

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Depression is a medical condition characterised by feelings of extreme sadness and dejection. Depression is not just the feeling of sadness we all experience at times. It is normal for most people to feel sad at times, particularly when faced with losses, or feelings of grief. These latter are called “reactive” feelings -- feelings which occur when faced with loss or grief.

On the other hand, depression is more than a low mood, or feelings of sadness at a loss. It is a serious medical condition which causes both physical and psychological symptoms but, which, if detected, can be treated using a range of effective and safe treatment approaches.

Depression is a common disorder. In Australia, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men will experience depression at some time in their life. Unfortunately, only about 20% of depressed people are correctly diagnosed -- because depression can “mask” itself as physical illness (such as chronic pain, sleeplessness, or fatigue). Therefore, many people who suffer from depression are not treated and may suffer for years from what is a treatable condition.

Depression can contribute to, and be caused by, many physical illnesses. It is a major cause of health problems. Untreated depression can lead to the onset of medical problems.

The World Health Organisation has concluded that, by 2020, depression will be the world’s major health problem, costing many billions of dollars to deal with.

WHAT CAUSES DEPRESSION?

Depression results from a combination of physical and psychological factors, causing chemical changes in the brain. Physical factors may include: medical illness and treatment; inherited traits; chemical changes; and drug/alcohol use. Psychological factors may include: life stressors; negative experiences; and high anxiety. It is important that diagnosis and an assessment of the causes in any particular case must be carried out by a medical practitioner.

DEPRESSION SYMPTOM CHECKLIST

Have you or a loved one experienced any of the following for at least two weeks:

- ▶ Felt sad or depressed
- ▶ Lost interest in most things
- ▶ Lost pleasure in your normal activities
- ▶ Lost your appetite or lost weight
- ▶ Unable to get to sleep, or waking early
- ▶ Felt tired all the time.
- ▶ Had trouble concentrating
- ▶ Felt slowed down
- ▶ Felt restless or agitated
- ▶ Felt worthless
- ▶ Felt guilty
- ▶ Felt life is not worth living.

If “Yes” you may be suffering from depression and you should see your doctor to discuss the issue.

TREATMENTS OF DEPRESSION

In every case, there is a need for careful medical and psychological assessment, as people feel their depression in a variety of ways and the effects of the condition will also vary from person to person.

In cases of depression there is a need for a range of interventions, including: specific drug therapy; education; and psychological therapy.

The most common drug therapy is a prescription for an antidepressant, which helps control re-orient chemical message systems in the brain. These help improve sleep, concentration, energy and contribute to a better mood and less anxiety. Antidepressants are not addictive and are relatively safe and effective.

There are a range of psychological therapies for depression, aimed at helping the person decrease anxiety, stop drug/alcohol use, resolve life stresses, and, overall, to promote better coping skills. Education and counselling help the person reduce stress, resolve conflicts, manage their life more effectively, develop new ways of thinking about themselves and the world and develop new ways of enjoying activities.

Part of treatment may involve helping the person avoid family conflicts and develop ways of using their family as a means of support and encouragement.

Your medical practitioner can help develop the most appropriate treatment approach for any individual, possibly also drawing upon the expertise of other health professionals.