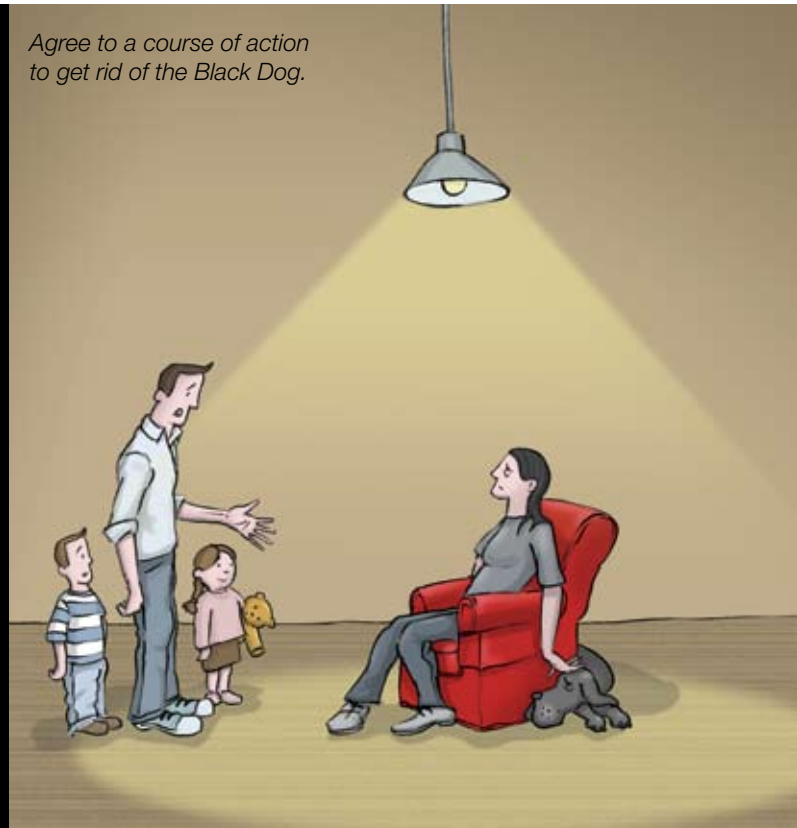


# Taking on **the**

Living with someone who suffers from 'the black dog', as Winston Churchill famously dubbed depression, isn't always easy. So *Kate Johnston* was delighted to discover a new book in which words and pictures combine to offer a wealth of understanding and advice.

Agree to a course of action to get rid of the Black Dog.



Somewhere on every page of Matthew and Ainsley Johnstone's illustrated book, *Living with a Black Dog*, you'll find a picture of the same sombre creature. Whether the dog is lying under the bed or doing its business on someone's shoe, its presence says a number of things: that the black dog is a reality and a part of everyday life; that it is sometimes in the centre but often fades into the background; and, importantly, that the black dog is somehow separate from the sufferer.

This last point is vital to helping loved ones manage the emotional roller coaster that is depression, says Ainsley. "When someone you love is in a bad

place, you have to remind yourself it's the depression, not the person," she says. "It's also important to not take their behaviour personally."

**The book approaches such classic mistakes as pointing out that there are others worse off or how lovely the weather is.**

The Johnstones decided to tackle this subject after Matthew's book about

suffering depression, *I Had a Black Dog*, received an overwhelming response. Like its predecessor, the new book has at its centre Matthew's wonderful illustrations and employs an engaging simplicity to cut through a complex issue with practical advice and gentle humour.

Ainsley spoke to others in her situation about their experiences, and discovered how similar they were to her own. "It's hard to see someone you love in pain," says Ainsley. "When Matthew was first diagnosed about 10 years ago, I had no idea about depression. I just knew it was something we would have to face together.

"I remember when we were living in New York. We had this wonderful life,

# black dog



IMAGES: MATTHEW JOHNSTONE

wonderful friends – and Matthew had a long list of what was wrong. I couldn't believe it – to me our life was so great. Then I thought, 'Hang on, this is the depression. I'm not buying into this.'"

Since then, Ainsley has learned much about what depression is, how it manifests and how to make sure her own life doesn't always revolve around that black dog lurking in the corner. Time and again communication comes up as a way through the dark times – and Ainsley believes open discussion can be much easier with an objective person present.

"Seeing a doctor together helps get things off your chest," says Ainsley. "You can acknowledge feelings you may not have

been able to. You don't really want to say, 'I hate this' – you want to be supportive. You have to find a way to express how you feel without making the other person feel guilty for making you feel bad."

Ainsley hopes that the book can help others open the lines of communication in a non-confronting way. "Sometimes pictures can express more than words," she says. "Some things are tough to approach but people can easily point to a picture and say, 'As a caregiver, I feel like that person'."

One of the biggest frustrations is not knowing what to do. The book is full of practical suggestions. "Even cooking a healthy meal or going for walk together can shift the mood," says Ainsley.

Equally important is what *not* to do. Using humour, the book approaches such classic mistakes as pointing out that there are others worse off or how lovely the weather is. And with time and lots of listening, says Ainsley, you'll both begin to recognise when the black dog is sniffing around.

"I remember once when Matthew was in a bad place. He was talking to me – and it clicked! He was saying exactly the same things every time he got depressed but it was like it was the first time he'd experienced it. I told him he'd said it all before but he had no idea. These days he's very good at knowing his own triggers, such as stress and lack of sleep. And I can sort of smell it coming."

Clearly, the book has been written from a genuine desire to help. "When our family members first read it they were screaming with laughter," says Ainsley. "I thought, 'Is that the reaction we want?' But I think it is important to laugh at serious things. We're proud of the book and hope people get a lot out of it." **YL**

## → MORE

*Living with a Black Dog*  
by Matthew and Ainsley Johnstone,  
Pan Macmillan 2008, RRP \$19.95.

*I Had a Black Dog*  
by Matthew Johnstone, Pan  
Macmillan 2005, RRP \$16.95.  
Web [www.ihadablackdog.com](http://www.ihadablackdog.com)

Other useful websites:  
[www.blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au)  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)  
[www.arafmi.org](http://www.arafmi.org)  
[www.justask.org.au](http://www.justask.org.au)  
[www.depressionet.com.au](http://www.depressionet.com.au)