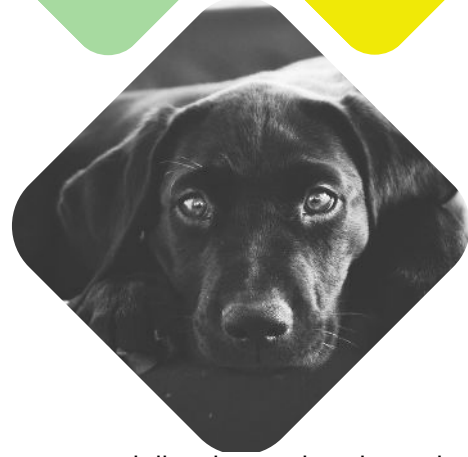


Depression



Everyone feels fed up, sad or 'in a mood' from time to time, especially when going through a major upheaval like separation and divorce. But symptoms of low mood that continue each day for at least two weeks and become severe enough to interfere with day-to-day functioning can indicate depression. This handout explores depression in a bit more depth.

What is depression?

The word 'depressed' is often misused. We might say 'I'm depressed' when in fact we mean 'I'm fed up because I've had a row, failed an exam, or lost my job'. These ups and downs are common and normal. Most of us recover quite quickly.

Clinical depression is when low mood continues for at least two weeks and interferes with our ability to function day-to-day.

About two-thirds of adults will have depression at some time in their lives and there is a higher likelihood when going through separation and divorce.

Sometimes it is mild or lasts just a few weeks, but about three in twenty adults have severe depression at some stage. Some will experience depression more than once during their lifetime.

Depression can alternate with periods of elation and over-activity or worry and anxiety that can cause physical symptoms such as sleeplessness and feeling sick.

We often won't recognise that we are depressed. We may just 'not feel quite right' or not be functioning well. We may notice the physical effects and assume it is a physical illness, for example, if we lose weight.

DEPRESSION MYTH: Only weak people get depressed



Depression is definitely **not a sign of weakness!**

Even great leaders such as Winston Churchill have suffered from depression. He referred to it as his 'black dog'.

Symptoms of depression

The list below are common symptoms of depression. It would be unusual to have them all, but one or more may indicate that you are experiencing depression.

- Low mood for most of the day nearly every day. Things always seem black
- Abnormal sadness, often with weepiness
- Feeling guilt, worthlessness or uselessness
- Loss of enjoyment, interest in life, even activities you normally enjoy
- Poor motivation - even simple tasks seem difficult.
- Poor concentration - it may be difficult to read, work, etc
- Problems sleeping
- Lacking in energy - always tired
- Sexual difficulties
- Poor appetite and weight loss or comfort eating and weight gain
- Irritability, agitation or restlessness
- Symptoms often seem worse first thing in the day
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, general aches and pains or palpitations
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicidal ideas, feeling that life's not worth living

What causes depression?

Depression can be caused by life events such as bereavement, illness, unemployment, separation and divorce or by a chemical imbalance in the brain. Depression may run in families. Some of us are more prone to it but anyone can become depressed at any time for no apparent reason. It can develop quite severely and suddenly. Often there is a combination of causes.

Does depression go away?

Most depression will get better without treatment. However, it may take several months or even longer. Meanwhile, life for the person with depression and their family and friends can be difficult. Relationships, work and lots of other aspects of your life may be seriously affected.

There is also a risk of turning to alcohol or illegal drugs. Some people even contemplate suicide which is a higher risk factor in men.

But depression is very treatable and there are a wide range of treatments and types of support available.

Treatments for depression

Talking & Counselling

Although depression is very common there can still be a sense of shame and often people will find it hard to admit that this is how they are feeling. Many hide symptoms from friends and relatives but being open about feelings may help your loved ones to understand and help.

Understanding yourself and being understood is important when tackling depression. Recognising the symptoms and knowing that it is a common illness sometimes helps people to accept that they are ill and need help. This is particularly true when physical symptoms such as headaches or weight loss due to depression occur.

Talking through feelings may be all that's needed to treat mild depression. Being motivated to talk through problems can be difficult at first, especially with more severe depression. It may be easier when things are improving.

Talking with an understanding friend or relative can be helpful and sometimes a professional is needed or preferred - someone independent and not personally involved. This may be a GP, counsellor or psychologist.

In some people, there is a particular problem causing depression and. There may be a local agency or self-help group dealing with these specific problems, for example www.relate.org.uk for marital and sexual problems. GPs can advise and provide a referral if that is necessary. Talking to someone who understands and who is experienced in dealing with depression can be of great benefit.

Antidepressants

Antidepressant drugs are commonly prescribed for depression. They relieve symptoms in about seven out of ten people. They can't change a person's circumstances, but symptoms such as low mood, poor sleep and concentration often improve.

Then when you are functioning better you will be able to deal with any underlying problems or difficult circumstances more effectively.

Antidepressants are not tranquillisers and are not addictive. It is important to understand that it often takes two to four weeks before a person notices their effectiveness. Many people will give up on the medication after a week or so because they think it's not working so if you are prescribed antidepressants it is important to give it enough time to work.

If you find antidepressants have helped and you feel ready to stop taking them follow the course that your doctor recommends. Some people stop treatment too early and the depression quickly returns. A normal course of antidepressants will last six months or more.

DEPRESSION MYTH: You just need to 'pull your socks up'

Depression is an illness that often needs treatment. Recovery can take time and need specific treatment. Being told to 'snap out of it', 'cheer up' or 'pull your socks up' is extremely unhelpful.

Psychiatric Support

Most people with depression are treated effectively by their GP. However, if depression is severe or someone is not responding to treatment they may be referred to a psychiatric team.

These teams typically include psychologists, psychiatrists, specialist nurses and occupational therapists. Specialist talking treatments such as cognitive therapy, counselling and psychotherapy are sometimes appropriate.

Dos and Don'ts for depression

- **Do distract yourself.** Go for walks, try and exercise. Try doing things that do not need much concentration such as watching TV.
- **Do eat regularly** even if your appetite is poor.
- **Do explore self-care** getting the basics of good sleep, eating well and exercise can make a surprising difference but there are lots of other self-care ideas, like journalling, time in nature, or creative activities. Experiment to see what helps you.
- **Do tell your doctor** if you feel you are getting worse, particularly if you feel suicidal.
- **Do consider time off work.** Sometimes a spell off work is needed, and others the distraction of work helps - everyone is different.
- **Do raise specific problems.** Speak to your doctor/counsellor about any specific psychological problems - such as childhood abuse - that might be the root of your depression. People can be reluctant to mention these things but specialist counselling is available.

- **Don't bottle things up** and 'go it alone'. Instead, try and tell people who are close to you how you feel. It is not weak to cry or admit that you are struggling.
- **Don't get isolated.** You might feel like being alone but getting isolated can make depression worse. If you can try to see friends and avoid too much time alone
- **Don't despair.** Remember most people with depression recover.
- **Don't drink too much alcohol.** It's very tempting as a quick fix. But alcohol is a depressant and will make things worse in the long run.
- **Don't avoid work.** Some time can help but too long might not be good. Dwelling on problems and brooding at home may make things worse. Everyone is different and the ability to work will vary.
- **Don't make any major decisions.** It may be tempting to give up a job or move away to solve the problem. If possible any major relationship, job or financial decisions should be delayed until you feel well again.