



Depression

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WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Everyone has times when they feel down. It's normal to feel sad when we've suffered a loss or disappointment, however, these heavy or gloomy feelings usually pass and we are able to still experience happy times with our friends or family.

Depression is different, it is a prolonged and persistent negative mood that can colour and interfere with many aspects of one's life – it is characterised by feelings of worthlessness, excessive guilt, loneliness, sadness, hopelessness, helplessness, self-doubt and anxiety. Suicidal thoughts may also be present.

When depressive feelings persist and interfere with one's health and social well-being, then some sort of intervention or professional help may be needed. In considering whether you need help with depression, it might be helpful to consider how often you feel down, how severe is it, and how long it lasts.

An important distinction can also be made between 'reactive' depression, which occurs in response to loss or disappointment, and 'biological' depression, which occurs in response to hormonal imbalances. Generally, reactive depression can be effectively treated through counselling whereas biological depression requires medication for treatment. Additionally, there are a number of types of depression with different symptoms that require professional diagnosis to determine the most appropriate form of treatment.

WHAT CAUSES DEPRESSION?

- significant loss
- loss of control over our lives e.g. prolonged stress, rising debt, relationship breakup
- unrealistic expectations of ourselves
- disappointment
- perceived failure
- negative thinking which gradually becomes self-defeating
- interpersonal problems
- ongoing health problems
- poor diet/lack of exercise
- inner conflict over spiritual, philosophical or existential beliefs

Whatever the causes of depression, effective treatment is available.

VULNERABILITY TO DEPRESSION

(Powell, 1992)

Some people are more vulnerable to depression than others. It may be that they have a history of depression, depression is present in other family members, or they have experienced ongoing significant life stressors.

Factors that assist in protecting individuals from depression can include:

- healthy self-esteem
- positive realistic thinking patterns
- the ability to communicate needs, thoughts and feelings
- having an active social support network

SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

Depression can have a range of symptoms including physical ones. Below is a list of possible symptoms – you do not need to suffer all of these to be experiencing depression. It is important to ensure there is no medical cause of ongoing physical symptoms.

Emotional

feeling down or sad, apathetic, irritable, pessimistic, hopeless, helpless, negative, guilty, anxious.

Physical

- increase or decrease in the amount of sleep
- increase or decrease in appetite
- fatigue, loss of energy
- weight loss or gain
- inexplicable aches and pains
- reduced sex drive

Behavioural

- loss of interest in and enjoyment of previously pleasurable activities
- difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- crying for no apparent reason
- neglecting responsibilities and personal appearance
- withdrawal from people or situations
- increased use of drugs and/or alcohol

Thoughts/Perceptions

(Powell, 1992)

- all or nothing thinking, or black and white thinking – something is either all good or all bad
- catastrophising – tendency to overestimate the negative aspects of a situation
- personalising – taking responsibility for unpleasant events
- negative focus – looking only at the negative side
- jumping to negative conclusions without facts
- living by inflexible rules and unrealistic expectations

DOWNWARD SPIRAL OF DEPRESSION

Depression can become self-defeating and result in a downward spiral of mood. Negative thinking can lead you to feel down, which in turn makes it more difficult to be actively involved in life.

The less active we become, the more we avoid pleasurable activities which in turn increases our levels of negative thinking and depressed mood. The way out is to break this spiral by increasing our involvement in pleasurable activities and opportunities for feeling good about life.

WHEN IS DEPRESSION SERIOUS?

Depression is a spectrum that ranges from mild to severe.

It is serious when the symptoms are pervasive, severe and present most of the time and when the things that normally improve your mood are not helpful. Under these conditions it becomes difficult to function normally. People at the severe end of the spectrum tend to experience more marked physical symptoms.

HOW TO REGAIN A POSITIVE OUTLOOK

- Make a weekly list of your positive accomplishments.
- Make a weekly schedule of your daily activities – include more pleasurable and social activities.
- Find a hobby or two.
- Exercise daily and eat healthy foods.
- Learn to use self-relaxation techniques whenever you feel tense.
- Set realistic short, medium and long-term goals.
- Be assertive – learn to say “no”.
- Learn to accept that everyone has different abilities and focus on your unique characteristics and positive accomplishments.
- Get to know and develop your strengths.
- Be aware of why you feel down and try to be optimistic about the future.
- Try to be aware of your negative thoughts and replace them with positive realistic thoughts.
- Check in with your emotional self and ask: Do I need a hug or other support? Do I need someone to listen? Do I need to vent and let off steam?

It is important to get professional help if symptoms of depression persist. Talking with your GP and a counsellor will help you to find the best way to manage your depression.

HOW TO HELP A PERSON WHO IS DEPRESSED

- Don't tell a depressed person that you know what they are feeling, be judgemental or offer 'quick fixes' – they may become angry with you.
- Ask them how can you help them.
- Be supportive and patient.
- Let the person know you are concerned and that you will be there for them.
- Encourage the person to seek professional help if symptoms persist and/or interfere with daily functioning.

RECOGNISING WHEN SOMEONE IS AT RISK OF SUICIDE

A person may become depressed when they believe that their problems are too overwhelming for them to cope with alone. Sometimes this can have tragic consequences. For very depressed individuals, suicide can seem like their only option. Some signs of depression and possibly suicidal behaviour to be aware of are ...

If your friend:

- seems very sad, lonely or negative in conversation;
- is not socialising and/or attending classes as much as usual;
- says they are sleeping or eating too much or too little;
- suddenly stops performing/handling in their assignments;
- is giving away their possessions;
- is feeling like their problems are too big, or that no one can help;
- is suddenly using drugs/alcohol excessively;
- is no longer taking care of their appearance;
- is talking about death, or when he/she will no longer be around;
- is suddenly very cheerful after being depressed.

A depressed person may share their suicidal thoughts with a friend, lecturer, tutor or another significant person in their life. This may be a subtle message, or quite obvious – it is, in most cases, a cry for help and should be taken seriously.

If you are concerned at the level of depression someone you know is experiencing and believe they may be contemplating suicide, the following steps may be taken:

DON'T

- Keep their feelings secret – breaking their confidence may keep them alive. Contact a Counsellor to discuss your concerns or talk to someone close to them who can help.
- Dare them to carry out their intentions.
- Tell them they don't mean it.
- Ignore the message – discuss with them their plans and intentions as openly as possible, and take their comments seriously.
- Leave it up to them to get the professional help they need.

DO

- Ask if the person is feeling suicidal. It may be a great relief for them to talk about it – it will NOT make them commit suicide.
- Seek professional help – don't attempt to handle the situation on your own.
- Take them seriously.
- Discuss their plans and feelings as openly as possible with them.

HELP! WHERE CAN I FIND IT?

- Self-help information is available on the Student Services website – follow the links to the Counselling Service.
- Peruse/borrow books from the Student Services counselling resource library.
- Seek counselling through the Counselling Service to discuss concerns and gain help with managing depression.
- If depression is severe and/or prolonged, consult your general medical practitioner who may recommend appropriate medication.

REFERENCE

The Mental Health Handbook, T. Powell, 1992, Winslow Press Ltd, Great Britain.