

## Depression: key facts from the Royal College of Psychiatrists

Depression is very common – one in five people become depressed at some point in their lives. Anyone can get low at times, but someone is said to be suffering from depression when these feelings don't go away quickly or become so bad they interfere with their everyday life.

### Why do people get depressed?

Sometimes there may be an obvious reason for becoming depressed, sometimes not. There is usually more than one reason and reasons are different for different people. The reason may seem obvious – a relationship breakdown or a bereavement or even the birth of a child – but sometimes it is not clear. Either way, these feelings can become so bad that you need help.

### What does it feel like to be depressed?

The feeling of depression is deeper, longer and more unpleasant than the short episodes of unhappiness that everyone experiences occasionally. Symptoms include:

- losing interest in life
- finding it harder to make decisions
- not coping with things that used to be manageable
- feeling exhausted
- feeling restless and agitated
- loss of appetite and weight
- difficulties getting to sleep.

### How do I know if I am depressed?

Often people don't realise how depressed they are because it has come on so gradually. They may try to struggle on and cope with feelings of depression by being very busy. This can make them even more stressed and exhausted. Physical pains such as constant headaches or sleeplessness then start. Sometimes these physical symptoms can be the first sign of a depression.

### What help is available?

There are two types of treatment available: talking treatments and medication. Both can be accessed through your doctor.

#### ■ What are talking treatments?

There are several different types of talking treatments.

- Counselling enables you to talk about your feelings to an objective, professional person. Your GP may have a counsellor at the surgery who you can talk to.
- Cognitive-behavioural therapy helps people overcome the negative thoughts that can sometimes be the cause of depression.
- Interpersonal and dynamic therapies can be helpful if you find it difficult to get on with other people. If your depression seems connected with your relationship with your partner, then a relationship counsellor might be helpful.
- If you have become depressed while suffering from a disability or caring for a relative, then a self-help group may give you the support you need.

#### ■ Any downsides to talking treatments?

Talking treatments are usually very safe but they can have side-effects. Talking about things may bring up bad memories from the past, which can make you feel low or distressed. Some people find that therapy can change their outlook and the way they relate to friends and family. This can put strains on relationships. It is important to make sure that you can trust your therapist and that they have had proper training.

### What sorts of medication might work?

- As well as tablets, there is an alternative remedy called St John's wort available from chemists. There is evidence that it is effective in mild to moderate depression. It seems to work in much the same way as some antidepressants, but some people find that it has fewer side-effects. If you are taking other medication, you should tell your doctor before taking St John's wort.
- Antidepressants can be effective if your depression is severe or goes on for a long time. They may help you to feel less anxious and cope better so that you can start to enjoy life and deal with problems effectively again. It is important to remember that you won't feel the effect of antidepressants straight away. People often don't notice any improvement in their mood for 2 or 3 weeks.

## **Any downsides with antidepressants?**

Like all medicines, antidepressants do have some side-effects, though these are usually mild and tend to wear off as the treatment goes on. The newer antidepressants (called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) may make you feel a bit sick at first and feel a little more anxious for a short while. The older antidepressants can cause a dry mouth and constipation. Unless the side-effects are very bad, your doctor is likely to advise you to carry on with the tablets.

You may get withdrawal symptoms if you stop antidepressants suddenly – these can include anxiety, diarrhoea, vivid dreams or possibly nightmares. This can nearly always be avoided by slowly reducing the dose before stopping.

## **Which is right for me – talking treatments or tablets?**

It depends on how your depression has developed and how severe it is. On the whole, talking treatments have been found to be effective in mild and moderate depression. Medication is not thought to be helpful in mild depression. If your depression is severe, you are more likely to need antidepressants, usually for a period of 7–9 months.

## **What will happen if I don't get treatment?**

Four out of five people with depression will get better without help but this can take 4–6 months or longer. It still leaves one in five people depressed 2 years later and a small number of people with depression will eventually die by suicide.

## **What can I do to help myself?**

- Talking to someone close to you about how you feel can help. Going over a painful experience several times and crying it out can allow the mind to heal.
- Another strategy is to do something – go outside for a walk or some other form of exercise. This will help you to keep fit and hopefully sleep better. You can also do jobs around the house to try and take your mind off thoughts that make you depressed.
- Make sure you eat well even though you may not feel it and don't drink alcohol as this makes depression worse, although it might not seem to at first.
- Try not to get worried if you can't sleep but do something relaxing in bed such as reading, watching TV or listening to the radio.
- If you think you know what is causing your depression, it can help to write down the problem and then think of the things you could do to tackle it. Pick the best actions and see if they work.
- Also try to keep hopeful. Remember this is a very common experience and you will come through it, probably stronger and more able to cope than before.

## **How can I help someone who is depressed?**

- Listen to them but try not to judge them. Don't offer advice unless they ask for it but if you can see the problem that is behind the depression, you could work with the person to find a solution.
- Spending time with them, listening over and over to their problems and encouraging them to keep going with activities in their routine is all helpful.
- If they are getting worse, encourage them to visit their doctor and to accept and follow their treatment.