

Depression

A Self Help Guide

www.merseycare.nhs.uk

These are the thoughts of two people who are depressed:

"I feel so alone, I never see my friends now, I guess they have dropped me. They probably don't like me - who would? There is no point in making any effort it doesn't pay off... I just hate myself".

"I feel like crying all the time, I am so tired and can't get interested in anything. In fact I just don't even get started with the jobs I should be doing, I can't even do basic things that seem so easy to other people..."

If you are depressed, you may have had similar thoughts yourself. Depression is a very common problem and many people feel low or down in the dumps at times. This is often because of life stresses such as bereavement, money or housing problems or difficulties in relationships, but for some people the problem becomes much worse and normal life itself becomes difficult.

How can this guide help me?

At this point you may feel that nothing can be done to help. But there are things that you can do yourself which will make a difference and there are also other places where you can get help if the depression does not seem to be getting any better.

This leaflet aims to tell you more about depression, how to overcome it and what help may be available.

What is depression?

Depression is a very common problem. Many people will at some time experience symptoms of depression. In its mildest form depression does not stop us from leading a normal life, but the most severe depression can be life threatening, with thoughts of death and suicide.

These are some of the signs or symptoms that you may experience if you are depressed:

Emotions or feelings

- Feeling sad, guilty, upset, numb or despairing.
- Losing interest and/or enjoyment in things.
- Crying a lot or feeling unable to cry.
- Feeling alone even if you are in company.

Physical or bodily signs

- Tiredness.
- Lack of energy.
- Restlessness.
- Sleep problems, especially waking early or interrupted sleep.
- Feeling worse at a particular time of the day (usually morning).
- Changes in appetite, eating and weight.

Thoughts

- Losing confidence in yourself.
- Expecting the worst and having negative or gloomy thoughts.
- Thinking that everything seems hopeless.
- Thoughts of suicide.
- Thinking you hate yourself.
- Poor memory or concentration.

How these feelings, physical signs and thoughts may affect your life

- You may find it difficult to do even simple things.
- You stop doing your normal activities.
- You cut yourself off from other people.
- You may become inactive, just doing nothing for long periods of time.

Of course not everyone who is depressed has all of these symptoms. And even if you are not seriously depressed, it is usual to feel some of these things from time to time. This is particularly true if you have recently suffered a loss and especially if someone close has died. When these symptoms are part of a normal reaction to loss or distressing events, they should resolve with time. Most people find it helpful to talk over these feelings with somebody who cares. If these feelings are very strong, however, or continue for some time, then a depression may have developed. When this happens, you need to take steps to help yourself and/or seek help from others.

What causes depression?

No single cause for depression has been found. Usually there is more than one reason and this differs from person to person. Sometimes depression can happen without any obvious reason.

As we have already mentioned, distressing events can make someone start to feel low and at times this may turn into a more serious depression from which it is difficult to emerge.

Circumstances can play a part. So, for example, being alone, having to live on a very low income, physical illness and unemployment can all contribute. At times, even events that you might think of as good and positive, such as getting married, or starting a new job, can be stressful enough to cause depression.

Having a baby can also lead to a post natal depression for one in ten women.

Different people will react to depression in different ways and although some may be sad and withdrawn, some show their distress in other ways, such as heavy drinking or irritability.

One in ten people who have a severe depression may also have periods where they are excited, with uncontrolled behaviour. This is known as bipolar disorder and it affects equal numbers of men and women.

Are some people more likely to become depressed than others?

Some people seem to be more vulnerable than others to becoming depressed. This may be because of body make up (including body chemistry) or because of early life experiences and family influences. Some people may be more inclined to “look on the gloomy side” of life in general, and this may make them more likely to develop a depression.

How can I help myself to feel better?

Even if you already have a doctor or mental health worker involved in your treatment there are still things you can do to help yourself in overcoming depression.

1. Do something active

Physical activity is particularly helpful. Walk, run, cycle, skip; anything which begins to increase your activity can help to improve how you feel. Plan 15 or 20 minutes of activity every day, or every other day to begin with. This kind of physical activity can actually begin to make you feel less tired. Find something that interests you and spend some time on it. Plan to focus on things you would usually enjoy and build some time into each day for these activities. You might find it helpful to take up a new interest. Some people find that creative activities that help them to express their feelings, such as painting, writing poetry or playing music, can help them to feel better.

Make a small start on tasks that you may have been avoiding, break big tasks down into smaller stages and tackle these one by one. For example, there might be jobs in the house or the garden that really need to be done, but you have been putting off doing them. If that is the case, begin on day one by tackling just one small area. This way, by not taking on too much, you are more likely to achieve your goal and that will make you feel good.

2. Talk to others

Try and tell those close to you how you are feeling. They may be able to listen and help you to think things through. Having a cry can help to relieve tension and let things move on. You may be surprised to find those you talk to have felt depressed themselves at some time and can understand how you feel.

3. Look after yourself

Resist the temptation to cope with your depression by drinking alcohol, misusing medication or turning to illegal drugs. These may give some immediate relief but quite soon create further health and psychological problems for you to cope with. Eat well; a good diet can help to keep you in good health so recovery is easier. Try and 'treat' yourself to things you normally enjoy.

4. Challenge negative thinking

Don't allow gloomy thoughts to go unchallenged. When someone is experiencing depression they often tend to think and expect the worst of themselves, their life and the future. Don't just accept these thoughts, try to:

- identify when your mood is very low;
- jot down the unpleasant thoughts you are having during that time;
- counter these thoughts by writing down arguments against them. Imagine what you would say to a friend if they had such negative thoughts about themselves;
- keep a diary of things you have enjoyed or achieved during the week. This can help you to concentrate on the good things rather than the bad things in your life.

What treatment is available for depression?

Most people are treated for depression by their family doctor. The doctor may suggest a talking treatment or antidepressant tablets or both.

The doctor may refer you to a mental health worker. This could be a psychiatrist (a medically qualified doctor who specialises in mental health), or it may be to a counsellor, community psychiatric nurse, psychologist or other mental health worker.

The talking treatments are usually counselling or therapy. These will help you understand your own difficulties and begin to work out ways of overcoming depression. "Cognitive therapy" is one kind of therapy that is often used. It can help people to challenge their negative thinking and get on with their lives.

Whatever type of counselling therapy is used, it will usually take a little time before you begin to feel the benefits, but treatment of this kind has helped many people and can be very effective.

Antidepressants are sometimes prescribed by your family doctor or psychiatrist. They have been shown to be helpful for many people suffering from depression.

Antidepressants work on the chemicals in the brain to make you feel less depressed. They are not addictive and once you begin to feel better, usually after quite a few months, you can plan, with your doctor, to stop taking them. This should not cause you any difficulty and your doctor will gradually adjust and reduce the dose.

When you begin a course of antidepressants it is important to remember that they do not work immediately. It will take 2-4 weeks before they take effect and you need to keep taking them regularly to feel the benefit. They can have some side effects at first but these are usually quite mild and will generally wear off as treatment continues. Your doctor or pharmacist will advise you about this. Although people often start to feel better within 2-4 weeks of taking antidepressants, it is important to keep taking them for as long as your doctor advises. This helps stop the depression coming back. If you are taking antidepressants it is important to consult your doctor before taking any other tablets, drugs or alcohol.

Where can I find help if I am depressed?

If you think you may be depressed, your GP is the best person to talk to in the first instance. Your GP will have information about local services which may be able to help. Your practice nurse or health visitor, who is based at your GP practice may also be able to help.

The following organisations and help lines may also be useful:

- **Association for Post Natal Illness**

Tel: 0207 386 0868 www.apni.org.uk

145 Dawes Road, London, SE6 7EB

For women who are experiencing depression following the birth of their baby.

- **CRUSE Bereavement Line**

Tel: 0844 477 9400 www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

PO Box 800, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 2RG

Helpline for bereaved people and those caring for bereaved people.

- **Depression Alliance**

Tel: 0845 123 23 20 www.depressionalliance.org/

20 Great Dover Street, London, SE1 4LX

Information, support and understanding for people who suffer with depression, and for relatives who want to help. Self-help groups, information, and raising awareness for depression.

- **Depression UK**

www.depressionuk.org/

C/o Self Help Nottingham, Ormiston House, 32-36 Pelham Street, Nottingham, NG1 2EG

A national mutual support group for people suffering from depression although does not provide a helpline.

- **MDF: The Bipolar Organisation**

Tel: 08456 340 540 www.mdf.org.uk

Castle Works, 21 St. George's Road, London, SE1 6ES

A user-led charity working to enable people affected by bipolar disorder to take control of their lives.

- **Mental Health Matters**

Tel: 0191 516 3500 www.mentalhealthmatters.com

Avalon House, St Catherines Court, Sunderland Enterprise Park, Sunderland, SR5 3XJ

A national organisation which provides support and information on employment, housing, community support and psychological services.

- **Mind Infoline**

Tel: 0845 766 0163 www.mind.org.uk

15-19 Broadway, Stratford, London, E15 4BQ

Provides information on a range of topics including types of mental distress, where to get help, drug and alternative treatments and advocacy. Also provides details of help and support for people in their own area. Helpline available Mon - Fri, 9am - 5pm.

- National Debt Line**
 Tel: 0808 808 4000 www.nationaldebtline.co.uk
 Tricorn House, 51-53 Hagley Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B16 8TP
 Help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt.
- NHS Choices – Your health, your choices** www.nhs.uk
 Information about conditions, treatments, local services and healthy lives.
- NHS Direct**
 Tel: 0845 46 47 www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
 Health information and advice.
- PALS – Patient Advice and Liaison Service** - www.pals.nhs.uk
 Provides information and advice about local NHS services and support organisations and helps sort out any problems with NHS services.
- Rethink**
 Helpline: 0845 456 0455 www.rethink.org
 89 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7TP
 Provides information and a helpline for anyone affected by mental health problems.
- Relate**
 Tel: 0300 100 1234 www.relate.org.uk
 Premier House, Carolina Court, Lakeside, Doncaster, DN4 5RA
 Help with marital or relationship problems.
- Samaritans**
 Tel: 08457 90 90 90 www.samaritans.org
 PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA
 Provides confidential support for anyone in a crisis.
- SANELine**
 Tel: 0845 767 8000 www.sane.org.uk
 1st Floor Cityside House, 40 Adler Street, London, E1 1EE
 Offers practical information, crisis care and emotional support.
 Helpline available 6pm - 11pm (local rate).
- Young Minds**
 Tel: 020 7336 8445 www.youngminds.org.uk/
 48-50 St John Street, London, EC1M 4DG
 A national organisation committed to improving the mental health of all children and young people under 25.

Useful Books

Books which you may like to buy or borrow from your local library:

- **Feeling good: the new mood therapy**

David Burns - HarperCollins 2000

A drug-free guide to curing anxiety, guilt, pessimism, low self-esteem and other depressive disorders.

- **Dealing with depression**

Kathy Nairne and Gerrilyn Smith - The Women's Press 2001

This is a practical guide for sufferers of depression and those who know someone who is depressed. It identifies the causes of depression and the many forms it may take, explores ways of coping and recovering, and evaluates the help available.

- **Depression: the way out of your prison**

Dorothy Rowe - Taylor and Francis 2003

Gives us a way of understanding our depression which matches our experience and which enables us to take charge of our life and change it.

- **Overcoming depression**

Paul Gilbert - Constable and Robinson 2000

A self-help guide using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques, this book is full of step-by-step suggestions, case examples and practical ideas for gaining control over depression and low mood.

- **Anxiety and depression: a practical guide to recovery**

Robert Priest - Ebury Press 1996

Robert Priest has written this book especially to provide help for those feeling anxious and depressed. In particular, he covers the practical self-help methods to reduce stress and offers an explanation of the causes and effects of anxiety and depression.

- **Overcoming depression and low mood: a five areas approach**

Christopher Williams - Hodder Education 2006

Overcoming Depression and Low Mood is a series of short self-help workbooks for use by people experiencing low mood and depression. Developed in liaison with a wide range of experts, the course provides access to the proven Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) approach. Providing accessible information and teaching key life skills the workbooks provide a practical and effective way of improving how you feel.

This guide is based on material produced by
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A number of Self Help Guides
are available on a
number of conditions,
a full list can be found here:
www.merseycare.nhs.uk/selfhelp