not that his story is unique or remarkable among the countless others who suffer from depression, it's that he was willing to seek treatment, then candidly discuss his battle upon returning to the spotlight.

In the macho world of professional sports, where admitting you need help can be like admitting weakness, it was an especially bold move. The fact that Delonte is a high-profile athlete helps shed some much-needed light on a group of disorders that plagues more people every year, many of whom keep their suffering in silence.

Whether chronic depression and anxiety can be definitely cured is up for debate, but it can be controlled with counseling and medication. It's not always an easy, cause-and-effect treatment, like setting a broken bone. It might take some work to find the treatment options that best suit your case, but I can attest that treatment does work if you stick with it. It's not a magic bullet, but it can improve your quality

of life.

Out of all the ways Delonte can use his pedestal as an NBA player to positively affect his community, his biggest contribution might have been as simple as the act of raising his hand and admitting he is a person who suffers from depression, then doing something about it.

We can only hope that many others follow his example.