**Depression**

It describes what depression feels like, some of the help that is available, how you can help yourself and how to help someone else who is depressed.

It also mentions some of the things we don't know about depression. At the end of the leaflet, there is a list of other places where you can get further information.



**What does depression feel like?**

We all feel fed up, miserable or sad at times.

These feelings don't usually last longer than a week or two, and they don't interfere too much with our lives.

Sometimes there's a reason, sometimes not. We usually cope - we may talk to a friend but don't otherwise need any help.

However, in depression:

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your feelings don't lift after a few days – they carry on for weeks or months are so bad that they interfere with your life.

Most people with depression will not have all the symptoms listed below, but most will have at least five or six.

You:

feel unhappy most of the time (but may feel a little better in the evenings) lose interest in life and can't enjoy anything find it harder to make decisions

can't cope with things that you used to

feel utterly tired

feel restless and agitated

lose appetite and weight (some people find they do the reverse and put on weight)

take 1-2 hours to get off to sleep, and then wake up earlier than usual lose interest in sex

lose your self-confidence

feel useless, inadequate and hopeless

avoid other people

feel irritable

feel worse at a particular time each day, usually in the morning think of suicide.

You may not realise how depressed you are for a while, especially if it has come on gradually.

You try to struggle on and may even start to blame yourself for being lazy or lacking willpower.

It sometimes takes a friend or a partner to persuade you that there really is a problem which can be helped.

You may start to notice pains, constant headaches or sleeplessness. Physical symptoms like this can be the first sign of depression.

**Why does depression happen?**

As with our everyday feelings of low mood, there will sometimes be an obvious reason for becoming depressed, sometimes not.

It can be a disappointment, a frustration, or that you have lost something - or someone – important to you.

There is often more than one reason, and these will be different for different people. They include

**Things that happen in our lives**

It is normal to feel depressed after a distressing event - bereavement, a divorce or losing a job.

You may well spend a lot of time over the next few weeks or months thinking and talking about it. After a while you come to terms with what's happened. But you may get stuck in a depressed mood, which doesn't seem to lift.

**Circumstances**

If you are alone, have no friends around, are stressed, have other worries or are physically run down, you are more likely to become depressed.

**Physical Illness**

Physical illnesses can affect the way the brain works and so cause depression. These include:

life-threatening illnesses like cancer and heart disease long and/or painful illnesses, like arthritis

viral infections like 'flu' or glandular fever - particularly in younger people hormonal problems, like an under-active thyroid.

**Personality**

Some of us seem to be more vulnerable to depression than others. This may be because of our genes, because of experiences early in our life, or both.

**Alcohol**

Regular heavy drinking makes you more likely to get depressed – and, indeed, to kill yourself.

**Gender**

Women seem to get depressed more often than men.

It may be that men are less likely to talk about their feelings, and more likely to deal with them by drinking heavily or becoming aggressive.

Women are more likely to have the double stress of having to work and look after children.

**Genes**

Depression can run in families. If you have one parent who has become severely depressed, you are about eight times more likely to become depressed yourself.



**What about bipolar disorder (manic depression)?**

About one in 10 people who suffer from serious depression will also have periods when they are too happy and overactive.

This used to be called manic depression, but is now often called Bipolar Disorder.

It affects the same number of men and women and tends to run in families (see **information on Bipolar Disorder**).



**Isn't depression just a form of weakness?**

Other people may think that you have just 'given in', as if you have a choice in the matter.

The fact is there comes a point when depression is much more like an illness than anything else.

It can happen to the most determined of people – even powerful personalities can experience deep depression. Winston Churchill called it his ‘black dog'.



**When should I seek help for depression?**

When your feelings of depression are worse than usual and don't seem to get any better.

When your feelings of depression affect your work, interests and feelings towards your family and friends.

If you find yourself feeling that life is not worth living, or that other people would be better off without you.

It may be enough to talk things over with a relative or friend.

If this doesn't help, you probably need to talk it over with your GP. You may find that your friends and family have noticed a difference in you and have been worried about you.



**I have depression - how can I help myself?**

**Don't keep it to yourself**

If you've had some bad news, or a major upset, tell someone close to you - tell them how you feel.

You may need to talk (and maybe cry) about it more than once. This is part of the mind's natural way of healing.

**Do something**

Get out of doors for some exercise, even if only for a walk.

This will help you to keep physically fit, and will help you sleep. Even if you

can't work, it's good to keep active.

This could be housework, do-it-yourself (even as little as changing a light bulb), or any activity that is part of your normal routine.

**Eat well**

You may not feel like eating - but try to eat regularly.

Depression can make you lose weight and run short of vitamins which will only make you feel worse. Fresh fruit and vegetables are particularly helpful.

**Beware alcohol!**

Try not to drown your sorrows with a drink. Alcohol actually makes depression worse.

It may make you feel better for a short while, but it doesn't last.

Drinking can stop you dealing with important problems and from getting the right help. It's also bad for your physical health.

**Beware cannabis**

While cannabis can help you to relax, there is now evidence that regular use, particularly in teenagers, can bring on depression.

**Sleep**

If you can't sleep, try not to worry about it. Settle down with some relaxing music or television while you're lying in bed.

Your body will get a chance to rest and, with your mind occupied, you may feel less anxious and find it easier to get some sleep.

**Tackle the cause**

If you think you know what is behind your depression, it can help to write down the problem and then think of the things you could do to tackle it. Pick the best things to do and try them.

**Keep hopeful**

Remind yourself that:

Many other people have had depression.

It may be hard to believe, but you will eventually come out of it.

Depression can sometimes be helpful – you may come out of it stronger and better able to cope. It can help you to see situations and relationships more clearly.

You may be able to make important decisions and changes in your life, which you have avoided in the past.



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**Talking treatments**

There are many different sorts of **psychotherapy** available, some of which are very effective for people with mild to moderate depression. They include:

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**Counselling**

Simply talking about your feelings can be helpful, however depressed you are. Sometimes it is hard to express your real feelings even to close friends.

Talking things through with a trained counsellor or therapist can be easier. It can be a relief to get things off your chest, and it can help you to be clearer about how you feel about your life and other people.

There may be a counsellor at your GP surgery with whom you can talk, or your GP can refer you to a local counselling service.

**Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)**

Many of us have habits of thinking which, quite apart from what is happening in life, are likely to make us depressed and keep us depressed. CBT helps you to:

identify any unrealistic and unhelpful ways of thinking

then develop new, more helpful ways of thinking and behaving.

**Problem-solving therapy**

This helps you to be clear about your key problems, how to break them down into manageable bits and how to develop problem-solving skills.

**Couple therapy**

If your depression seems connected with your relationship with your partner, then RELATE can be helpful in enabling you to sort out your feelings – it is an organisation that specialises in working with couples (see 'other organisations' for contact details).

**Antidepressants**

If your depression is severe or goes on for a long time, your doctor may suggest a course of antidepressants.

These are not tranquillisers, although they may help you to feel less anxious and agitated. They can help people with depression to feel and cope better, so that they can start to enjoy life and deal with their problems effectively again.

**How do antidepressants work?**

The brain is made up of millions of cells which transmit messages from one to another using tiny amounts of chemical substances called neurotransmitters. Upwards of 100 different chemicals are active in different areas of the brain.

It is thought that in depression, two of these neurotransmitters are particularly affected – Serotonin, sometimes referred to as 5HT, and Noradrenaline.

Antidepressants increase concentrations of these two chemicals at nerve endings, and so seem to boost the function of those parts of the brain that use Serotonin and Noradrenaline. Even so, it is not certain that this is the actual mechanism that improves your mood.