

Understanding Depression

At times, people may experience symptoms such as sadness, loss of interest or low motivation. Sometimes these symptoms become intense and are present most days for a long period of time.

When symptoms such as these start interfering with everyday life and last more than two weeks, we refer to them as 'clinical depression' or 'major depression'. Major depression is very different from simply feeling 'blue' from time to time and includes the following changes:

Changes in mood

- Moods common to depression include sadness, anxiety, guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness and anger.
- If depression is mild, 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 such as seeing a good friend, 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 happen.

Physical changes

- Trouble falling, or staying, asleep and waking up too early is common. Some people, on the other hand, find themselves sleeping more.
- Weight can change, with appetite decreasing or increasing significantly.
- Sexual interest may decline.
- Energy levels fall, as does motivation to carry out everyday activities, including things that were enjoyable in the past.

Changes in thinking

Depressed people tend to see themselves as being useless, inadequate and failures. They dwell on how bad they feel and on how hopeless everything is. Sometimes, these thoughts are so negative that they can contemplate taking their own life.

Changes in relationships

People who experience depression may become unhappy and dissatisfied with their family relationships, close friends, etc. They may feel shy and anxious around others and have trouble socialising. They may feel lonely and unloved, but at the same time, feel unable to reach out to others.

What causes depression?

Depression is not usually caused by one thing. We know that an individual may be vulnerable to depression if there is a history of depression in the family, and we also know that particular thinking patterns (e.g., oversteering the negative) are also associated with depression. It is important to note that having a vulnerability to depression does not mean that someone will experience depression. There are many situations that can trigger depression including, loss of a loved one, loss of working ability, relationship difficulties, or a traumatic event.

Getting help

There are effective treatments available to help people overcome their depression. One of the most effective treatments is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). This approach recognises that the way we think and act affects the way we feel. During this therapy you will learn:

- A structured approach to problem solving to help you manage the day to day stressors.
- How to challenge your negative thinking, which will have a positive impact on the way you feel.
- Strategies to help you get back to your routine and enjoying your usual activities.

The therapy may involve 8-12 weekly sessions with a mental health professional, but may require longer depending on your needs. Your doctor may also have suggested medication which can be of assistance in overcoming depression, especially in the case of severe depression.

Self-management resources

Below is a list of internet and other written resources that may help you, together with the treatment recommended by your doctor.

- Written materials for you and your family are available from websites such as beyondblue (www.beyondblue.org.au) and the Black Dog Institute (www.blackdoginstitute.org.au)
- There are also internet based self-help programs available e.g., MoodGYM (www.moodgym.anu.edu.au).
- Useful books include Mind over Mood: A Cognitive Therapy Treatment Manual (Padesky and Greenberger 1995) and Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy (Burns 2008).
- At Ease website (www.at-ease.dva.gov.au) is a Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) website with information on mental health and wellbeing including the 'Wellbeing Toolbox', which is an online interactive program, anxiety management and alcohol resources. A Mental Health and Wellbeing after Military Service booklet is also available to order or download from this website.

Veterans Line 1800 011 046 can be reached 24 hours a day across Australia for crisis support and counselling. This service is provided by the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS).