

## Depression

**Disclaimer:** These notes are intended for information only, and should not be seen as a substitute for professional advice.

### What is depression?

Depression is a word we often use to describe sadness and a general low mood. Depression is very common - on average, one in five people become depressed at some stage in their lives. In Australia now there are approximately one million adults and 100 000 young people who are living with depression. Depression is more than just normal sadness as it lasts longer, is more intense, and has a major impact on everyday functioning. It impacts on the following areas:

#### Mood

People who are depressed experience a low mood that occurs regularly for more than two weeks. It is also common to feel guilty, overwhelmed, frustrated, hopeless and disappointed.

#### Thoughts

People who are depressed tend to think in a negative way. They generally have negative thoughts about themselves, the world, and their future. It is common for people to have thoughts such as "I'm a failure", "it's all my fault", "it's all hopeless", and "nothing good will ever happen to me". Some people experiencing depression begin to have thoughts of ending their life (see section on Suicide).

#### Behaviours

When people are depressed they often don't enjoy the things they used to enjoy. For example, they often do not go out as much as they use to and they tend to see less of their friends and families. Sometimes when people become depressed they rely on alcohol and other drugs to help lift their mood. Unfortunately, this often has the opposite effect. University students who are experiencing depression may stop attending classes, fall behind in completing their assessments, stop handing in assignments and may fail to attend exams. Because of their negative thoughts and low mood, students who are depressed are less likely to ask for help from lecturers and classmates and can fall significantly behind in their university studies.

#### Physical

When people are depressed they commonly experience:

- A fall in energy levels
- Interrupted sleeping patterns (sleeping too little or too much)
- Fatigue
- Changes in appetite and associated changes in weight (either weight gain or loss)
- A loss in sexual interest
- Headache and muscle pain

## **Why do people become depressed?**

No one factor causes depression. People become depressed due to a combination of biological and psychological factors. Biological factors can include genetic make-up, certain hormones and brain chemicals. Psychological factors include stressful life events, upsetting events that have happened in the past and a negative style of thinking. Being a university student and balancing the demands of study, work and interpersonal relationships can be very stressful. When students have relocated from rural areas, interstate or overseas in order to undertake study, the pressure can be even more intense. This is a time when many people begin to notice symptoms of depression in themselves or their friends.

## **What can be done to help?**

There are many things that can be done to help overcome depression. Broadly, treatments fall into two categories: medication and psychological treatment.

### Medication

As depression involves brain chemicals, anti-depressant medication is aimed at re-balancing brain chemicals. This can be helpful in reducing the symptoms of depression and improving a person's mood. These days medications are safe and non-addictive.

While medication can be very helpful in reducing some of the symptoms that occur in people with depression, it is important to note that medication is not a cure. In most cases it will only reduce the symptoms so people can deal with their underlying issues more effectively. For some people it is a good idea to combine medication and psychological treatments as this brings about the most change in relieving negative physical symptoms and improving people's mood.

It is important for people to consult with their doctors if they are considering anti-depressant medication.

### Psychological treatment

Psychological treatments for depression involve teaching people effective strategies to overcome their depression. Treatments are generally short-term and involve targeting two major aspects of depression: negative thoughts and unhelpful behaviours.

#### *Negative thoughts*

When people are depressed they generally have very negative thoughts. These negative thoughts play a major role in maintaining depression as they influence the way people feel. As a result, treatment involves teaching people how to identify and challenge their unhelpful thoughts and replace them with more helpful, realistic thoughts.

#### *Unhelpful behaviours*

People who are depressed often feel tired and lack the motivation to do things such as get out of bed, go for a walk, and spend time with their friends or family members. Often, people think that it is better that they stay home and rest instead of doing things that they used to enjoy. However, not doing things actually makes people feel more depressed as they are not getting the opportunity to do things which would help improve their mood. As a result, treatment involves teaching people ways to change

the aspects of their behaviour that increase their depression. This is often done by setting up activity schedules, engaging in fun activities, identifying goals, and using problem solving.

It is very common for people who are depressed to also experience anxiety (see section on Anxiety).

## **Self Help Tips**

### Self-care

Maintaining a healthy and balanced lifestyle is a very important factor in managing mood levels. Getting adequate sleep (approximately 8 hours per night), eating a healthy diet, and getting regular exercise are key components in combating depression. In addition, keeping alcohol and other substance use (including caffeine) to a minimum is very helpful.

### Engaging in activities

In order to feel better, it is very important to spend time doing the things you used to enjoy, such as going for a walk, having a coffee with friends, taking a bath, and cooking a meal. It is also necessary to combine doing fun activities with activities that provide you with a sense of achievement such as washing the dishes, doing your washing, paying off your credit card, or reading a section of a text book. Doing these things can help make you feel on top of things again. It can be helpful to write a list of activities you enjoy and that those that give you a sense accomplishment. Try to do one of the activities from your list per day. Start with the tasks that are easier to manage and, as you start to feel better, gradually build up to more tasks which are more challenging.

### Changing negative thoughts

People often think that external events cause us to feel a certain way. However, this is not correct. In actual fact it is the way we perceive or think about events that results in how we feel. For example, it is often thought that sitting for an exam causes people to experience high levels of anxiety. However, it is not the exam itself that results in anxiety, but the way we think the exam. People who think “this is too hard, I’m sure I’m to fail” will feel more anxious than those who think to themselves, “while I don’t want to do this exam, I am prepared, and I know I will do enough to get by”. Because of this well established link between people’s thoughts and their mood, altering your negative thoughts about ones situation can have a big impact on how you feel.

In order to change negative thoughts, it is important to recognise when you are having a negative thought. The major indicator of this is when you experience a strong emotion. For example, when you suddenly feel very sad, it can be useful to ask yourself “what thought is going through my mind?” once you have recognised that you are thinking negatively, it is important to determine whether or not your thought is true or if there is a more helpful way of viewing the situation. It can be useful to ask yourself the following questions:

What is the evidence for and against this thought?

How might someone else view the situation?

What is the likelihood that this will really happen?

Is there any other explanation?

Once you have evaluated your thought, you can develop a more realistic thought about the situation. Once you are thinking about the situation in a more realistic manner it is likely that you will feel better.

### **Further information**

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

General information on depression and anxiety

[www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/consumers.cfm](http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/consumers.cfm)

Contains self-help modules on depression and anxiety to work through online

[www.moodgym.anu.edu.au](http://www.moodgym.anu.edu.au)

A program which teaching cognitive behaviour skills people with depression

## **COUNSELLING SERVICE AVAILABILITY AND ACCESS**

**Location:** Building 109, Level 2

### **Hours**

Monday - Thursday 8.00am to 6.00pm

Friday 8.00am to 4.30pm

### **Contact numbers**

Telephone (08) 9266 7850

From outside metro area FREECALL 1800 199 008

Fax (08) 9266 3052

### **Web site**

<http://counselling.curtin.edu.au//index.html>

If you require after hours counselling or support you may telephone:

- **Crisis Care** 9223 1111 or 1800 199 008 (Country Callers)
- **Psychiatric Emergency Team** 1300 555 788
- **Lifeline** 13 11 14
- **Salvo Care Line** 9442 5777
- **Samaritans** 9381 5555 or 1800 198 313 (Country Callers)
- **Rurallink** 1800 552 002