



Depression

Everyone feels fed up, sad or 'in a mood' from time to time especially when you are 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.

The symptoms of depression

The word 'depressed' is often misused. People might say 'I'm depressed' when in fact they 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 people recover quite quickly.

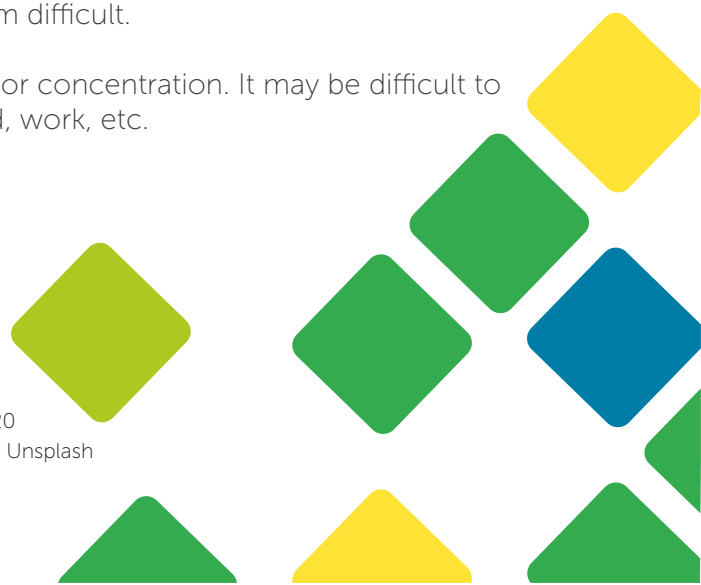
Clinical depression is when low mood continues for at least two weeks and interferes with day-to-day functions.

About two in three adults will have depression at some time in their life 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 a severe depression at some stage. Some people have more than one bout of depression at various times of their life.

People often won't recognise that they are depressed. They may know that they are 'not right' and are not functioning well. They may feel that they have a physical illness, for example, if they lose weight.

The following is a list of common symptoms of depression. It would be unusual to have them all, but one or more are present in somebody who has depression.

- Low mood for most of the day nearly every day. Things always seem black.
- Abnormal sadness, often with weepiness.
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness or uselessness.
- Loss of enjoyment and interest in life, even hobbies and activities which they normally enjoy.
- Poor motivation. Even simple tasks seem difficult.
- Poor concentration. It may be difficult to read, work, etc.



-Problems sleeping. Sometimes difficulty in getting off to sleep; sometimes waking in the early hours and being unable to get back to sleep.

- Lacking in energy; always tired.

- Difficulty with affection, including going off sex.

- Poor appetite and weightloss. Sometimes the reverse happens with 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?

Separation and divorce can be a cause of depression but the important point is that anyone can become depressed.

Some people are prone to it and it can develop for no apparent reason. There may be no particular problem or worry but symptoms can develop quite severely and suddenly. In some of these people depression can alternate with periods of elation and over-activity.



This is called manic depression. This form of depression may run in families. Depression may also be caused by life events such as relationship problems, bereavement, redundancy, illness, etc.

In many people, it is a mixture of the two. For example, the combination of a mild, low mood with some life problem such as work stress, may lead to a spiral down into depression.

Women tend to develop depression more often than men. After childbirth (postnatal depression) and the menopause are particularly common times for women to become depressed.

A chemical imbalance in the brain might be a contributing factor to why some people become depressed and not others. This is not fully understood. However, it is an alteration in some chemicals in the brain that is thought to be the reason why antidepressants are effective treatments for depression.

Does depression go away?

Most people with depression will get better without treatment. However, this may take several months or even longer. Meanwhile, life for the person with depression and for their family and friends can be difficult. Relationships, employment, etc may be seriously affected.

There is also a danger of some people turning to alcohol or illegal drugs. Some people even contemplate suicide but treatment can really help.

Busting the myths about depression

Depression is very common but many people fail to admit to it. Some people may feel there is a stigma attached or people will think they are weak. Great leaders such as Winston Church have suffered depression.

Depression is one of the most common illnesses that GPs deal with. People with depression may be told by others to 'pull your socks up' or 'snap out of it'. The truth is they cannot and such comments by others are extremely unhelpful.

Treatments for depression

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Understanding yourself and being understood are 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. Some people ask "Am I going mad?" They are relieved to discover that their symptoms have been shared by many people who have recovered.


Many hide symptoms from friends and relatives but being open about feelings may help your loved ones to understand and help.



Talking treatments Talking through feelings may be all that is required for 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. When the ice is broken, talking with an understanding friend or relative is helpful and sometimes a professional is needed - someone independent and not personally involved. This may be your GP or they may refer you to a 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 RELATE – www.relate.org.uk – for marital and sexual problems). GPs are in a position to advise and refer you to these groups if necessary. Talking to someone who understands and who is experienced in dealing with depression can be of great benefit.





Antidepressants These are commonly prescribed for depression. They work well to relieve symptoms in about seven out of ten people who are depressed. They cannot however alter a person's circumstances, but symptoms such as low mood, poor sleep, poor concentration etc are often eased. This may then allow normal functioning and increase the ability to deal with any problems or difficult circumstances. Antidepressants are not tranquillisers and are not addictive. They do not usually work straight away. It often takes two to four weeks before their effect builds up.

A common problem is that some people abandon medication after a week or so, feeling that it is doing no good. It is best to persevere if medication is prescribed. Also if it is helping, follow the course that a doctor recommends. Some people stop treatment too early and the depression quickly returns. A normal course of antidepressants will last six months or more.

Referral Most people with depression are treated effectively by their GP. However, some people are referred to a psychiatric team if their depression is severe or they are not responding to treatment. Available in most teams are psychologists, psychiatrists, specialist nurses and occupational therapists. Specialist talking treatments such as cognitive therapy, counselling and psychotherapy are sometimes appropriate. Other treatments such as specialist medication or electrical treatment (ECT) are sometimes needed to treat people with very severe depression.





Some dos and don'ts about 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 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, at others the hurly burly of work helps - everyone is different.

Do speak to your doctor or counsellor about any specific psychological problems - such as childhood abuse - if you feel it 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 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 off 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.