

Depression

What is depression?

Most people feel unhappy or depressed every now and again, but there is a difference between this feeling and the mental illness of depression.

Depression is a very real illness that affects the entire mind and body. It seriously dampens the five basic activities of humans: their energy for activity, sex drive, sleep, appetite and ability to cope with life. They cannot seem to lift themselves out of their misery or 'fight it themselves'. Superficial advice like 'snap out of it' is unhelpful, because the person has no control over it.



What is the cause?

The cause is somewhat mysterious, but it has been found that an important chemical is present in smaller amounts than usual in the nervous system. It is rather like a person low in iron becoming anaemic.

Depression can follow a severe loss, such as the death of a loved one, a marital separation or a financial loss. On the other hand it can develop for no apparent reason, although it may follow an illness such as glandular fever or influenza, an operation or childbirth. Depression is seen more commonly in late adolescence, middle age (both men and women), retirement age and in the elderly.

How common is depression?

It is one of the commonest illnesses in medicine and is often confused with other illnesses.

What are the symptoms?

The patient can experience many symptoms, both physical and mental. On the other hand, the classical symptoms of being depressed (crying and not sleeping) may be absent—we call this 'masked depression'. Usually some of the following are present:

- a feeling of not being able to cope with life (e.g. hopelessness, helplessness)
- continual tiredness
- sleeping problems (e.g. early waking)
- eating problems (e.g. poor appetite)

- loss of interest in things such as sex
- inability to enjoy normally enjoyable things
- tension and anxiety
- irritableness, anger or fearfulness
- feelings of guilt or worthlessness or being unwanted
- difficulty in concentrating and making decisions
- headache, constipation or indigestion

The symptoms may vary during the day, but are usually worse on waking in the morning. If they are severe, the depressed person may not feel like living at all.

What are the risks?

Suicide is a real risk. Almost 70% of suicides are due to depression in an otherwise very healthy and happy person. Another very serious and avoidable consequence is marital or relationship breakdown, mainly because depressed people can be unpleasant to live with, especially if their spouse or friends do not understand their suffering.

What must be done?

Depressed people really need urgent medical help, which usually gives excellent results. The risk of suicide is real, and threats must be taken seriously—they are often carried out. Every conceivable effort must be made to get medical help, even if the patient is reluctant to see a doctor.

What is the treatment?

The basis of treatment is to replace the missing chemicals with antidepressant medication. Antidepressants are not drugs of addiction and are very effective but take about 2 weeks before an improvement is noticed. If the person is very seriously depressed and there is a risk of suicide, admission to hospital will most likely be advised. Other more effective treatments can be used if needed. The depressed person needs a lot of understanding, support and therapy. Once treatment is started, the outlook is very good.

Special counselling is also very important. Simply talking about your feelings is most helpful.

Important points

- Depression is an illness.
- It is commoner than is realised.
- It just happens; no one is to blame.
- It affects the basic functions of energy, sex, appetite and sleep.
- It can be lethal if untreated.
- It can destroy relationships.
- The missing chemical needs to be replaced.
- It responds well to treatment.
- Never give up—better times are ahead.