

how Lillian beat depression



She has been on our TV screens for years, from *Generations* to *Soul City*, and now *Mponeng* on SABC 2. But behind the jokes lies a secret that Lillian Dube took years to tell. Here, we talk to the TV veteran about her battle with depression, and how she beat it.

Text by Marion Scher

From the moment you enter Lillian Dube's Windsor East home, you're wrapped in warmth. And it's not just the tasteful décor, soft leather couches and walls lined in African art, but Lillian herself. The room, however, does reflect this well-loved actress's hectic life with a piano against one wall, computer squeezed into a corner and, tucked away on the far side of the room, a table loaded with awards and trophies, such as the magnificent SABC1 Duku Duku Trophy for her work on *Soul City*. Next to this stands the Theatre Guild's Lifetime Achiever's Award. "I thought you had to be dead to get that," laughs Lillian. In fact laughter is an integral part of Lillian's life. "Well, where would we be without it?" she adds, still chuckling.

She's rushed in for our interview, worried about being late. Yesterday had been taken up with shooting the latest *Soul City* episode, where Lillian plays Sister Bettina Khumalo, the no-nonsense clinic director, whose mission in life is to help nurse and educate people on issues from HIV/AIDS to cervical cancer and abuse of women. In between her television career she's managed to squeeze in nine movies, including *Cry the Beloved Country* and *Country of my Skull*. But her heart is firmly in theatre. "Unfortunately, you have to pay the bills and, although nothing thrills me as much as being on stage, theatre in this country isn't able to pay well."

But I'm not really here to talk about Lillian's distinguished stage, film and television career, but an issue that Lillian has chosen to talk about whenever she gets a chance – depression, an illness that she knows only too well.

"Looking back, I suppose my depression was almost always there, although of course, I didn't know what it was called then. Unfortunately, my parents, through illness were unable to raise

me, so I went to live with my paternal grandmother who..., well, let's just say it wasn't so easy. Basically I had a miserable childhood and left school without a matric, which narrowed my job choices considerably. Plus the fact that I didn't have a 'dompas', as I'd grown up in Lesotho...

"Add apartheid to this and it meant my becoming a domestic worker. I remember so clearly seeing the 'madam' go off to work at a clothing store each day and thinking, 'I could do that easily and I will.'" Being Lillian, that was just what she did and within a few years found herself working for a store in downtown Johannesburg. But it was only when her son saw a newspaper advertisement for television auditions that her life really changed. "My son said, 'Mum, I really think you should go along – you'd be great on television.'" And the rest, they say is history – well, at least on her career side.

What wasn't so easy to overcome was the painful depression that dogged Lillian every step of the way. "There were so many times when I literally had to force myself to even lift my head off the pillow. And the more miserable I was, the more I sought solace from the bottle. That took away the pain – but only for a very short time. The next morning I'd wake up feeling far worse than before."

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"I used to find myself weeping uncontrollably for no reason that I could even think of. And often what was really strange was that in serious situations, such as funerals, I'd find myself laughing – again for no reason. In those days, depression wasn't recognised – certainly not in the black community. You stayed in bed; you were simply classed as lazy. This went against what I had always believed in – that poverty was self-made and that I could have a better life – it was there for the taking. All I had to do was work hard and I wasn't afraid of that, but the depression kept stopping me in my tracks."

What didn't help was marriage to an alcoholic, which Lillian stuck out for 10 years.

"I desperately wanted to get divorced. But in those days you were considered a failure if you were divorced – even your friends didn't want to know you. I sank to rock bottom; I even thought if killing myself wouldn't be so painful I would try that. Somehow, I'd thought being married had given me security..."

It wasn't until Lillian, in her role as Sister Khumalo, had to tackle the subject of depression in *Soul City* did she have her "light bulb" moment. "I suddenly realised I had all the symptoms they were talking about on the show. I realised then that I'd been so very ill and nobody had done anything

about it. The few times I had been to a doctor and complained I was given Panado for my illness. But when you go to the doctor you don't say 'I'm depressed' because you don't know what's wrong with you!"

Eventually Lillian was given tranquilisers, which although calmed her down, left her groggy. "Right then I thought that knowing what the depression was meant I'd find out all I could about it and beat it." And in true Lillian style that's just what she's done.

"These days I take control of my problems and make sure I surround myself with positive people. You have to believe in someone or something. My church means everything to me and has given me so much strength. Sometimes I listen to other people's stories there and realise just how lucky I am and how much God has given me. How can I not be thankful?"

"Depression makes you feel you are worthless and you have to find ways of reinforcing just how worthwhile you are. I am so busy with my acting and my casting agency that I don't have time to get depressed."

Lillian also works with the South African Depression and Anxiety Support Group, endorsing the work that they do on depression. She recently narrated one of their talking books – *Books of Hope* – that are distributed to communities where literacy is a problem. So what made her go public with her illness? "My life is an open book. I once lied that I had my matric when I applied for a job. I'd even convinced myself to the point where I spent hours looking for my matric certificate," she says roaring with laughter at the memory. "I even believed my own lie – I swore I'd never do that again. And by my 'coming out' about my depression, perhaps I can help other people change their lives and find ways of coping with their lives. The most important point, of course, is going to see a doctor and telling him about your symptoms"* (see box below).

And ask Lillian about her two grandchildren and the new man in her life and you'll see those famous eyes sparkle and her whole face light up. "If you can survive depression you can only become a better person," she says.

SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

- Persistent sad, anxious or "empty" mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed, including sex
- Decreased energy; fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering and making decisions
- Insomnia, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- Restlessness, irritability
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts