

## **To Keep Her Breathing: A Novella Exploring How Long-Term Depression Affects Women's Health**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This creative thesis incorporates a cyberpunk dystopian narrative to study the effects of long-term depression on women's physical health by showing the connection between psychological stress and physical decline. It highlights the often-overlooked reality that untreated stress can manifest as chronic pain, sleep disturbance, and cardiovascular issues. These ideas will be developed into a cyberpunk dystopian novella supported by Slavich and Irwin's Inflammation Theory of Depression (2014) and the concept of Socio-economic Marginalization by Hall and Carlson (2016). The narrative mainly focuses on Li, a woman who suffered from depression throughout her life because of childhood trauma and continuous emotional abuse. As her mental health deteriorates, she experiences migraines, insomnia, and hypertension. Throughout the narrative, Li is offered the opportunity to get better using psychological treatment and stress-reducing practices like meditation. Her journey provides a reminder that recovery is possible by facing trauma, taking back control, and gradually coming to terms with her condition to improve her health and self-worth.

**Keywords:** cyberpunk, depression, inflammation, novella, women's health

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is easy to overlook how depression, especially when it's long-term and untreated, can seriously affect women's physical health. Although depression is often seen as a common or even overused topic, I believe it still needs to be discussed, especially because, when it comes to women's health, most conversations end up focusing just on nutrition and diet. Public health discourse frequently attributes poor eating habits as the main reason women get sick. For example, the National Library of Medicine points out that eating patterns majorly contribute to disease (Przybyłowicz & Danielewicz, 2022). The Office on Women's Health also highlights that making healthier food and drink choices can help prevent or manage many health problems in women (Office on Women's Health, 2019).

While the emphasis on diet is not incorrect, it has the unintended consequence of disregarding other significant causative factors such as chronic stress and emotional pressure, factors which are less obvious but not necessarily less harmful to women's health. When all the attention is on nutrition, it is easy to miss other causes, like stress or emotional pressure, which are often harder to see but just as harmful. Sometimes, women do everything "right" with their diet, but their health does not improve, and that can be really confusing. One of the cases that stood out regarding this is Arianna Huffington's. She is a well-known journalist who collapsed from exhaustion caused by extreme stress, even though she lived what seemed like a healthy life.

That said, while depression can affect anyone at any age, I choose to focus on its occurrence in women for specific and compelling reasons. The first one is because women present with episodes of depression associated with reproductive events (i.e., premenstrual, postpartum, menopausal transition), in part because of a heightened sensitivity to intense hormonal fluctuations (Soares & Zitek, 2008). The second one is that women suffer from depression two times more than men because a part of the brain called the ventral striatum, which is responsible for reward, pleasure, and motivation, only decreases in women (Jenihansen, 2022). The third one is that depression in women is more difficult

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and complicated to treat than in men (Crompton, 2019).

Given the weight of these issues, I have chosen the cyberpunk subgenre of science fiction because it amplifies themes of inequality, systemic oppression, and emotional isolation that directly contributes to long-term depression. The National Library of Medicine reports that systemic oppression is linked to poor mental health outcomes. Studies consistently link poverty and lower socioeconomic status (SES) with increased vulnerability to negative physical and mental health conditions, including schizophrenia, major depression, panic and phobic disorders, as well as antisocial personality disorder (Berk et al., 2013).

Today, individuals are faced with increasing issues of automation of jobs, economic instability, and inaccessibility to mental health care (Parthsarathi et al., 2024). Social isolation and heightened stress levels may be a result of heightened urbanization and greater dependency on digital technology (Pass, 2024). Cyberpunk's dystopian circumstances reflect such contemporary challenges, presenting a hypothetical but perceptive examination of their long-term impacts on psychological and physical health (Li, 2022).

To bring all these ideas into narrative form, the story revolves around Li, a woman who struggles with lifelong depression, who explores a cyberpunk world plagued by crime, corruption, and poverty, together with Seven, a humanoid robot who lives alongside her. The story follows Li's journey, exploring the devastating effects of long-term depression on a woman's physical health in a dystopian world.

## **CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK**

### **Theme**

The creative work emphasizes how long-term depression, particularly if left untreated, can lead to serious physical health problems among women. It emphasizes the often-overlooked connection between psychological distress and its physical manifestations. Through this perspective of connection, the narrative illustrates how issues related to mental health can subtly affect body functions and overall health. Through the main character's experience, the narrative encourages readers to become aware of the importance of early identification of depressive symptoms. The narrative also highlights the importance of intervention and appropriate treatment in preventing further physical deterioration among women.

### **Plot**

As the prologue, the story opens in Zone D, which has poverty, rundown infrastructure, poor resources, and crime. Li is a poor girl who is neglected by her abusive and alcoholic father. She lives under constant struggle. It is during a night of rain that she encounters Seven, a discarded army robot who narrowly avoided being destroyed by Eon Haven. Malfunction allows Seven to go beyond his design, allowing him to understand Li. As Li grows up, Seven takes on a care role that her father has neglected. Seven's analytical skills, originally meant for analyzing the military, reveal Li's decline into poor health due to chronic depression because of childhood traumatization. Chronic stress leads to severe physical conditions like migraines, insomnia, and cardiovascular complications. Lack of proper access to medical services in Zone D exacerbates her condition over time. Over time, Li becomes aware of her critical state and the temporary relief provided by cybernetic alterations. Li resolves to confront the inequality directly by planning a daring break-in to access life-saving technology in Eon Haven's elite medical facility. Seven reluctantly support Li's plan, knowing it risks both their lives.

The rising action peaks as they infiltrate the highly secure medical center at Eon Haven, vividly highlighting the socioeconomic divide between Zone D and Eon Haven. Li faces fierce opposition from guards, known as the Forcers. The climax is attained when there is a last face-off,

with Li desperate and physically drained, needing to overcome and defeat Sawyer, an antagonist of the repressive regime of Eon Haven. The falling action shows when Li successfully acquires the medical treatment and escapes with Seven back to Zone D. Their victory, however, comes at the cost of Sawyer's death, symbolizing a permanent shift in Li's moral boundary and highlighting the grim realities she must navigate. The resolution occurs when Li returns and focuses on her recovery through meditation and stress-reducing practice (listening to music). She gradually regains control over her physical and mental health, showing remarkable improvement.

## **Characters**

### **Protagonists Li**

Age: 25 years old

Li was born to neglectful parents. Her mother is a drug addict, and her father is an alcoholic who is always drunk. They stay in Zone D, which is a slum area where only the poor live. Almost daily, her father beats and punishes her for even slight mistakes. Li grew up in continuous fear and stress. One day, a humanoid robot crosses paths with her and decides to stay with her and her family. When she is 25, her stress escalates into severe depression. Over time, Li must face the root of her prolonged depression which is her deteriorating physical health. She is forced to be mature despite her young age which makes her grow up to be a person who has personality traits of mature and strong-willed. She would choose to keep her problems alone and would rather be silent than talk about them to people. Li is shown as a character with shoulder-length black hair, fair skin, 162cm tall, and weights of 50kg.

### **7X01 (Seven)**

Age: He doesn't age, although he appears as late 40s years old

7X01 is a former military humanoid robot created to serve the citizens of Eon Haven and deploy on battlefields. However, on one mission, for unknown reasons, he malfunctioned. Thus, he's gaining consciousness and overwriting his original code and programming. Gaining this consciousness led him to defect from his orders. In response, Eon Haven's authorities discarded him in a landfill filled with broken robots, cyborgs, and other debris. Still, 7X01 managed to break free and find his way into Zone D, where he first met Li. Now, assuming the name Seven, he decided to stick with her, driven by a sense of his new mission, which is to protect Li. Seven's personality is straightforward, blunt, and destructive to other people, but caring and considerate to Li. Seven values his mission and would call it the 'purpose of life', which, in the story, his mission is to keep Li safe and in the best condition. Seven's appearance looks like a human male with strong biceps and a well-built figure. Seven has dirty blonde short-trim hair, brown eyes, and fair skin. His height is 183 cm, and he weighs more than the average human man since he is made of steel, titanium, plexiglass, and other materials that are used to build a humanoid robot.

### **Antagonist Hubert**

Age: 35 years old (during Li's flashback)

Hubert is Li's father. Hubert and Li live in a slum area, where Hubert's inability to provide for them keeps them trapped in poverty. He has a deep dependence on alcohol, turning to drinking whenever he feels upset or angry, which makes him a chronic alcoholic. Hubert shows little to no care for his daughter due to his drinking habit. He is even abusive to Li, who receives severe punishments for minor offenses. Hubert has dark circles under his eyes and greasy black hair due to a lack of hygiene, body hair, and would wear the same clothes for days. His personality traits are easily irritated, grumpy, uncaring, firm, and have a big ego.

### **Sawyer (the All-seeing Eye)**

Age: Sawyer is a living program that lives in a surveillance camera system that is set to watch the entire place, both Zone D and Eon Haven, so he doesn't have any age. Although his voice can refer to the sound of a middle-aged man.

Sawyer (or can be known as the All-seeing Eye) is an antagonist in the story. He is a living

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program that lives in every surveillance camera system that always watches both Eon Haven and Zone D. The All-seeing Eye itself was in a special room, highly guarded, and at the ground level of the government building. Physically, Sawyer is a computer which stores big data about everything, watches everything, and controls every military human-droid that is always on protocol around Zone D, where Li (the protagonist) and the poor live. In the story, Sawyer keeps controlling the slum area (the poor people), and he always refers to them as 'rats' or 'roaches'.

### Conflicts

Three types of conflicts are used in my story, which are man versus self and man versus man. According to Hannah Yang, a speculative fiction author, man versus self-conflict is a conflict that involves a character's internal struggle against himself (Yang, 2022). This type of conflict often involves a character choosing between two conflicting obligations, facing their flaws and fears, or coming to terms with their nature. Meanwhile, man versus man is a type of conflict where two characters are in direct opposition to each other. The driving force of the conflict is how these two interact and how the antagonist keeps the main character from achieving their goals (Craiker, 2022).

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this creative thesis is to show the effect of long-term depression on women's health. Through creative work, I have shown how psychological distress, rooted in childhood trauma, emotional neglect, poverty, and oppression, can manifest in chronic physical illnesses. Drawing from Slavich and Irwin's Inflammation Theory of Depression, the creative work connects the main character's prolonged depression with physical illnesses such as sleep disorders (insomnia), chronic pain (migraines), and cardiovascular issues. Not only that, but the concept of socio-economic marginalization reflects how external, structural pressures often worsen internal psychological struggles.

Through the main character's journey, this creative thesis reveals how long-term depression is not only a psychological struggle but one that deeply affects the body. In the early chapter, her childhood with her father is marked by abuse and poverty cycles that lead to chronic migraines, insomnia, and fatigue that echo her deteriorating mental well-being. As she sees the cruel oppression from the higher authority, her psychological trauma surfaces again, drawing her further into physical and emotional decline. However, a turning point begins with Li doing meditation and stress-reducing practices along the story as she also learns to forgive the past and make peace with her trauma. Her story demonstrates that even the most severe pain may be greeted with hope and recovery if the right support and care are given.

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