

Making Sense of Depression

Depression is a common problem that can affect any of us at any age, bringing feelings that range from sadness and unhappiness through to extreme misery and despair.

Most of us have times when we feel sad or 'down' for some reason. These periods are usually short-lived and we find our own ways of coping with them. But sometimes feelings of depression do not go away, and may be so overwhelming that they make it hard for people to function normally. When this happens it is important to get professional help.

How does depression affect people?

In lots of ways there may be feelings of hopelessness or helplessness. Life may seem meaningless, boring or 'empty'. Sometimes people feel they can no longer find pleasure in things they used to enjoy. They may feel as if they have lost their confidence, or feel worthless. Some people may feel very anxious or agitated, or even have panic attacks. There may be physical symptoms too and, for some people, these may be more obvious than the emotional ones. These physical signs can include loss of energy and fatigue or even a feeling of 'heaviness' in their limbs. Daily activities may seem harder. They may have difficulty sleeping or, on the other hand, they may sleep more hours than usual. There may be concentration problems or headaches, or loss of interest in sex. Some people do not feel like eating much, while others turn to food for comfort. Some people may also abuse alcohol or other drugs to try and cope.

What causes depression?

The causes are complex. It may start with a particular event or a difficult circumstance in our lives - the death of someone close, separation from someone we love, ill health or the loss of a job, for instance. Things like poverty, feeling isolated because of difficulty speaking English or because there are no friends or family living nearby may also affect some people's ability to cope and can contribute to depression too. But not everyone with these problems feels depressed. How people react to things can depend a lot on their particular personality and experience of life. People who expect a lot of themselves and tend to be very self-critical, for instance, may be more prone to depression. The same goes for people who are very dependent. A tendency to get depressed may run in families too. It is also important to remember that depression can also be caused by changes to chemicals in the brain.

How severe can depression be?

In some cases people attempt suicide or try to harm themselves. They may even develop false beliefs - thinking that they have done bad things in the past and deserve to be punished, for instance.

What about post-partum depression?

This is a special type of depression that affects some women after childbirth. Although it is common for women to feel 'down' for a few hours or even a few days after childbirth,

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for some women, the feelings of depression and anxiety persist for weeks or months or longer. They may have frightening thoughts, feel inadequate and find it difficult to cope with the demands of everyday life. Women who experience these symptoms need support and help.

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Canadian Mental Health Association – Edmonton Region Phone: (780) 414.6300 www.cmha-edmonton.ab.ca
Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers Phone: (780) 424.7709 www.emcn.ab.ca
Multicultural Health Brokers Co-op Phone: (780) 423.1973