

## **Depression**

Depression is a common condition that will affect one in three people at some time in their life. It is a complicated illness with many different symptoms and causes. Changes in eating habits and sleeping patterns and overwhelming feelings of despair are often the first signs of depression. Many sufferers become emotionally detached from those around them and withdraw into a world of their own. Some describe it like being in a prison with no windows or doors, which can alienate friends and relatives, increasing the isolation.

### **Symptoms:**

Changes in sleeping patterns; broken nights or over-sleeping  
Changes in eating patterns: loss of appetite or overeating  
Overwhelming feelings of guilt and worthlessness  
Tiredness and loss of energy  
Headaches, stomach upsets or chronic pain  
Persistent thoughts of death or suicide

Depression can result from post-viral illnesses and can have symptoms similar to thyroid conditions. It is always worth checking to see if there is a physical cause. Alcohol, recreational drugs, prescribed drugs and illnesses can trigger depression.

### **Causes:**

There is no one cause of depression - it is often an interaction of genetic factors, body chemistry and life events. It spans the spectrum of negative states from feeling low to severe or clinical depression. Depression results in chemical imbalances in the neurotransmitters in the brain – whether this is the cause or result of the illness is less certain. Mid-life is the most common time for depression to strike, but it can affect all age groups.

For many people it follows some kind of loss; the death of a loved one, redundancy, divorce, illness or else it follows a period of stress. This is sometimes called reactive depression. Grief and sadness are natural responses to such loss but depression is an illness and has major differences which can be difficult to spot. Others have a tendency to become depressed from time to time for no apparent reason. This is sometimes described as endogenous depression which appears to arise from changes, often hormonal, inside the person himself.

## **Psychological Causes**

life events, loss, failure or stress at school or work. Depression particularly affects people with low self-esteem, little confidence and persistent negative thoughts who are often overwhelmed by stress.

## **Physical causes**

chemical imbalances in the body, hormonal changes such as childbirth, menopause or over-production of Cortisol; alcohol or drug use.

## **Social causes**

loss of activity, losing interest in hobbies, change at work, redundancy, retirement.

## **When is the right time to seek help?**

If a low mood has lasted for more than two weeks or is starting to interfere with your life it may be time to seek help. The shame that has been attached to mental illness often increases the distress and isolation of depression. The earlier help is sought for depression the better - many of the symptoms are similar to other illnesses. Organisations and self-help groups can help with advice.

## **Treatment for depression:**

Counselling is effective in treating mild to moderate depression, and is often combined with medication in more severe cases, which is sometimes known as clinical depression. Understanding depression and its triggers it can be helpful for sufferers trying to manage the condition. Talking to friends and family or specialist agencies can help. Counselling can help address low self-esteem, or relationship issues or persistent negative thinking.

In most cases help will be available from your GP who can refer sufferers on for psychiatric help, in the cases where it is needed. Exercise is increasingly recommended to help combat the effects of depression and many GP's can refer those suffering with depression for specialist support at local gyms.

Recent studies suggest depression occurs as often in men though women are twice as likely to be diagnosed and treated. It is argued that men tend to express their symptoms differently, for example, through the use of alcohol and drugs, and are unwilling to admit to the symptoms of depression. It is therefore interesting to note that the figures for men are rising faster than the figures for women. This may indicate that men now are more likely to admit to feeling depressed. (Statistics from Mind)

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*Content written/edited by Denise Pickup BACP (Accred) in 2008. The content is for general information only and may or may not relate to your individual situation; please contact a professional directly to discuss this issue.*