

# DEPRESSION - A SIMPLE GUIDE

## WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Someone who says: "I'm depressed" might mean several very different things.

- 1. THE 'BLUES'**: A short-lived down mood
- 2. SADNESS and GRIEF**: We all feel 'down' after a major loss, a big disappointment, or when we fear something bad is going to happen, such as losing our job. It's often very unpleasant - but it's a normal feeling, which lifts naturally, the time depending on how severe the loss was.
- 3. A DEPRESSIVE ILLNESS**: This is different. It involves not just our mood, but our thoughts, our habits, our work performance and family life and the way we feel about ourselves. It can be very serious, even fatal, and disable people for a long time. But it's not a sign of personal weakness and it cannot be willed or wished away. If you have it you can't just "pull yourself together." Expert treatment can help most people.

## ABOUT DEPRESSION

There is often *no* apparent reason for negative, painful feelings. Depression is as much a 'physical' problem as an 'emotional' one. *It's thought to be caused by changes in the chemical balance in the brain.* 15% of people are treated for it at some time, most often in the 30s and 40s. You may not feel particularly sad, making diagnosis hard. *You may not have every symptom* and the severity of symptoms varies with individuals and over time.

## ARE YOU DEPRESSED?

Over the last **TWO WEEKS** have you:

1. Felt sad, down, 'empty' or miserable most of the time?
  2. Lost interest or pleasure in most of your usual activities?
- If you answered NO to both, you probably don't have depression. If one answer is YES, check off these symptoms. Have you:
3. Lost or gained a lot of weight? \_\_\_\_\_  
OR Had a decrease or increase in appetite? \_\_\_\_\_
  4. Had sleep disturbance - waking early? \_\_\_\_\_
  5. Felt slowed down, restless or excessively busy? \_\_\_\_\_
  6. Felt tired or had no energy? \_\_\_\_\_
  7. Felt worthless? \_\_\_\_\_  
OR Felt excessively guilty? \_\_\_\_\_  
OR Felt guilt about things you shouldn't have? \_\_\_\_\_
  8. Had poor concentration? \_\_\_\_\_  
OR Had difficulties thinking? \_\_\_\_\_  
OR Were very indecisive? \_\_\_\_\_
  9. Had recurrent thoughts of death? \_\_\_\_\_

**Your total score:** \_\_\_\_\_

4 or less: Unlikely to have a depressive illness

5 or more: Likely to have a depressive illness

*(This is not a diagnostic test, just an indicator.)*

**Other symptoms** include:

- Poor concentration, slow thinking, forgetful
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Not wanting to be around people
- Long standing pain or other chronic symptoms
- Loss of interest in sex

## TYPES OF DEPRESSION

**Major Depression**: Symptoms interfere with work, study, sleep, eating, and pleasure. It is often disabling

**Dysthymia**: Long-term symptoms that don't disable but reduce functioning and wipe out happiness. Also associated with major depressive episodes.

**Bipolar Disorder** (manic-depression): It's less common. The mood changes from severe highs (mania) to lows (depression). Usually it's gradual, but sometimes rapid. In mania, the person can be overactive, overtalkative, with excessive energy. Thinking, judgment and behavior are distorted, often causing serious problems and embarrassment, inappropriate elation, grand schemes in business and romance. It may worsen to a psychotic state.

## CAUSES OF DEPRESSION

Usually a mixture: Genetic, Psychological, Environmental.

**Reactive**: A loss - bereavement, unemployment, bankruptcy, anything really bad that happens, or too much change.

**Endogenous** - there's no obvious outside reason

**Buried Emotions** - It's more common in those with low self-esteem and after childhood abuse or neglect. Buried anger, fear or guilt may be involved.

**Medical**: Virus infections, hormone imbalance, serious illness such as heart attack or cancer, and medications, such as high blood pressure pills may all affect mood.

## DIFFERENT STROKES....

**Women** suffer depression more than men. Possible reasons? Hormones: menstrual changes, pregnancy and menopause with its changes and losses. Women usually have more problems juggling work and home life, are more likely single parents, and do more caring for children and aging relatives.

**Men** are less affected but less likely to admit to it. They commit suicide 4 times more than women, but attempt it less. They often mask depression with alcohol or drugs, or by overworking. Men show less sadness but more irritability and anger and are less willing to seek help.

**Children** of all ages can become depressed. If a child's schoolwork declines, they get into lots of trouble, are grouchy - is it bad behaviour or depression?

**The Elderly** show depression usually as physical symptoms, or alcohol abuse. It is still highly treatable at any age.

## SUICIDE

Thoughts of suicide are very frightening, but they don't mean that you're falling apart or 'losing it'. Almost everyone has had at least a passing thought like this.

Signs of danger include:

- Repeatedly thinking of harming yourself
- Making specific plans to do it
- Seeing no hope for the future
- Not having much support from family and friends
- Hopeless negative feelings take over and won't go away

If you feel like this or know someone who does, talk to a doctor, a help line or the crisis clinic of your hospital right away!

Most people who try to commit suicide don't really want to die, they just want their problems to disappear.

They are feeling unbearable pain and have totally lost hope for the future. But almost always, if they can get help and support, this terrible feeling will go away in a few weeks at most.

## TREATMENT OF DEPRESSION

### SELF HELP

In mild depression we could **decide to be responsible for our own mood**. Taking responsibility simply means the *ability* to make a *response*. In any situation you have choices, and you can keep on choosing different responses until you feel the way you want to.

Some suggestions for self-help:

- **Learn how depression affects you.** Understand the symptoms, accept them. Then look further
- **Decide** what problems might be depressing you, then:
- **Make Plans** for problems that do have solutions
- **Learn to accept** problems with no solution
- **Reduce** harmful habits if possible (alcohol, drugs)
- **Increase your strength** physically with exercise
- **Increase your strength** mentally by:
- **Changing the thinking** that determines your mood
- **Use Attitudes** optimism, flexibility, gratitude, humour
- **Work to find your Purpose and Meaning**
- **Ask for help.** You're worth it. Look for support
- **Share your feelings** with a good listener
- **Do something** constructive such as tidying up
- **Do a good deed** for someone else
- **Work on your close relationships**
- **Set small and achievable goals** for yourself.

### PROFESSIONAL HELP for depression

Your family doctor should be your first and continuing source of assistance. Some GPs do therapy themselves and all can prescribe medications and refer to a psychiatrist if necessary. Psychologists and social workers are trained to do therapy but are not covered by medicare. The cost bothers some, but is your mental health and happiness not worth a lot?

**When to get help?** If you have:

- Suicidal thoughts - and definite plans
- Feelings of not being connected to other people
- Feelings of loss of hope for the future
- Trouble coping with work and home life
- Drinking a lot or taking pills without a prescription

### 'TALKING' Therapy

It's important (but often not easy) to find a knowledgeable therapist who won't judge or criticize you, and who cares.

'*Cognitive-Behavioural*' therapy has been most studied. It helps you pick out depressing thoughts, beliefs and behaviours - and change them to ones that are more accurate and rational and will allow you to feel better.

'*Solution-Focused*' therapy starts with a fantasy of how you would like your life to be and then helps you work out exactly how and when you are going to make it happen.

'*Interpersonal*' therapy focuses on the role of important relationships with parents, siblings, spouses, and on issues of grief and bereavement.

Effective therapists usually use a range of techniques.

### DRUGS for Depression

Many people are reluctant to take drugs, even if they do feel very depressed. But drugs remain effective for many people. Most have fewer serious side effects than in the past and overdoses are not usually fatal.

They are most useful to treat severe symptoms such as lack of energy, sleep disturbances and uncontrollable anxiety and when you feel life is just not worth living.

Relieving symptoms can make therapy much more effective. You might try the herb St. John's Wort first as it doesn't need a prescription, but it's best to work with your doctor when using any medication. Anti-depressant drugs won't make you high or addicted. They simply move your brain chemistry towards normal. They are not habit-forming.

- They take 3-4 weeks to be effective
- To reduce side effects, start at low dose, increase slowly.
- Antidepressants all work equally well, but one may be effective where another hasn't been.
- See your doctor frequently to assess how well you are doing - and to discuss any side effects
- Be careful if taking other drugs or driving
- Multiple drugs may be needed

Newer antidepressants have different types of side effects:

Headache - will usually go away.

Nausea - this is also temporary, transient after each dose.

Nervousness, agitation and insomnia: Dosage reductions or time will usually resolve them.

Sexual problems occur with some but not all.

Usual treatment is for 6 months or so. Longer courses may be needed. Don't stop too soon or suddenly!

### HOSPITAL treatment

If a person is so depressed that they can hardly function at all, or has tried or is thinking about suicide even with therapy and medications, then hospital treatment is essential. It provides a secure environment away from major problems - and treatment can be much more intensive.

*Can you be forced to go into hospital?* No, unless you're at serious risk of harming yourself. In this case it's probably the best thing that could happen.

### CONCLUSION

Those who have achieved great things or who are truly happy have almost always reached that point because they overcame massive problems and somehow found a meaning and passion in life, *not* because they had an 'easy life'.

Try to believe that although feeling depressed or stressed is not pleasant, it can be an opportunity to make changes that will leave you stronger and happier.

### RESOURCES

1. *Your Family Doctor or a Counsellor*
2. *The Canadian Mental Health Association*
3. *Books. Check out Amazon.com or Chapters.com*
4. *Internet:www.ifred.org/ifacts.html*  
www.healthline.com  
www.mayoclinic.com/health/depression/  
www.psycom.net/depression.central.html
5. *In Crisis?* Call the local hospital Crisis Clinic