Depression

What is depression?

Sadness is normal from time to time. However, if a person experiences low mood, a lack of interest in things, or spends a lot of time 'shut down' over many weeks or months, this can be diagnosed as depression. Depression can be triggered by a difficult life event, but sometimes there doesn't seem to be any specific cause. Between 5 and 6% of adults globally are thought to have depression, with numbers higher for women than men. Depression occurs across all ages, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds.

When depression is mild, people are normally able to carry on with everyday life, but more severe depression significantly affects day-to-day activities and can even involve suicidal feelings. If you are feeling suicidal, you may like to read the information material on suicidal ideation.

If you feel suicidal right now, call 999 – this is an emergency.

What are the symptoms of depression

During periods of depression, people find they lose enjoyment and enthusiasm for the things they normally like doing. Some people describe a 'shutting down' feeling, where they feel outside of everyone else's experiences. Feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness are common. People can start to avoid activities and can struggle with sleep, concentration, and appetite. Decision making can become harder, and some people start to use drugs or alcohol to try to ameliorate symptoms.

Sometimes people associate depression with being tearful, but people don't all react in the same way. You might be someone who gets more frustrated, irritable, or restless, or gets unexplained aches and pains. Relationships can become tricky if you experience a loss of libido or start to avoid social contact with friends or family. With depression can come a lowering of self-esteem and confidence, which can make it really difficult to help yourself with low mood.

Occasionally with depression comes some psychotic symptoms. This can include paranoia or hearing voices. Psychotic symptoms are linked to depressive thoughts and feelings and can feel very real and very scary. Some people become convinced that they have done something terrible like committing a crime. The voices can exacerbate low mood by reinforcing low self-worth, or confidence.

What are the causes of depression

No one can predict if or when depression may occur. For some, a traumatic life experience may be an obvious cause, but genetics and chemical imbalances in the brain can also play a part. If there is a family history of depression, there is a statistically higher risk that you may struggle with it too. Genetic susceptibility can be exacerbated by biological imbalances in the brain, including a serotonin imbalance. Changes to brain structure and function can also affect mood and communication between parts of the brain.

Other factors which can increase the risk of depression are due to environmental problems. Chronic stress around finances or relationships might make someone more likely to become depressed, and if there has been a background of abuse or early trauma, this can make someone even more vulnerable to depression. Unresolved trauma can also initiate unhelpful thinking patterns like perfectionism and low self-esteem.

It is very likely that for most people with depression, a combination of risk factors is at play. Once someone has experienced one depressive episode, there is a higher chance that it may reoccur.

Types of depression

The main type of depression is Major Depressive Disorder, or MDD. Depression symptoms last for 2 weeks or longer. If the depression episode lasts for two years or longer, it is known as Persistent Depressive Disorder, PDD. With PDD, the symptoms may be less severe than MDD.

If depression alternates with excessively high mood, this is called Bipolar Disorder, previously known as Manic Depression. Strictly speaking, it is a separate disorder from depression. The highs can lead to harmful behaviours such as unsafe sex, gambling, or spending sprees.

Seasonal Affected Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression with a seasonal pattern. Usually the person has depressive tendencies in the winter months when light levels are low. Symptoms include fatigue, low motivation, and increased sleepiness.

Post Partum Depression, also known as Post Natal Depression, occurs after a mother has given birth. This is thought to be caused by hormonal changes, and emotional difficulties arising from adjusting to being a new Mum. There can be difficulties for the new Mum in bonding with their baby, as well as typical depression symptoms such as irritability, low mood, and anxiety.

What self care can you practice

Everyone who is depressed deserves help. It is important to visit the GP and ask for support, but there are also tips which you can follow to try to feel more in control of the depression yourself. It may take a while to find the best self-help for you, so don't give up. It can be useful to talk through these with a trusted person so that they can help you with motivation during the process.

Still doing things you normally enjoy is important. Friends and family still want to spend time with you. You can ask friends and family to help you do things like eat well or go for a short walk with you. You can ask them to help with shopping, cooking, or looking after the kids for a bit. People will find it easier to help you if you let them know what you need. If you are dissociating quite a bit, you may need to write down an idea when you can, so that you can show it to someone when you see them.

Sleeping can be difficult with depression, but try to keep to a normal routine if possible. Alcohol and drugs will make depression worse, so try to have a few 'treats' lined up that don't include these. Try a cup of tea in the garden, a favourite snack, or a cuddle up on the settee with your pet – whatever feels special to you!

Try to spend some time outside in nature. Watching wildlife, feeling the breeze on your skin, and being in green spaces is proven to reduce stress hormones and increase 'happy' hormones. Better still, get involved in an activity which involves direct interaction with nature – growing seeds and plants is a really good way of being able to 'look forward' and plan for the future.

What treatments are available

A GP is likely to offer psychological or physical treatment as a first port of call. It is unlikely that antidepressant medication would be offered, unless the depression is moderate or severe.

Psychological treatment may be online, or face-to-face. There are self-help programmes prescribed by GPs which can be offered quickly and allow a depressed person to start to feel in some control over their illness. The programmes teach awareness of how feelings affect behaviours and feelings and may use treatments such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Behavioural Activation, Interpersonal psychotherapy, or problem-solving therapy. Physical activity programmes designed specifically for people with depression can also be prescribed, or outdoor activities like a community gardening scheme may be available.

Helping someone else with depression

First of all, let the person know that you are aware they are struggling, and make yourself available to them. You are there to listen first and foremost, without judgment. You don't have to have all the answers – that is what GPs and the helplines are for! When the person is ready, you can help them work through the support that is available. Send text messages to keep in touch and let them know that you are thinking of them. Let them know too that they don't need to reply if they are not up to it.

Supportive comments might be things like:

"It is really sad that you are feeling like this", or

"You mean a lot to me – how can I help you manage today?"

You might offer to spend some time just being with them watching a favourite TV programme or film. It doesn't need to be complicated.

Never say things like "just think positively", or "others have it worse than you". Encouraging positive activities like exercise is helpful but be aware of how you introduce that: saying "you wouldn't have got depressed if you did more exercise" just suggests that they are to blame for their low mood.

Ask the person what specifically about everyday life they are finding difficult. For instance, they may find it hard to decide what to eat, and so you can make them lunch or help them buy some good quality ready meals that they can cook from frozen. Supporting them, whilst empowering them to gain strategies to support themselves, is ideal.

Try to do things together that you would do normally, be it a craft activity, a walk together, or a trip to the cinema. It can give the sufferer a break from their depressive thoughts, giving them a chance to talk about something positive. Also remember that you personally do not have to take full responsibility for the depressed person. It is hard being with someone who is depressed, so you will need time to support your own mental health too.

Helplines/useful contacts:

Mind's services

- Mind's helplines provide information and support by phone and email.
- Local Minds offer face-to-face services across England and Wales. These services include talking therapies, peer support and advocacy.
- Side by Side is our supportive online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

Other organisations

Anxiety UK

03444 775 774 (helpline)
07537 416 905 (text)
anxietyuk.org.uk
Advice and support for people living with anxiety.

Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)

0800 58 58 58
thecalmzone.net
Provides a helpline, online and WhatsApp chat, as well as information and support, for anyone affected by suicide or suicidal thoughts.

Cruse Bereavement Support

0808 808 1677
cruse.org.uk
Information and support after a bereavement.

Hub of Hope

hubofhope.co.uk
UK-wide mental health service database. Lets you search for local, national, peer, community, charity, private and NHS mental health support. You can filter results to find specific kinds of support.

The National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC)

0808 801 0331
support@napac.org.uk
napac.org.uk
Supports adult survivors of any form of childhood abuse. Offers a helpline, email support and local services.

National Childbirth Trust (NCT)

0300 330 0700
nct.org.uk
Information, support and classes for parents.

NHS talking therapies self-referral

nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-nhs-talking-therapies-service
Information about local NHS therapy services for certain mental health problems. You can self-refer (England only) but you must be registered with a GP.

Papyrus HOPELINEUK

0800 068 41 41
88247 (text)
pat@papyrus-uk.org
papyrus-uk.org
Confidential support for under-35s at risk of suicide and others who are concerned about them. Open 24 hours, 7 days a week.

Samaritans

116 123 (freephone)
jo@samaritans.org (email response may take several days)
Freepost SAMARITANS LETTERS
samaritans.org

Samaritans are open 24/7 for anyone who needs to talk. You can visit some Samaritans branches in person. Samaritans also have a Welsh Language Line on 0808 164 0123 (7pm–11pm every day).

Sane

0300 304 7000
support@sane.org.uk
sane.org.uk
Offers emotional support and information for anyone affected by mental health problems, including a helpline.

Togetherall

togetherall.com
Online mental health community (formerly called Big White Wall). Free in some areas through your GP, employer or university.

Volunteer by Do IT

doit.life/volunteer
Lists UK volunteering opportunities.

Bibliography

What is depression? | Types of mental health problems | Mind

Depression - NHS

Depressive disorder (depression)

Depression - Causes, Symptoms, Types & Treatment

What is seasonal affective disorder (SAD)?

This information has been written using the above websites, and is believed to be correct on the day of writing. This leaflet is not designed to take the place of advice from your GP.

Nikki Fouracre Aug 2026