

What is depression?

Everyone has times in their lives when they feel down or depressed. But if the depression goes on for a long time, or becomes very severe, you may find yourself stuck and unable to lift yourself out of it. This is what doctors call a 'depressive illness'.

What are the signs and symptoms?

If you are depressed, you will probably notice you feel unhappy. It just won't go away and can be worse at a particular time of day, often first thing in the morning. You can't enjoy anything, can't concentrate properly, feel guilty about things that have nothing to do with you, become pessimistic and perhaps even suicidal. Physical symptoms include not getting to sleep, waking early in the morning and/or throughout the night, losing interest in sex, not eating and losing weight.

Is depression different for men?

There is no evidence for a completely separate type of 'male depression'. But men tend to be more competitive and concerned with power and success than women. They don't like to admit that they feel fragile or that they need help, but feel that they should rely on themselves. So they are less likely to talk about their feelings with their friends, loved ones or their doctors. This may be why they don't get the help they need. There is also evidence that some symptoms of depression are more common in men than in women. These include irritability, sudden anger, increased loss of control, greater risk-taking and aggression. Men are also more likely to commit suicide.

How do men deal with depression?

Men are more likely than women to use drugs and alcohol rather than asking for help. This usually makes things worse, certainly in the long run. Your work will suffer and alcohol often leads to irresponsible, unpleasant or dangerous behaviour. Men may also focus more on their work than their relationships or home life. This can cause conflicts with partners. All of these things make depression more likely.

What factors are linked to depression in men?

■ Relationships

For married men, research has shown that trouble in a marriage or long-term relationship is the single most common problem associated with depression. Men tend not to cope with disagreements as well as women. Arguments can make them feel physically uncomfortable so they try to avoid both disagreements and difficult discussions. The partner will want to talk about a problem, but some men will try to avoid it. The partner then feels ignored and tries to talk about it more, which makes the man feel he is being nagged. So, he withdraws further, which makes his partner feel even more ignored and so on. This can destroy a relationship.

■ Sex

When men are depressed, they feel less good about their bodies and less sexy. Many go off sex completely. Several recent studies suggest that, in spite of this, men who are depressed have intercourse just as often, but they don't feel as satisfied as usual. A few depressed men actually report an increase in sexual drive and intercourse, possibly as a way of trying to make themselves feel better. Another problem may be that some antidepressant drugs reduce sex-drive in a small number of men. However, the good news is that, as the depression improves, so will sexual desire, performance and satisfaction.

■ Impotence

Difficulty in getting or keeping an erection can bring about depression. Again, this is a problem for which it is usually possible to find effective help.

■ Pregnancy and children

Only recently we have realised that more than one in ten fathers suffer psychological problems after having children. This shouldn't really be surprising. We know that major events in people's lives, even good ones like moving house, can make you depressed. Having children changes your life more than any other event. Suddenly, you have to spend much more of your time looking after your partner, and possibly other children, and you may be very tired. New mothers tend to be less interested in sex for a number of months. Sheer exhaustion is the main reason, although you may take it personally and feel that you are being rejected. You may have to adjust, perhaps for the first time, to taking second place in your partner's

affections. You may also find that you can't spend so much time at work. New fathers are more likely to become depressed if their partner is depressed, if they aren't getting on with their partner, or if they are unemployed.

- **Unemployment and retirement**

Leaving work, for any reason, can be stressful. Recent research has shown that up to one in seven men who become unemployed will develop a depressive illness in the next six months.

- **Temperament**

You are more likely to become depressed if you are shy, if you don't have a close relationship or if you don't manage to find another job. Depression itself can make it harder to get another job.

- **Retirement**

Even retiring from work at the usual age can be difficult for many men, especially if your partner continues to work. It can be hard to adjust to losing the structure of your day and contact with colleagues.

- **Gay men and depression**

On the whole, gay men do not suffer from depression any more than straight men. However, it seems that gay teenagers and young adults are more likely to become depressed, possibly due to the stress of 'coming out'.

- **Suicide**

Men are around three times more likely to kill themselves than women. Suicide is commonest among men who are separated, widowed or divorced and is more likely if someone is a heavy drinker. Over the last few years, men have become more likely to kill themselves, particularly those aged between 16 and 24 years and those between 39 and 54 years. We don't yet know the reason for this.

- **Violence**

Some studies have shown that men who commit violent crimes are more likely to get depressed than men who don't. However, we don't know if the depression makes their violence more likely, or if it's just the way they lead their lives.

Getting help

Helping yourself

If you've had a major upset in your life, try to tell someone how you feel about it. Keep active. Taking some exercise, even if it's only a walk, will help to keep you physically fit and you will sleep better. Ensure you eat a balanced diet, with lots of fruit and vegetables. Avoid alcohol and drugs as they will make you more depressed in the long run. You can also use relaxation techniques for example yoga, massage or aromatherapy. Do something you enjoy at least one thing every week. Check out your lifestyle. A lot of people who have depression are perfectionists and tend to drive themselves too hard. You may need to set yourself more realistic targets and reduce your workload. Take a break as it can be really helpful to get away and out of your normal routine for a few days. Read about depression. Books and websites can give you ideas on how to cope, and also help friends and relatives to understand what you are going through.

Changing your perspective

It can help to see depression as a result of chemical changes in the brain and/or as the inevitable cost of living in a demanding and difficult world. It is nothing to do with being weak or unmanly and it can be treated. Both talking and medication can be important ways to help you get better.

Professional help

The best place to start is your GP who can go over your options and discuss any worries you have about confidentiality. Many men are concerned that information held by their GPs may need to be given in medical reports, and so may damage their chances in work. It's important to remember that, in the UK, it is illegal for an employer to fire you – or not hire you – solely because you have a diagnosis of a certain disorder. Their only grounds for this are that your condition (whatever it is) will actually interfere with your ability to do the job. Even if it does interfere to some extent, under the Disability Discrimination Act, an employer is expected to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that someone with a recognised condition - including depression - can be supported in their job rather than dismissed.

Depression may be due to physical illness, so you need to get a proper physical check-up. If you are already having treatment for a physical illness, your GP will need to know. Your GP might recommend a course of psychotherapy. You could also try the Samaritans.