

Understanding depression and its symptoms

Following the experience of disaster or trauma many people feel negative emotions such as sadness, frustration, a loss of motivation or reduction in energy. Sometimes these symptoms become intense, last continuously for more than two weeks, and interfere with everyday functioning. Depression symptoms this severe are referred to as 'clinical depression' or 'major depression'. In this handout, when we refer to depression we are referring to 'clinical depression'.

Mood

Depression is considered to be a disorder of mood. Individuals who are depressed 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 may lift with a positive experience, but fall again with even a minor disappointment. In severe depression, a low mood will persist throughout the day, failing to lift even when pleasant things occur. The low mood may fluctuate during the day such that it may be worse in the morning and relatively better in the afternoon. In addition to sadness, other moods common to depression are anxiety, guilt, worthlessness and inadequacy.

Physical

Often, in depression, physical symptoms also exist.

- Sleep patterns often change, such that it is difficult to fall asleep. Some individuals wake many times during the night finding it difficult to go back to sleep, and/or wake up early in the morning. Others find themselves sleeping more - having difficulty staying awake.
- Appetite may decline and weight loss occurs, or some individuals may find themselves eating more than usual and thus gaining weight.
- Sexual interest may decline.
- Energy levels fall, as does motivation to carry out everyday activities. Depressed individuals often feel unmotivated to engage in activities that in the past were enjoyable or satisfying, and thus cease doing them.

Thinking

Individuals who are depressed find that they think in certain ways. They tend to see themselves as being useless, inadequate, and a failure. Often their self-esteem and self-confidence become very low. They find themselves caught with thoughts of how bad they feel, how the world is terrible, and on how hopeless everything is.

Interacting with other people

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

What causes depression?

It is important to understand that depression is not caused by one thing, but that there are a number of interacting factors to be considered. These factors can be grouped into two categories: biology and psychology. Many factors interact in depression, although precisely which specific factors interact may differ from person to person.

Psychology

Thinking. Many thinking patterns are associated with depression. These include overstressing the negative, taking the responsibility for bad events but not for good events, having inflexible rules about how one should behave, and thinking that you know what others are thinking and that they are thinking badly of you. Depression often occurs after traumatic injury because of the consequences of the injury such as disability, disfigurement, and not being able to return to activities such as work, hobbies or sports. Some people find it very hard to come to terms with the realisation that their world is very different after injury.

Loss. Often, loss is associated with an increase in depression symptoms. Loss is very prevalent following injury – loss of working ability, loss of sporting ability, and loss of important roles (such as income earner for the family).

Stress. An accumulation of stressful life events may also increase depression symptoms. After injury, stress levels can often increase because of financial worries, relationship difficulties, and the stress of rehabilitation from physical injury.

Behaviour. When people have a low mood they often don't feel like socialising with their friends and family. They also don't feel like doing the things they usually do that are fun and pleasurable. A loss of energy means they stop exercising or doing things they usually do around the house. Over time this decrease in activity and pleasurable activities leads to further loss of interest and motivation creating a vicious cycle of depression.

Biological factors

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

Conclusion

While we cannot do very much about the genes which we have inherited, there are many things we can do to overcome depression symptoms. Your doctor may have suggested medication, especially in severe depression. While taking medication can be of assistance in overcoming depression, there are many things you can do which will help overcome and prevent depression. Cognitive behavioural therapy will help you incorporate self-help methods of thinking and behaving which will lead you on the way to recovery.