

UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION

What is depression?

- ✿ Depression is a common mental disorder that presents with depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, low energy, and poor concentration (World Health Organisation).
- ✿ Depression occurs in persons of all genders, ages, and backgrounds.
- ✿ Depression is not just a mental but also a physical state. When someone is depressed there can be a shortage of certain chemicals (serotonin, noradrenaline and dopamine) in the brain. Stress can deplete (reduce) the amount of these chemicals in the body.
- ✿ Depression can be triggered by stress. This could be a stressful life event like a death in the family, getting married, moving country, being a victim of crime, or by ongoing stress like pressure at school or work, money worries or health problems.

Types of depression

Different types of depression are sometimes diagnosed with slightly different causes and symptoms. Examples include:

- ✿ Mild depression or dysthymia is when a person feels low or loses enjoyment of life for at least 2 years (either continuously or on and off). On average it takes people approximately 10 years before seeking treatment for it.
- ✿ Major depressive disorder is severe and is diagnosed by the person feeling five or more of the symptoms of depression, lasting over two weeks.
- ✿ Post-natal depression: can occur after childbirth. Peri-natal depression is depression that occurs during pregnancy but which is less common.
- ✿ Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression associated with lack of daylight and shorter daylight hours in winter.
- ✿ Bipolar depression is also called manic depression. It is a serious mental health problem involving extreme swings of mood (highs and lows). This form of depression occurs in bouts, separated by periods of mania (highs), in which the person may become psychotic (meaning to see, hear, taste or smell things that aren't there) and lose touch with reality.
- ✿ Depressive illnesses can run in families. What appears to be inherited is a vulnerability to depression. This means that if we have close relatives who have clinical depression, we may inherit a tendency to develop the illness. It does not mean that we are destined to become depressed.

Symptoms of depression

When a doctor diagnoses someone with depression they will look for these symptoms. If at least five of these are present over at least two weeks this is called depression.

- ✿ Depressed mood (such as feeling sad, empty).
- ✿ Markedly diminished pleasure in all (or almost all) activities.
- ✿ Insomnia or hypersomnia (not being able to sleep or sleeping all the time).
- ✿ Increase / decrease in appetite or significant weight loss.
- ✿ Fatigue / loss of energy.
- ✿ Feelings of worthlessness.
- ✿ Excessive or inappropriate guilt.
- ✿ Diminished ability to think, concentrate, and/or take decisions.
- ✿ Recurrent thoughts of death, suicidal ideation, having a suicide plan or making a suicide attempt.

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- ✦ In bipolar depression, manic episodes typically start suddenly. Symptoms get worse over the course of a few days. These include racing thoughts, more talkative than usual, inflated self-esteem, significantly reduced need for sleep, great difficulties concentrating, doing something which appears pleasurable but can lead to painful consequences.
- ✦ Robbie Williams revealed in 2002 that he had taken pills for the past six months to combat depression. He said did not understand why he often felt so down.

Cultural differences

- ✦ Anxiety and depression are classed as common mental disorders (CMD). In the UK they occur very similarly in all groups, with the exception of the Irish, for whom this rate was higher than in the White group. However, White, Irish and Black Caribbean women had similar rates of CMD. Whilst Indian and Pakistani women had significantly higher rates of CMD, Bangladeshi women had very low rates of CMD.
- ✦ The presentation of depression, its meanings and how it is experienced, vary according to culture. As an example, in parts of Chinese society, the experience of depression is physical rather than psychological. So people do not report feeling sad, but rather express boredom, discomfort, feelings of inner pressure, and symptoms of pain, dizziness, and fatigue.
- ✦ Many cultures see mental illness as shameful and delay treatment until symptoms reach crisis proportions.

How many people suffer from depression?

- ✦ Depression is a very common mental health problem worldwide. The World Health Organisation estimates that depression will become the second most common cause of disability worldwide (after heart disease) by 2020.
- ✦ Records show 3-4% of men and 7-8% of women in Britain are suffering moderate to severe depression at any one time. However men are less likely than women to seek medical help, so the true figures may be higher.
- ✦ Post-natal depression affects 13% of women in Western Europe.
- ✦ Bipolar depression is rarer than unipolar forms, and affects men and women equally and affects about 5 people in 1000, or 0.5% of the population in the UK.
- ✦ Depression is common amongst people who self-injure and research shows that depression is one of the most frequent mental health problems in people who die by suicide. This does not mean all people who suffer depression feel suicidal.

Medical treatment & counselling

- ✦ Antidepressants are the main mode of treatment for depression by general practitioners, and can be very effective in helping people to recover.
- ✦ Annually in the UK, GPs spend £160m per year on anti-depressant drugs. In 2002, 33 million prescriptions of antidepressants were dispensed in the UK. That is over double the 16 million prescriptions given out in 1995.
- ✦ People can take anti-depressants for just a few weeks or sometimes for years. Coming off antidepressants is a gradual process and may have some side effects (also called withdrawal symptoms), as the body gets used to working without these chemicals.
- ✦ Because depression is often triggered by stress or underlying problems, talking therapies or counselling can help a person work through these. Counselling helps to improve mood, find ways of coping and hopefully prevent people from getting depression again.

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Emotional balance and building resilience

Strengthening emotional wellbeing can help. This is done by:

- ✦ getting enough rest and learning how to relax
- ✦ exercising regularly
- ✦ avoiding too much alcohol, smoking and illegal drugs
- ✦ eating a balanced healthy diet
- ✦ sharing thoughts and feelings with a trusted friend.

Managing your illness also helps. Recognising the signs of depression when it starts means a person can take action to cut down on their stress levels, seek support from friends or counsellors, and if necessary get medication.

Friends and self-help groups give the chance to meet people and share experiences. Social support is an essential part of good emotional health.

Challenging negative thoughts: It can be extremely helpful if you can recognise patterns of negative thinking, challenge these yourself, and try and replace them with more positive, constructive thoughts. Some people do this in their head, whilst some like to write it down or talk it through with another person.

Activity: Exercise can be very therapeutic as it can stimulate production of chemicals in the brain called endorphins. These endorphins can help lift your mood, give you more energy and make you feel better. Even just going for a short walk can help.

Care for yourself: When you are feeling depressed it is extremely important that you care for yourself. Many depressed people lose the motivation to look after themselves properly. Eat healthily, be kind to yourself, and try not to cut yourself off from other people.

Supporting someone with depression

There are lots of ways to support someone with depression:

- ✦ Offering to listen and giving emotional support. Depression can make people withdraw from social situations so family and friends are really important. Encourage them to speak to a GP or use the help that is available.
- ✦ People with depression often feel low on energy and motivation and may even find it hard to leave the house so practical support like shopping or housework can be welcome.
- ✦ Encourage them to look after their emotional balance. Not everyone realises that good physical and social health improve mood and emotional health. Talk through different things they can do (see above).
- ✦ Treat them as a person not an illness. People with mental health problems say that sometimes the stigma and discrimination they experience from other people is worse than the illness itself.
- ✦ Supporting a person with depression is not easy and it is important that you keep looking after your own emotional balance too.

"She was having the shittest time... It doesn't feel like very much, but I listen. It's not about me understanding everything, it's about getting it off her chest. I'm there for her if she needs me."

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For further information and support...

Samaritans

24/7 emotional support for anyone with difficult feelings.

Tel: 08457 90 90 90 (United Kingdom) or

Tel: 1850 60 90 90 (Republic of Ireland)

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Web: www.samaritans.org

Write to: Chris, PO Box 90 90, Stirling, FK8 2SA, Scotland

BBC website

Good site with further information on emotional and mental health.

Web: www.bbc.co.uk/health/mental

Childline

Tel: 0800 1111

Web: www.childline.org.uk

Phone the free, 24-hour helpline for children and young people in the UK, about any problem, at any time - day or night. Children who are deaf or find using a regular phone difficult can try the textphone service.

Young Minds

Friendly website with information and postings about emotional health.

Web: www.youngminds.org.uk

Depression Alliance

Tel: 020 7633 0557

Web: www.depressionalliance.org

Provision of help, advice, information and support to people with depression and their carers. Research into the causes of and the treatments for depression; the dissemination of such research.