

## Introduction

Most of us can feel miserable or 'down in the dumps' at times. We might feel like this when someone we love has died or moved away, or if we have lost a job, or had stressful or difficult things to cope with. Usually these feelings fade over time, especially when people have other good things happening in their lives. This is 'feeling depressed' and is not 'depressive illness'.

When these feelings are intense and persistent, stopping us from doing the things we would usually do over a period of weeks or longer, it is likely to be depressive illness. Even when circumstances and relationships improve, a person with depressive illness will find their low mood still persists. Despite their best efforts, and of those close to them, they are unable to 'feel good' again. Depressive illness can vary from just interfering with usual activities and relationships (mild to moderate depression), to being very debilitating (severe or 'major depression'). Severe depression can make it hard for the person to relate and communicate with others, or to do day-to-day tasks.

Sometimes when depression is very severe, people may become convinced that some things are true that others know are not true. They may come to believe that they are the cause of certain bad things in the world, or that they have lost all their possessions, or are guilty of some crime. At other times, people may believe that they can hear people saying bad things about them, or may be seeing and hearing things that do not exist. Such serious illness indicates the need for urgent medical treatment.

The terms people use to describe depression may vary for people of different cultures. If your culture or first language differs from that of your health professional, you may benefit from assistance from a cultural advisor in discussing problems with symptoms of depression.

## What causes depression?

There is seldom one specific cause of depression. Some people seem more likely to become depressed than others. Sometimes depression may happen without an apparent cause. At other times coping with stressful events may contribute to becoming depressed. Examples might include:

- The death of someone you love
- Having a baby
- Being under pressure at work.

Coping with ongoing stress can also result in depression. Examples of prolonged stress include:

- Trying to make ends meet on a low income
- Being unemployed
- Feeling lonely.

Sometimes more than one family member may experience depression. This is because the way we behave and react is partly shaped by our genes (the physical make-up we are born with). How we are brought up can increase the risk that we will experience depression.

Having unhappy experiences in childhood or in relationships can increase the risk of becoming depressed later in life. Equally, good experiences such as a close relationship with a parent or friend or a 'purpose in life' can reduce the risk of depression.

## How common is depression?

Depression is common. People of all ages, cultures and backgrounds can experience depression.

- At some stage in their life, about one in seven people will experience at least a short period of depression

- In any one month in Australia, 4% of the adult population will experience a depressive disorder
- Of these, 40% will also be experiencing another mental or physical illness
- A little under half of those experiencing depression will have significant disruption to their lives.

The symptoms of depression vary in severity and from person to person. They can range from feeling irritable to feeling suicidal.

**There are many causes of depression. There are also things that protect against or reduce the risk of developing a depressive illness.**

## Common symptoms of depression

Not sleeping OR Sleeping too much	Restlessness OR Slowness observed by others	Can't make decisions and can't concentrate
Feeling down all day	Blaming yourself too much and feeling worthless	Fatigue or loss of energy nearly everyday
Significant change in weight or appetite	Thinking about death frequently	No longer interested in favourite activities