

FACT SHEET

Depression

What is depression?

Depression is a clinical term used by psychiatrists to describe a period of time when a person feels very sad to the point of feeling worthless, hopeless and helpless. Everyone experiences unhappiness at some time in his or her life, and many people may become depressed temporarily when things do not go as they would like. When a depressed mood persists however, and begins to interfere with everyday living, it may be the sign of a serious state of depression that requires professional help.

What causes depression?

There is no single cause of depression. Stressful and discouraging situations naturally overwhelm and have the potential to become serious. Experiences of failure commonly result in temporary feelings of worthlessness and self-blame, while personal loss causes feelings of sadness, disappointment and emptiness.

The onset of depression may sometimes be attributed to some of these factors:

- a genetic predisposition
- death or illness of friend/family member
- financial difficulties
- difficulties with job or personal relationship
- poor self-esteem
- seasonal or hormonal changes
- addictions

Researchers believe that a deficiency of certain chemicals in the brain and/or genetics may also affect how likely we are to develop an ongoing or serious depression. Any of the factors listed above may act as triggers to release disturbances in brain chemical function.

What are the symptoms?

Depression can change the way a person thinks and behaves, and how his or her body functions.

Some of the signs to look for are:

- feelings of despair and hopelessness
- feeling detached from life and those around you

- continued fatigue or loss of energy
- feelings of sadness – crying for no apparent reason
- inability to concentrate or make decisions
- thoughts of suicide
- changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- persistent or recurring headaches or frequent gastrointestinal upsets

What can friends and family do?

It is important to know that depression is an illness and no individual or family member should feel responsible for the depression. The depressed person should not be blamed or told to “pull themselves up by their boot straps”. Some people who are depressed keep to themselves, while others might not want to be alone. Listen and offer support rather than trying to contradict or talk an individual out of it. It is important that you let them know that it is all right to talk about their feelings and thoughts. Ask them how you can help and go with them to their family doctor or a mental health professional. Most of all, do not do it alone – get other people to help and support.

What are the treatments?

Depression is a treatable illness. No one has to suffer endlessly. Most people with clinical depression feel a sense of relief when they learn the facts about this illness; they realize depression is not a personal weakness, and most importantly, they learn they are not alone.

Each case of depression is unique, so people may require different methods of treatment. The most common and successfully used treatments for depression are psychological counselling in combination with anti-depressant medication. Support from family, friends and self-help groups can also make a big difference.

Where can I get help?

If you or a loved one appears to be suffering from depression, you should talk to your family physician. Remember, you are not alone. You will be taking a major step toward recovery when you begin to seek help. For more information, contact the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario, toll-free at 1-800-875-6213 or visit www.ontario.cmha.ca.