

Depression

You are feeling overwhelmingly sad and, at times, this is compounded by feeling guilty, worthless or hopeless. You are also feeling anxious, tense, irrationally worried, and irritable.

Depression is described as a serious illness by health professionals. They tend to use expressions such as depression, depressive illness or clinical depression to refer to it. What you have to bear in mind is that it is very different from the common experience of feeling miserable or fed up for a short period of time. When you're depressed, you may have feelings of extreme sadness that can last for a long time. These feelings are severe enough to interfere with your daily life, and can last for weeks or months, rather than days.

If you are feeling depressed then you are not alone. Depression is increasingly common. Research shows that around 15% of people suffer from bout of severe depression at some point in their lives. However, the exact number of people with depression is hard to estimate because many people do not seek help. They try to cope with it by themselves. Significant life events can trigger periods of depression for example, exam or work stress, family turmoil, or concerns around identity or sexual orientation are all types of thing that can be triggers. Hormonal changes, such as around adolescence, pregnancy or menopause can also contribute to depression.

Depression can affect people of any age, race, culture or gender. However, studies have shown that women are twice as likely to suffer from depression as men, although men are far more likely to commit suicide. This is perhaps due to the fact that men are generally more reluctant to admit that they have problem and, if they do, they are reluctant to seek help.

People with a family history of depression are also more likely to experience depression themselves.

Depression affects people in many different ways and can cause a wide variety of physical, psychological and social symptoms.

A few people still think that depression is not a real illness and that it is a form of weakness or admission of failure. Living through depression often makes a person stronger, and more sensitive. People with depression are often asked what they have to be depressed about. Young people are told that "they have their lives ahead of them," even though their feelings tell them that their life is over. This can prevent them seeking help, by reinforcing their feelings of guilt, and making recovery harder.

Recovering from depression is not as simple as "pulling yourself together." Hearing that is very hurtful, and can actually reinforce people's feelings of worthlessness making their depression worse. Remember the experts describe it as an illness with real effects, and it is certainly not a sign of failure. In fact, famous leaders, such as Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi, all had periods of depression.

Symptoms of depression

If you're depressed you often lose interest in things that you once enjoyed. You find that it interferes with your work, social and family life. So what are the symptoms of depression? These can be physical, psychological and social.

Psychological symptoms include:

- continuous low mood or sadness,
- feelings of hopelessness and helplessness,
- low self-esteem,
- tearfulness,
- feelings of guilt and worthlessness
- feeling irritable and intolerance of others,
- general lack of motivation and interest,
- difficulty in making decisions,
- lack of enjoyment,
- feelings of anxiety or worry
- reduced sex drive.
- suicidal thoughts or thoughts of harming someone else,

Physical symptoms:

- change in appetite or weight
- unexplained aches and pains,
- lack of energy or lack of interest in sex,
- changes to the menstrual cycle, and
- disturbed sleep patterns (for example, problems going to sleep or waking in the early hours of the morning).

Social symptoms:

- not performing well at work,
- taking part in fewer social activities and avoiding contact with friends,
- reduced hobbies and interests, and
- difficulties in home and family life.

Triggers of Depression:

Depression can be triggered as a result of:

- **Reactive Depression:** stressful life events, such as bereavement, divorce, illness, redundancy, and job or money worries, feelings of hopelessness, etc. This is often known as 'reactive depression', where depression is a reaction to the event. However, in other cases, depression does not have an obvious cause.
- **Physical or chemical** - depression can be caused by changes in levels of chemicals in the brain. For example, your mood can change as hormone levels go up and down. This is often seen in women as it is associated with the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, miscarriage, childbirth and the menopause.
- **Social** - doing fewer activities or having fewer interests can also lead to depression.

Family history

If you have a family history of depression, you are more likely to get depression yourself.

Studies have shown that different versions of a gene can be inherited, which can have an effect on a natural mood-changing chemical in your brain called serotonin. However, it is still not fully understood whether this imbalance is a result of depression, or a cause of it. But rest assured, many people who have a family history of depression never develop the condition and yet people with no family history of depression can become depressed.

What you need to bear in mind is the fact that there is rarely one single cause of depression - usually, different causes combine to trigger the condition. For example, you may feel low after an illness and then experience a stressful life event, such as bereavement, which then leads to depression.

People often talk about a 'downward spiral' of events that lead to depression. For example, if a person's relationship with their partner breaks down, they are likely to feel low, they may stop seeing friends and family, and they may start drinking more - all of which can make them feel even worse and trigger depression.

Other frequent causes of depression may include:

- **drinking excess alcohol** –
- **using recreational drugs** - such as cannabis and cocaine, and
- **taking some types of prescription medication** - can also occasionally cause depression.

Grief and depression

Process of Grieving can cause similar symptoms as depression. However, you have to bear in mind that grief is an entirely natural response to a loss, while depression is considered to be an illness. The difference is that within the process of grieving feelings of loss and sadness come in waves, but you are still able to enjoy life and able to look forward to the future. However, those who are depressed have a constant feeling of sadness; they do not enjoy anything and have little sense of a positive future. Grief, however, in some individuals can lead to state of depression.