

Coping With Depression

Step one: Understanding depression

The word 'Depression' is often used to describe feelings of sadness which are experienced by all people at some stage during their life. These feelings are normal if you are suffering the loss of a loved one, relationship breakdown or when day-to-day disappointments or frustrations build up. A Major Depressive Episode (or clinical depression) is a diagnosis given when an individual experiences depression to a severe degree for a period of at least 2 weeks and where that person finds it difficult to manage everyday life tasks (e.g. work or personal life).

Research findings show that:

- Depression is the leading cause of disability (non-fatal disease burden) in Australia
- Depression affects men and women of all backgrounds and occupational groups
- It affects 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men at some stage of their lives
- It affects 5.8% of employees, with 6 million working days lost each year to depression
- While the onset of depression is usually seen in people in their early to mid 20's, it can occur at any age

A. Know the signs

Depression can manifest with physical and psychological symptoms, and changes in behaviour at home and at work.

- Feeling sad or crying a lot.
- Negative, pessimistic thoughts about yourself, the world or the future.
- Feeling worthless, guilty and critical of yourself.
- Changes to normal sleep patterns.
- Loss of motivation and interest in most things and/or feeling numb to emotions.
- Feeling worried, nervous or agitated.
- Working slowly or making more mistakes, behind in things or not making it to work.
- Feeling hopeless that things will improve.

- Feeling irritable, frustrated and impatient with yourself or others.
- Appetite changes – eat more or less.
- Feeling helpless and blaming yourself or others a lot.
- Withdrawing from others, yet feeling lonely.
- Finding it hard to concentrate, think clearly, remember things and make decisions.
- When depression is very strong people can experience thoughts of not wanting to live or not deserving to be here.

B. Understand the causes

Although there isn't a test to determine the cause of depression, it is usually determined by a combination of: difficult life events (present and past), heredity, learned behaviour patterns, negative/unhelpful thinking patterns about the situation, and biochemical/physiological imbalances (e.g. serotonin). A medical check-up is important to rule out any physical illnesses that may have symptoms similar to depression. Effective treatment of depression aims to provide a person with support and strategies to develop more helpful coping behaviours, good thinking and a healthy physiology.

C. Know the recommended treatment options

Of people with depression, 44% do not seek treatment. When untreated, depression can last an average of 4 months. Once depression is recognised and treated, most people will return to their normal health and performance at work and home. There are two main types of treatment:

Psychological therapy. A qualified professional, such as a psychologist, can help you resolve the life pressures, difficulties with coping and negative thinking that maintain depression. The psychological therapy most widely researched and found to be effective in treating depression is called Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT involves identifying and changing your personal thinking and behaviour patterns that might be maintaining depression. This is done through learning and applying healthy, rational and effective coping skills in your daily routine.

Support and treatment from your doctor. Your doctor or psychiatrist may prescribe antidepressant medication when this is appropriate for you. Medication can provide some relief from the physical and emotional symptoms of depression, which can then help you to manage better. In many cases, a combination of both psychological therapy and antidepressant medications are prescribed over a period of months, however the recommendation of treatment will rest with each individuals' doctor or mental health professional.

Step Two: Tips for Managing Depression

A. Physiology & Health

Our physiology is affected by depression. You can help manage depression by looking after your body in these ways:

- **Medication:** If prescribed, adhere to the directions and talk to your doctor before making any changes to usage. Remember medications can take some time to take full effect, so allow sufficient time for the benefits to appear.
- **Exercise:** It is proven to lift your mood and give you more energy. Try to exercise a little each day and start small and build up gradually (e.g. walk the dog, use the stairs, stretch, do yoga, swim, ride a bike).
- **Relaxation:** It is important to reduce tension and manage anxiety, which in turn improve your health and mood. Try a massage, warm bath, relaxation tape, soothing music, or peaceful reflection.
- **Sleep management:** Try to keep a regular sleep routine. Relax before bedtime and reduce stimulation. Keep a sleep diary to record patterns of sleep to discuss with your health professional.
- **Nutrition:** A balanced, nutritious diet can improve your energy levels, boost your immune system and enhance your general health and wellbeing. Limit your intake of alcohol, cigarettes, caffeine and other drugs. A healthy body leads to a healthy mind.

B. Behaviour Patterns

Our energy and motivation are slowed down with depression. When we are feeling blue, almost without realising we can stop doing the things that help us enjoy life and cope better. You can help manage depression by taking steps each day to re-activate your energy.

- **Stay active:** Try to schedule enjoyable and routine activities to fill up the spare hours of your day. Set realistic standards and don't feel guilty for what you don't achieve. Focus on what you did do rather than what you didn't.
- **Be with others:** Avoid withdrawing from others. Spend time with your friends and family. Accept help. Talking is good therapy. Support groups can also be helpful.
- **Have a laugh, it's good medicine:** It releases endorphins (happy hormones) to lift your mood and clear your thinking. Try watching funny TV shows, or reading cartoons or humorous articles. Spend time with positive and helpful people.
- **Communicate clearly:** Try to express how you feel and ask for what you want. Be assertive and respectful. This helps you to get your needs met and improves your relationships.

- **Keep a journal:** Write your thoughts and feelings down. This helps you to clarify your thinking, solve problems, release emotions and track your experiences. Remember to record the things that help you feel better.

C. Good Thinking:

Our thinking affects the way we feel. You can help manage depression by taking charge of your thinking style.

- **Rational Thinking Strategies:** A psychologist or counsellor, specially trained in CBT, can teach you ways to identify and replace unhelpful, irrational thinking patterns with more realistic and effective thinking. Good thinking leads to positive action, problem solving and feeling better.
- **Solving Difficult Problems:** Problem solving is a skill that is harder when you're depressed, but is essential for working through day to day challenges. You can learn to tackle a problem by writing down the options for handling a problem. Then working out the best option for you based on pros and cons, and a plan for putting the solution into place. It is okay to ask people that you trust for guidance. Try to avoid major decisions until you are feeling better.
- **Self-acceptance:** Remember your achievements and strengths. Praise and reward yourself for your efforts as well as outcomes. Give yourself a fair go and put self-criticism on hold.
- **Be realistic:** Adjust your expectations. Good recovery requires understanding that we can't always do 100% so don't push yourself. Remember that depression is a common condition that is manageable and can be overcome.

Recommended reading:

Beating the Blues (Susan Tanner & Jillian Ball)

Depression: Lifting the cloud (Christine Read)

Breaking Patterns of Depression (Michael Yapko)

Recommended Websites:

www.depressionet.com.au

www.reachout.asn.au

www.beyondblue.org.au