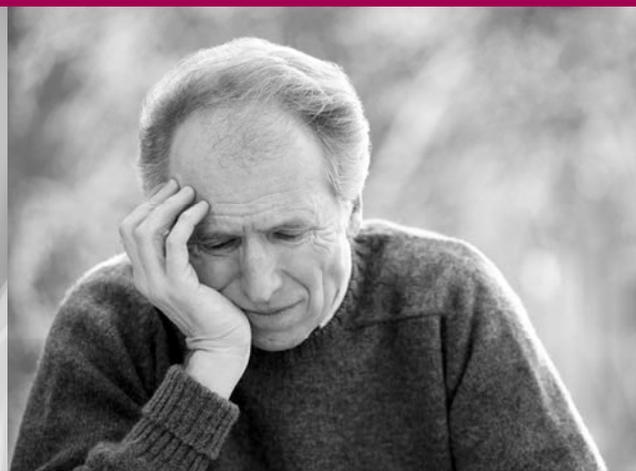




The
British
Psychological
Society

Depression – what, who, why and how to help



What is depression?

When a person has depression they usually feel very sad or down, and the feelings don't go away. Depression is different from feeling a bit miserable for a day or two: it can last for months rather than days or weeks.

Depressed people sometimes believe that they cannot, or simply do not want to, do things that they usually enjoy. Depression can seriously affect much of everyday life.

Who suffers from depression?

Depression is one of the most common mental illnesses, affecting nearly 1 in 6 people in the UK at some point in their lives. It is not always clear what causes depression. Depression can arise out of the blue, but it can also be triggered by difficulties such as serious physical illness, dementia, childhood problems, bereavement, family problems, or unemployment. The more of these difficulties a person has the more likely it is that they could become depressed. There is also some evidence to suggest the likelihood of developing depression may have some genetic cause because it tends to run in families.

Some people will have depression just once. However, about half of people who have had an episode of depression will get depressed more than once. How long depression lasts also varies from person to person. Most people will feel better within four to six months, but some can experience symptoms for much longer.

How can I tell if I have depression?

Depression varies from person to person. It can be difficult to distinguish between depression and everyday feelings of sadness, which affect most people from time to time. But in general, if you are depressed, you will feel a loss of pleasure in things you used to enjoy, and a loss of interest in people and what is going on around you.

If you have depression, you might feel tearful, irritable or moody. You might be tired much of the time; you might also have aches and pains, a poor appetite (sometimes leading to weight loss). You might sleep badly, have a lack of interest in sex, or find it difficult to concentrate. It is also common to

withdraw from social activities such as seeing family and friends. In more serious cases you may feel like injuring or hurting yourself or consider that life is no longer worth living.

Most people will not have all of these symptoms but the type and number of feelings listed above will give an indication of whether a person has mild depression or a more severe depression.

If you visit your GP with physical symptoms, such as fatigue, insomnia or weight loss, he or she might ask you questions about depression, such as if you have felt down in the past month.

What should I do if I think I have depression?

If something has happened to you recently that has made you feel sad, anxious or stressed, do try to talk to family or friends. If the feelings do not go away you should seek more help. Your GP is likely to be the first person you will see about your depression.

Your GP will probably recommend further treatment. This could be with a psychologist, or with some other professional specialising in mental health problems (such as a nurse therapist, psychiatrist or counsellor).

How can we treat depression?

Psychological treatment or therapy can help people to understand how they feel and help sort out any problems and difficulties.

People with mild depression could be offered counselling or problem-solving therapy. Another option is guided self-help – where the patient is given either a self-help book or access to a PC package and works through this with assistance from a healthcare professional.

If someone has a more severe type of depression they are likely to be offered:

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) – a psychological treatment that encourages people to develop their ability to identify and challenge negative thoughts, and to re-evaluate possibly unhelpful beliefs about life.

- Interpersonal therapy – a psychological therapy specifically designed to help people with depression to identify and address current problems in their relationships with family, friends, partners, and other people.
- Family/couple therapy – a psychological treatment that enables family members/couples to look at the way they behave with one another, and understand the link between this behaviour and the symptoms of depression.

Typically each of the above treatments would involve about 16-20 sessions, usually once a week.

Medicines (antidepressants) are also often used for adults with depression. Patients with mild depression should not be offered antidepressants straight away because depression may get better by itself or by talking to a healthcare professional.

Exercise can also help to elevate the mood of those suffering from mild depression. GPs may advise sufferers to follow an exercise programme.

There is also some evidence that using “mindfulness” (which is similar to meditation) can be helpful in preventing recurrences of depression.

It is really important to remember that, while there is some evidence for the efficacy of all the different therapies we have listed, there is no guarantee that any particular psychological therapy will be right for you. It is also essential to find a therapist with whom you can develop a good relationship, since a good “therapeutic alliance” is the basis for the success of all therapy.

Where to find out more

The British Psychological Society
Directory of Chartered Psychologists..... <http://www.bps.org.uk/directory>

The Depression Alliance, the leading UK charity
for people affected by depression..... <http://www.depressionalliance.org>

Advice on local “Breathworks”
courses on mindfulness practice <http://www.breathworks.co.uk>

About the author

Ian Hughes manages the adult psychology service for Cardiff & Vale NHS Trust and works in a busy, inner-city community mental health team. He was previously the first editor of the *Journal of Mental Health*.