

Understanding Depression



“ Depression is as old as the human race, and rare is the person who has not felt its touch.”

Dorothy Rowe

“ If you know someone who’s depressed, please resolve never to ask them why. Depression isn’t a straightforward response to a bad situation; depression just is, like the weather. Try to understand the blackness, lethargy, hopelessness, and loneliness they’re going through. It’s hard to be a friend to someone who’s depressed, but it is one of the kindest noblest, and best things you will ever do.”

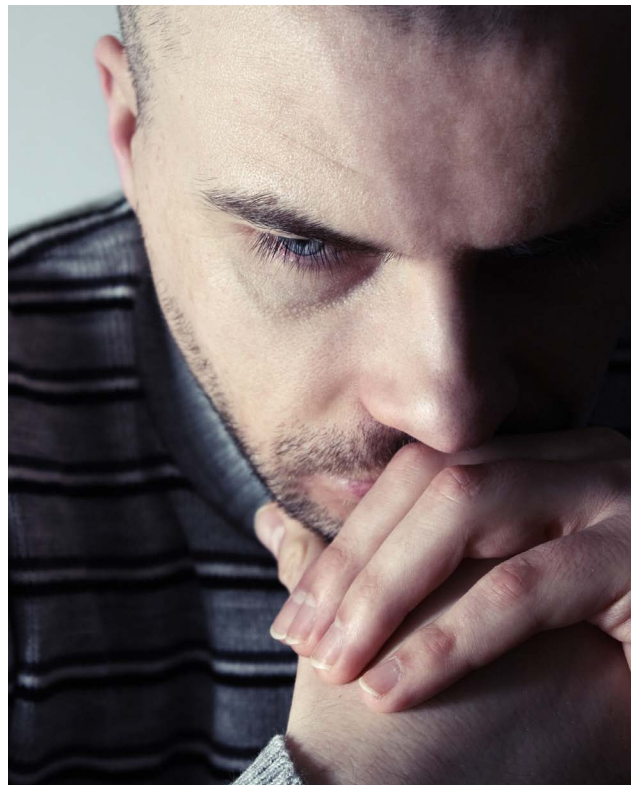
Stephen Fry

When people talk about feeling depressed they usually mean that they are low in spirit, feeling a bit miserable or fed up. These are perfectly normal feelings that everyone experiences and usually they pass within a few hours or days without affecting our ability to function in our everyday lives. Depression, in the medical sense of the word, is an illness that gives rise to profoundly difficult and persistent feelings. Whilst there is variation in the way it affects individuals there are typical features such as feelings of hopelessness, deep sadness, self-loathing and worthlessness; lack of vitality or motivation; and in severe cases suicidal tendencies. One of the difficulties with depression is that, unlike physical illnesses, on the outside we may appear to be fine. There is no broken arm, hacking cough or strange spots to indicate that there is something wrong. It can be tempting for the uneducated observer to wonder why someone can’t just pull themselves together. Without such visible symptoms it may even be hard to convince ourselves that there is something wrong and that we need help.

Fortunately we are beginning to understand more about depression and with greater social awareness more people feel able to ask for the help that they need. There are a range of options available for managing and treating depression including talking therapies such as FBT therapy, psychotherapy and cognitive behavioural therapy, medication and lifestyle changes such as reducing stress and improving physical wellbeing. If you, or someone you know, is affected by depression and you would like to find out more you can talk to one of our Adviceline Advisors, or visit www.well-online.co.uk for further resources.

What causes depression?

There is still no consensus as to what exactly causes depression. Some experts believe it is due to biological factors while others believe it is a result of traumatic or difficult personal experiences. It is most likely due to an integration of biological, personal and social factors. In the Journal of Psychiatry Dr PJ Cowen argues that we need to understand it in terms of our individual responses to stress and anxiety. It can be triggered by stressful events such as bereavement, the breakdown of a relationship or the loss of a job. Sometimes it follows an illness; it has been associated with physical conditions such as an underactive thyroid, or the hormonal changes after the birth of a child. It can be part of a downward spiral after a series of testing events, and people who are lonely are more susceptible to it. There is a tendency for depression to be a common trait in families so if one family member suffers from it there is a higher chance others will too. Alcohol and drugs are known contributors to depression. Whilst alcohol is often used to relax and relieve stress it also acts as a depressant. Cannabis has also been shown to bring on depression and other mental health issues.



Symptoms of depression

Depression has been described in many ways. Winston Churchill famously referred to it as the Black Dog, while others say it feels like darkness, an abyss or a constant heaviness. Symptoms will vary from person to person but if you find yourself agreeing with several of these then there is a possibility that you could be suffering from depression:

Physical

- Lack of energy
- Loss of libido
- Disturbed sleep – difficulty falling asleep or in staying asleep
- Change in appetite
- Unexplained aches and pains
- Increased reliance on alcohol or other substances to soothe difficult feelings

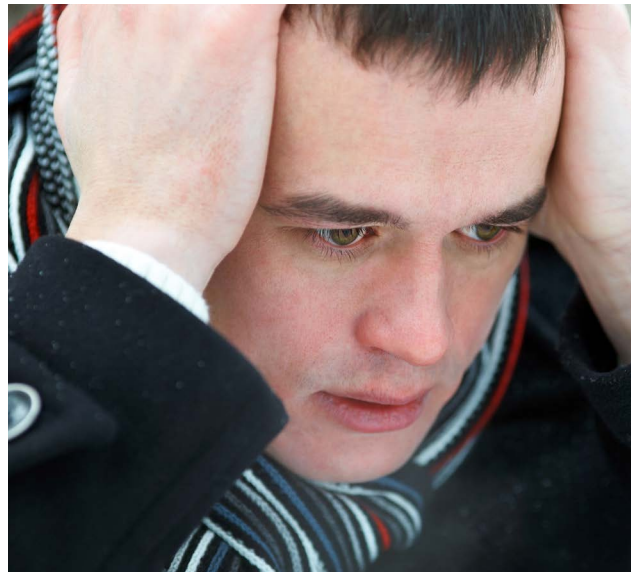
Psychological

- Low self worth
- Feeling hopeless or that life isn't worth living
- Unable to enjoy life
- No motivation or interest in things
- Persistent anxiety or worry
- Continuous low mood or sadness, feeling tearful
- Feeling numb and empty
- Irritability and intolerance of others
- Wanting to withdraw and isolate yourself
- Suicidal thoughts or thoughts of harming yourself

There are other more specific types of depression such as **bi-polar disorder**, previously known as manic depression – in which the person alternates between periods of excessively high moods (mania) and depression; **seasonal affective disorder (SAD)** or 'winter depression' which has a seasonal pattern usually related to winter; or **postnatal depression** which develops after the birth of a baby.

Negative thinking

One of the most powerful and destructive aspects of depression is the way that it can affect our thinking. Psychologist Dorothy Rowe asserts that depression causes a person to believe that they are bad or unacceptable. There are many paths that can lead someone to this conclusion, for instance they may believe that bad things happen to them because they do not deserve better, or perhaps they experienced neglect from a parent and are left with the sense that they are unlovable. These beliefs make us feel bad and shape the way that we view everything else; to put it more succinctly 'we do not see things as they are, but as we are'. We begin to believe that our way of seeing the world is the absolute truth, that anyone who sees it differently must be mad or bad. In order to come out of depression we need to challenge this way of thinking and learn to value and accept ourselves.



What helps?

The first thing to do is to acknowledge that you have depression and that you need help. Once you have named it you can explore your options and decide what positive steps to take. Here are a few suggestions below:

Don't isolate

There is a tendency when depressed to withdraw from others, including our loved ones. While you may lack the energy or inclination to be socialising or spending lengthy periods with others it is important to remain connected. Even having just one person that you can talk to will help. Choose people who are supportive and try to avoid those who may be critical.

Set goals

Many of those who have suffered from depression have reported how helpful it has been to set themselves goals. These goals are not intended to be overwhelming but small steps that will help you to feel more empowered. Depending on how severe your depression is this might include ensuring that you have a healthy breakfast, going for a walk, meeting a friend or doing something that you feel passionate about. Each time you achieve one of these goals allow yourself to recognise what you have accomplished.

Exercise

Many studies have demonstrated links between exercise and lower rates of depression. It gives back control of the body and this can lead to feeling more in control in other areas.

Additionally it releases endorphins, the hormone associated with positive moods. Any kind of exercise is fine as long as you do enough of it. Make sure it is something you enjoy.

Reduce Stress

Stress can be a trigger for depression. When you are in the midst of depression it might feel too overwhelming to make major life changes but there will be some ways that you can reduce stress e.g. asking for help, eliminating any unnecessary activities or demands. Make time to relax and recuperate.

Talking Therapies

FBT therapy and Psychotherapy offer a supportive space to explore difficulties; gain understanding and insight into ourselves and help to bring about effective changes in wellbeing. In many ways the two approaches are similar, although therapy tends to be more short term and focussed and psychotherapy addresses deeper issues and is usually longer term. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy aims to reframe events in a more positive fashion and is usually short term. You may be able to access some of these services via Confidential Care or your GP.

Your GP

Your GP is an important source of support and if you feel you may be depressed, especially if you are experiencing suicidal thoughts, you need to talk to them. Together with your GP you can discuss what could be helpful in treating the depression.

If someone you know is depressed

Caring for someone with depression can be challenging but there are things you can do to help. Offer emotional support and be prepared to listen without trying to cheer them up or fix them. Accept that they might not know why they feel depressed or be able to justify how they are. You may worry that talking about negative feelings might make things worse but if you allow someone to feel heard and understood then you are offering something valuable. The more the person feels able to talk freely the less likely they are to push down their real feelings. You can also offer practical help in the form of making meals, running errands or cleaning. If you are in a relationship or living with someone with depression be aware that it can have an impact on you too and ensure that you don't forget to look after yourself. Get support from friends or family and take time out for yourself.

Conclusion

Although depression can feel hopeless there is much that can help the sufferer. Some people recover fully and others find ways of managing it. Whilst it can seem devastating depression can also be a catalyst, demanding that we face up to our selves, that we make peace with our wounds, our self-doubt and imperfections. With the right kind of help we can learn to be kind and accepting of ourselves and find our hopefulness again.



Further Reading and Support

I had a Black Dog: His Name was Depression by Matthew Johnstone

Depression: The Way Out of Your Prison by Dorothy Rowe

Depression, the Secret we Share by Andrew Solomon on Ted Talks

www.ted.com/andrew_solomon_depression_the_secret_we_share

The Samaritans – charity that provides confidential support for anyone who needs it, including those who feel suicidal

Telephone: **08457 90 90 90**

Email: jo@samaritans.org

www.samaritans.org

Further help and information

CiC – Supporting Organisations
www.well-online.co.uk

24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline, providing emotional and practical support.

(This helpsheet is intended for informational purposes only and does not represent any form of clinical diagnosis. While every effort has been made to ensure that the content is accurate, relevant and current, CiC accepts no liability for any errors or omissions contained herein. The list of books is provided for interest only and CiC is not responsible for their availability, accuracy, or content.)

