Beating depression without drugs

A healthier lifestyle could banish the blues, says a new book

BY **JAKE WALLIS SIMONS**
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Steve Ilardi is slim and enthusiastic, with intense eyes. The clinical psychologist is 7,000km from me, in Kansas, and we are chatting about his new book via Skype, the online videophone service. "I've spent a lot of time pondering Skype," he says. "On the one hand it provides a degree of social connectedness. On the other, you're still essentially by yourself." But, he concludes, "a large part of the human cortex is devoted to the processing of visual information, so I guess Skype is less alienating than voice calls."

Social connectedness is important to Ilardi. In *The Depression Cure*, he argues that the brain mistakenly interprets the pain of depression as an infection. Thinking that isolation is needed, it sends messages to the sufferer to "crawl into a hole and wait for it all to go away." This can be disastrous because what depressed people really need is the opposite: more human contact.

Which is why social connectedness forms one-sixth of his "lifestyle based" cure for depression. The other five elements are meaningful activity (to prevent "ruminating" on negative thoughts); regular exercise; a diet rich in omega-3 fatty acids; daily exposure to sunlight; and good-quality, restorative sleep.

The program has one glaring omission: anti-depressant medication. Because according to Ilardi, the drugs simply don't work. "Meds have only around a 50 percent success rate," he says. "Moreover, of the people who do improve, half experience a relapse. This lowers the recovery rate to only 25 percent. To make matters worse, the side effects often include emotional numbing, sexual dysfunction and weight gain."

As a respected clinical psychologist and university professor, Ilardi's views are hard to dismiss. A research team at his workplace, the University of Kansas, has been testing his system — known as TLC (Therapeutic Lifestyle Change) — in clinical trials. The preliminary results show, he says, that every patient who put the full program into practice got better.

Ilardi is convinced that the medical profession's readiness to prescribe anti-depression medication is obscuring an important debate. Up to 20 percent of the UK population will have clinical depression at some point, he says — twice as many as 30 years ago. Where has this depression epidemic come from?

The answer, he suggests, lies in our lifestyle. "Our standard of living is better now than ever before, but technological progress comes with a dark underbelly. Human beings were not designed for this poorly nourished, sedentary, indoor, sleep-deprived, socially isolated, frenzied pace of life. So depression continues its relentless march."

Our environment may have evolved rapidly but our physical evolution hasn't kept up. "Our genome hasn't moved on since 12,000 years ago, when everyone on the planet were hunter-gatherers," he says. "Biologically, we still have Stone Age bodies. And when Stone Age body meets modern environment, the health consequences can be disastrous."

To counteract this Ilardi focuses on the aspects of a primitive lifestyle that militate against depression. "Hunter-gatherer tribes still exist today in some parts of the world," he says, "and their level of depression is almost zero. The reasons? They're too busy to sit around brooding. They get lots of physical activity and sunlight. Their diet is rich in omega-3, their level of social connection is extraordinary, and they regularly have as much as 10 hours of sleep." Ten hours? "We need eight. At the moment we average 6.7."

So we should all burn our possessions and head out into the forest? "Of course not," Iladi shudders. "That would be like a lifelong camping trip with 30 close relatives for company. Nobody would recommend that."

Instead we can adapt our modern lifestyle to match our genome by harnessing modern technology, such as fish oil supplements to increase our intake of omega-3. All well and good. But I can't escape the feeling that the six-step program seems like common sense. Isn't it obvious that more sleep, exercise and social connectedness are good for you?

"The devil is in the detail," replies Ilardi. "People need to know how much sunlight is most effective, and at which time of day. And taking supplements, for example, is a complex business. You need anti-oxidants to ensure that the fish oil is effective, as well as a multivitamin. Without someone spelling it out, most people would never do it." Ilardi practices the program himself. He's never been depressed, he tells me, but it increases his sense of well-being and reduces his absentmindedness (his college nickname was "Spaced").

It all makes sense, but will I try it myself? I don't suffer from depression, but well-being sounds nice. I'm not so sure about the fish oil, but I might just give it a go.

Top tips to beat depression

- Take 1,500mg of omega-3 daily (in the form of fish oil capsules), with a multivitamin and 500mg vitamin C
- Don't dwell on negative thoughts — instead of ruminating start an activity; even conversation counts
- Exercise for 90 minutes a week
- Get 15 to 30 minutes of sunlight each morning in the summer. In the winter, consider using a lightbox
- Be sociable
- Get eight hours of sleep

SOURCE: THE GUARDIAN

A rolling

CONTINUED FROM P13

There is a father and son at the heart of the first Wall Street, as there is in much of Stone's work. It's a relationship that has clearly preoccupied him. But Lou Stone was perhaps not your standard, uptight New York stockbroker: he paid for Stone to lose his virginity to a prostitute at the age of 16. Stone has raised two sons himself now — Sean, 26, and Michael, 18. Has that made him see his father differently?

"Sure, but even before I had my sons, I was very father-oriented. He was a very powerful man. But you must remember my mother was very powerful too."

Ah yes, his mother. Jacqueline Goddet met Lou Stone when he was working as an aide to Eisenhower. She does sound like an extraordinary character, I say. "She still is — she's 88 and a party animal. She loves people and they love her. She called me the other night and she'd been out on the 4th of July weekend until two in the morning."

Perhaps Stone's greatest exploration of his relationship with his mother is in his novel, *A Child's Night Dream*. He started writing it when he was 17 and returned to it at 50, a period that he refers to as his midlife crisis. "I'd been criticized and loved, and criticized and loved, I mean, really, extremely ... *Nixon* had just come out and had flopped. And I loved *Nixon*. I thought it was one of my more mature works and it had not been well received. But it didn't matter. I returned to the book. I knew that it would never have a big circulation, but it mattered to me and I got it out. I just stopped making films for two years and basically did that. I'd lost my way and I felt like the book was putting me back."

Was writing the novel a way of reckoning with the past and in particular with his mother? After all, there is a character called Oliver Stone who is sexually obsessed with his mother ... "Yeah, well, there were two Stones, William and Oliver; they were two sides to me.

Oliver Stone says his relationship with his mother was "a classic Freudian case." PHOTO: AFP

But, yes that's correct. There was no incest, but my mother was very French and very free. It wasn't a big deal to walk around naked in the house and stuff like that."

I tell him about an extraordinary quote I found from a few years ago, when his mother said: "Oliver didn't just love me. He was in love with me."

"Is that right?" he says. "Ha, ha, ha. Well, she was a great tease. If that's the case, it's a classic Freudian case, the frustrations of an Oedipus complex. The son wants the mother but never gets her because she's the first woman in his life."

Does the Freudian explanation make sense to him? "Absolutely. Your mother's body is the first thing you know and, frankly, it's very attractive and it turns you on. But you don't know what to do about that so it's a tremendous puzzle."

Usually, when an interviewer discovers something interesting about a subject, it's repeated in every article thereafter, but I find only one piece from the mid-1990s, an interview with his ex-wife Elizabeth Stone, in which she claims that it was his mother who initiated him sexually. She says that Jacqueline had told her: "He couldn't relax and I had to show him."

"It's not clear," the interviewer goes on, "from detailed interviews with Elizabeth, Oliver and his mother, Jacqueline, what actually occurred. Elizabeth claims that Jacqueline Stone touched her teenage son's genitals and masturbated him. Jacqueline heatedly denies it."

So, I ask him straight out: did his mother teach him how to masturbate?

"Well, I can't live with denial — sure."

She physically showed him?

"It was no big deal. It's not English. It's French. It was no big deal. I wasn't attracted to her, you have to understand. After a certain point, I grew up and I moved on. And I've had successful relations — with everybody!"

He says this as a joke, but it's also true. He is a self-confessed womanizer. Elizabeth, his second wife, (his first, Najwa Sarkis, was Lebanese) is said to have left him after having finally run out of patience with his extramarital dalliances. "It's on the record," says Stone. "And I don't like to lie. That's bullshit. It's not a big deal ... I'm not running for office."

The Asian mentality is very different, he says, from the Anglo-Saxon one. "That's why I loved Asia when I was young. When I went over there, it was a revelation. I could never quite come back. I always had difficulties readjusting to the Anglo-Saxon mentality with women."

It is why his third wife, Sun-jung Jung, understands him, he says. "She's cool. She's Korean. Different mentality. Mutual respect ... she laughs and trills and she sings when she speaks. I love the sound of her voice."

Their daughter, Tara, is 14. "She's part of that new generation, Asian-American. We're really going through it now. I mean, she's 14 — she does respect me but she does give me a hard time. But it's fun. She's smart. We go to the movies. She loves talking about movies."

Has having a daughter changed his attitude to women? "Yes it has. It's harder to be blind. Sometimes, you have to be blind to jump into some of these things, but when you see your daughter in some of these women ... you see the human side more clearly than before."

I wonder aloud whether his relationship with his daughter will inform his female characters. His films have always seemed to me to be explorations of masculinity, of male relationships, in one form or another, but then his world, for years, was male. He was an only child and incarcerated for years in an all-male boarding school, before going to an all-male Yale. Discovering women in Vietnam, he says, he felt like Gauguin in the South Seas. "They were these ripe fruits."

He starts reciting his female characters, finishing with Olympias, Alexander's mother. It is abundantly clear from everything he says that *Alexander* was the project of his life. "It was. That's why I went back three years later and did a third version of it. If you could ever see it — it's the right version of it. The editing was rushed ... I was never able to ... frankly it's a complicated vision and I'm fighting to get it recirculated. In England, there is a release of it, but it's very little known because it was so slagged at the time. It was very painful to me."

Of all the films, it's his most autobiographical, he says. That's a strange statement given that its subject concerns the greatest emperor who ever lived, but then he is also the vulnerable son of all-powerful parents. He first dreamed of making it as a film student, he says, and it was during that midlife period of reflection that he came back to it again.

"I remember feeling like I had lost my way. The book was important and so was *Alexander*. I do think that what you are when you're young ... that you must stay faithful to something in there."

This is one of his core beliefs. His teenage years are still the crucible of Oliver Stoneness on which he draws. They were so extreme, in almost every way. From the emotional barrenness of boarding school ("For years, I thought it was a disaster; it had taken the love out of my life; there was no sense of humanity"), those odd experiences with his parents and sexuality, through the privilege of Yale and finally, apocalyptically, Vietnam. You really don't need to be a Freudian to read something into this. Elizabeth Stone has put it more bluntly: "That little boy didn't stand any chance of a normal sort of life."

He's gone through various stages of taking drugs, mostly psychedelic ones. "Heavy trips," he calls them — in Stone there's a small part of the 1960s that never died. He tells me about being "frightened to death" on one of them. So why did he do it? "Because of the adventure."

Ah yes. The adventure. That other Stone hallmark. His cousin James says that Stone went to war because "anything he could do to be at the edge, and to experience more than other people had experienced, and to shock, he was likely to do."

Even now, there seems to be no letting up. There still seems to be this lust for experience, as evidenced by *South of the Border*. At an age where most men might start thinking about golf, Stone is chasing socialists across South America.

He's as committed as he ever has been, if not more so. Politically, workaholically. There's still a relentless drive to work, work, work. It's coming up to 9pm by the time I leave his office and nobody seems to be making a move to go home. His film editor has been waiting patiently for him in the room next door, ready to attack yet another section of *Oliver Stone's Secret History of America*. There's another documentary on Castro to come — the third part of his trilogy. There are the final edits on *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*. And then there's *South of the Border* to launch in London. And defend from attacks all over again.

I fear for *Oliver Stone's Secret History of America*. If his ambition occasionally exceeds his talent, it's not because his talent is small, but that his ambition is so very, very large. The *Alexander* comparison is really not as far-fetched as it might seem: he really is trying to remold the world according to his vision. Watch out, world.