

What Is Depression?

Depression is a word used in everyday language to describe a number of feelings, including sadness, frustration, disappointment and sometimes lethargy. However, in clinical practice, the term “depression” or “major depression” differs from these everyday “down” periods in three main ways:

- Major depression is more intense
- Major depression lasts longer (two weeks or more)
- Major Depression significantly interferes with effective day to day functioning.

Depression as a syndrome

A syndrome is a collection of events, behaviours, thoughts or feelings that often go together. The depression syndrome is a collection of feelings, thoughts and behaviours that have been found to characterise depressed people. You may find you experience some or all of these thinking patterns, feelings and behaviours. There are many individual differences to the number of symptoms and the extent to which different symptoms are experienced.

Symptoms of depression

Mood

Depression is considered to be a disorder of mood. Depressed individuals describe low mood that has persisted for longer than two weeks. In mild forms of depression, individuals may not feel bad all day but still describe a dismal outlook and a sense of gloom. Their mood might lift with a positive experience, but fall again, with even a minor disappointment.

In severe depression, a low mood could persist throughout the day, failing to lift even when pleasant things occur. The low mood might fluctuate during the day-it may be worse in the morning and relatively better in the afternoon. This is called “diurnal variation” which often accompanies a more severe type of depression.

In addition to sadness, other emotions common to depression are guilt, loneliness, anxiety and irritability.

Thinking Patterns

Individuals who are depressed think in certain ways, and this thinking is an essential feature of depression. Those who are depressed tend to see themselves in a negative light. They dwell on how bad they feel, how the world is full of difficulties, how hopeless the future seems and how things might never get better. Often people with depression have low self-esteem and blame themselves for many things which happen in their life.

Physical Changes

Some people experience physical symptoms of depression

- Sleep patterns can change. Some people have difficulty falling asleep, or have an interrupted sleep, or wake early in the morning. Others sleep more than normal and have difficulty staying awake.
- Appetite may decline and weight loss occurs, while others eat more than usual and thus gain weight.
- Sexual interest might decline
- Energy levels may fall, as well as motivation to carry out everyday activities. Depressed individuals may stop doing things they enjoy because they feel unmotivated or lethargic.

Interpersonal

Many depressed people express concern about their personal relationships. They may become unhappy and dissatisfied with their family, and other close relationships. They may feel shy and anxious when they are with other people, especially in a group. They may feel lonely and isolated, yet at the same time are unwilling or unable to reach out to others, even when they have opportunities to do so.

Many people experiencing depression might begin to wonder if there is something really wrong with them. One typical fear is that they might be going “crazy”. Reactions from other people such as “get over it”, “sort yourself out”, are not very helpful.

Although you might feel alone in your struggle with depression, many people experience depression. One in every four people experience depressed mood at some time in their life. Depression can affect any kind of person, regardless of their age, personality, socioeconomic status, culture, or gender. Remember you are not alone!

What Causes Depression?

Depression is mostly likely caused by a number of different factors interacting with one another. Very broadly they can be grouped into biological and psychological factors. Notably though, besides biological factors and psychological factors, factors outside of the individual such as socio-cultural factors might also influence the development of depression. Interestingly, in the last 50 years depression in western cultures has increased tenfold. Conversely, there are some cultures in the world that have very low rates of depression, suggesting the influence of socio-cultural factors.

Biological Factors

Biological factors that might have some effect on depression include; genes, hormones and brain chemicals (neurotransmitters).

Genetic factors

Depression often runs in families, which suggest that individuals may inherit genes that make them vulnerable to developing depression. However, one may inherit an increased vulnerability to the illness, but not necessarily the illness itself. Although many people inherit the vulnerability, a great many of them never suffer a depressive illness.

Hormones

Research has found that there are some hormonal changes that occur in depression. The brain goes through some changes before and during a depressive episode and certain parts of the brain are affected. This might result in an over or under production of some hormones, which may account for some of the symptoms of depression.

Brain Chemicals

Nerve cells in the brain communicate to each other by specific substances called neurotransmitters. It is believed that during depression, there is reduced activity of one or more of these neurotransmitter systems, and this disturbs certain areas of the brain that regulate functions such as sleep, appetite, sexual drive and perhaps mood. The reduced level of neurotransmitters results in reduced communication between the nerve cells and accounts for the typical symptoms depression. Many antidepressant drugs increase certain neurotransmitters in the brain.

Psychological factors

Thinking

Many thinking patterns are associated with depression. These thinking patterns include

- Overstressing the negative
- Taking responsibility for bad events but not for good events
- Having inflexible rules about how one should behave
- Thinking that you know what others are thinking and that they are thinking badly of you
- Negative thoughts regarding being worthless, unlovable, incapable, or helpless

Loss

Sometimes people experience events where loss occurs, and this can bring on depression. The experience of loss may include the loss of a loved one, loss of a friendship, loss of face, loss of support, or loss of an established role.

Sense of failure

Some people may stake their happiness in achieving certain goals, such as getting A's on exams, or finding a life partner. If for some reason they are not able to achieve these goals, they might believe that they have failed somehow, and it is this sense of failure that can sometimes bring on depression.

Stress

An accumulation of stressful events may also bring on depression. Stressful events include situations such as unemployment, financial worries, high work-loads, relationship problems, physical illness, and major changes in life circumstances.

Conclusion

There are a number of things you can do to overcome depression, or to prevent yourself from becoming depressed. Medications can be of assistance in overcoming depression. Sometimes people have incorrect ideas about antidepressant medications. It is important to discuss medications fully with your doctor, including any concerns you might have. Counselling and various other “talking therapies” can also be useful in overcoming depression. For more information on talking therapies for depression, contact the Student Health Centre on ph 364-2402 and make an appointment to discuss your options with a counsellor. A 50 minute appointment will typically cost \$10.00. Normally there is no wait-list and you can be seen within a week.