

It took a lot of convincing, but I finally do believe that depression is a biological disorder. I reached this conclusion during a particularly nasty bout with my own illness. Once again, I wanted to die. My depression was back, but this time it felt truly hopeless. I'd been fighting it for more than 20 years, and I was doing all the things you're supposed to do: anti-depressants, cognitive-behavioral therapy, exercising, you name it. But I still had a meltdown. I had thought I had it licked. What a joke. Death looked so attractive. I've long thought dying sounded easy—it's living that's hard. But while suicide might end my suffering, it would create suffering for those I love most. I couldn't do it. So I sought more help. The experts have told us for some time that depression is a biological disorder, but I wasn't sure I believed it. I felt I was weak, immature, a coward, incompetent. That most of all—incompetent. But in surfing the Web for answers, I found an interview with a prominent psychiatrist and academic. He described what they've learned by studying the brains of depressed people. It seems that the part of the brain that is supposed to regulate stress hormones is too small in these people. And, as that part of the brain becomes overwhelmed, it leads to the release of even more stress hormones. It's like a stuck switch, the doctor said. This made perfect sense to me, because when I have one of my "meltdowns," I feel so much stress that I can't possibly act rationally. No amount of "positive self-talk" can stop the chemical assault going on in my brain. I finally began to believe that this illness really isn't my fault. Unfortunately, I also believe that publicly sharing my experience—as I'm doing right now—could jeopardize my career and some of my relationships. I mean, how wise is it to go on the radio and say, "I'm mentally ill?" But if I—an intelligent, well-informed woman who's even married to a psychiatrist—if I was still skeptical about whether this illness has a biological basis, what must others think? Those of us who struggle with mental illness must not be shamed into silence. We must reach out to others to say, "It's not your fault. And there are many things that can help." I'm living proof. An increase in the dosage of my anti-depressant has been very beneficial, and I know that cognitive therapy will continue to help as well. But I've also learned that if those don't work in the future, there are numerous other therapies we haven't tried yet. So even though I know my demons will return someday, I believe there is still reason for hope. I also believe none of us is alone in this battle. We can reach out to others and live—one breath at a time.